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PART ONE  
*Disaster Jokes*



# 1

## JOKES THAT FOLLOW MASS-MEDIATED DISASTERS IN A GLOBAL ELECTRONIC AGE

CHRISTIE DAVIES

During the last forty years or so, “disasters”—such as a famine, an earthquake, the crashing of a plane, train, or spaceship, a multiple murder, or the sudden death of a celebrity—have tended to receive extensive, vivid, tear-jerking television coverage, often rapidly followed by a cycle of gruesome jokes. The jokes begin within hours or even minutes of the disaster’s melodramatic presentation on television, rapidly increase in number, peak a couple of months later, and then new jokes cease to be created, bringing the cycle not to an end but to a plateau. The jokes no longer circulate as something new and exciting, but remain present in people’s memories, notebooks, and computers. Here are some British and American favorites of the 1980s; they are examples of one of the most modern and most democratic forms of folklore, a truly people’s joke, a joke of, by, and for the people that bypasses all official modes of transmission:

Regarding the death of Jessica Savitch, an American television personality:

Why did Jessica Savitch drown?

She was an anchorwoman.

(Bronner 1985, 75)

Regarding the ferry disaster in 1987, when the *The Herald of Free Enterprise* sank outside Zeebrugge, with the loss of 193 lives:

Why is *The Herald of Free Enterprise* like French contraception?

Roll on, roll off, and the place is full of dead seamen.

(In oral circulation in Britain in the late 1980s)

Regarding an explosion and fire on the oil-rig *Piper Alpha* in 1988, in which 166 workers were burnt to death:

Where do *Piper Alpha* workers go on holiday?  
Burnham-on-Sea.

What's got four legs and goes woof?  
*Piper Alpha*.

(In oral circulation in Britain in the late 1980s)

It is, perhaps, significant that fifteen years later it is necessary to explain these jokes to the reader, even though they were major television stories at the time. They were tragedies for the individuals who died and for their families, but for others they were events that will not figure in a general history of the twentieth century. They will likely figure only in television documentaries, partly because television is self-referential and self-obsessed, and partly because pictures are a higher priority for the producers than the scholarship of their historical advisers. The Treaty of Versailles is thus reduced in television documentaries to an old (and therefore speeded up) black-and-white film of Lloyd George, Clémenceau, and Wilson trotting out of a building, raising their top hats to the crowd, and replacing them with unnatural celerity. It is a trivial and, incidentally, comic picture that no producer of "good," i.e., fatuous, television can resist. Likewise, the only convenient way for the author to check the details of the disasters that produced successive joke cycles in Britain in the late 1980s was to consult the Internet.<sup>1</sup> Most individuals do not remember the dates or scale of these disasters, or even what they were.

#### THE ABSENCE OF DISASTER JOKES IN THE PAST

It is important to note that jokes of this kind certainly did not exist in substantial numbers, and indeed probably did not exist at all, before the rise of television. "Sick" humor existed, but it did not crystallize in this particular form, as may be seen from a brief look at the history of such humor. There was no shortage of sick humor in the past (Davies 1990; Dundes 1987, 3–7; Gruner 1997, 41–53; Wilde 1979), including humor about death and destruction, but there are no set piece jokes about particular disastrous events or the deaths of celebrities. Before television, the human potential for telling such jokes was clearly already there, but the appropriate stimulus was absent.

Many sick and cynical humorous items, notably songs (Murdoch 1990; Palmer 1990; *Oh What a Lovely War* 1967) emerged from the worst disaster experienced by English-speaking peoples in the twentieth century, the First World War, but not set piece disaster jokes. It might well be

wondered why men confronted with death, on a scale and with a directness unknown to their comfortable descendants watching televised disasters, should have enjoyed such humor, but that is not the question asked here. Rather, what is striking is that there are no sick riddle jokes left over from the First World War to circulate among soldiers and civilians alike; no jokes to grow old as the joke tellers who grow old might yet remember them. Jokes could have been told but they were not, nor did those who learned of distant disasters from the press or radio invent such jokes in either wartime or peacetime in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There are no *contemporary* jokes about the Tay Bridge Disaster, the assassination of President Lincoln, the blowing up of the U.S. battleship *Maine* in Havana, the strangling of the exotic dancer Isadora Duncan when her trailing scarf got caught in the wheels of her car, or the mass murders by John Reginald Halliday Christie. Not even the eating of the Reverend Harold Davidson, the rector of Stiffkey in Norfolk, England, by a lion in a Skegness, England, amusement park in 1937 (Paris 1999, 65) produced a cycle of jokes. The idea of a Christian being eaten by a lion clearly amused the British public of the 1930s, as may be seen from the popularity of the comic monologue *The Lion and Albert* (Edgar 1932). Yet no jokes were invented about the scandalous rector who, after being defrocked for gross sexual irregularities, ended his life in a lion's den. Today, a televised news report on the ex-rector's career would produce scores of jokes from inventive viewers, but in 1937 there was no television, and there were no jokes.

The few jokes in circulation today that do dwell on long past disasters, such as the sinking of the *Titanic*, were, so far as we can tell, invented long after the events to which they refer. In the case of the *Titanic*, the jokes emerged mainly after the visually spectacular film of the late 1990s.

#### THE EARLIEST SICK JOKES

The first appearance of sick jokes with a short, quick, modern format occurred in the 1940s with variants of the little moron jokes, and in the cruel jokes of the 1950s (Gruner 1997, 54; Sutton-Smith 1960). Among these jokes are some that refer to *past* well-published disasters:

Happy Father's Day, Mr. Lindbergh.  
(Sutton-Smith 1960, 21)

Other than that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?  
(Sutton-Smith 1960, 21)

Brian Sutton-Smith (1960, 12; see also Gruner 1997, 54) was able to collect 155 “cruel jokes” in the autumn of 1958 alone, which he divided into subsets with names such as cruel jokes, gruesomes, grimsels, sick jokes, and the comedy of horror:

But Warden, I like Joe.  
Shut up and pull the switch.  
(Sutton-Smith 1960, 14)

I’m going to take you out of the parade, if you don’t stop dragging your cross.  
(Sutton-Smith 1960, 20)

However, the jokes still did *not* refer to *current* events. Indeed, they were generally non-specific. Most of them were one-liners, in contrast to the riddle jokes with a complex and sophisticated link between question and answer, (as distinct from unresolved nonsense riddles) of the kind that emerged in the 1960s, grew in the 1970s and 1980s, and boomed in the 1990s and into the new millennium. By the beginning of the 1960s, though, all the key elements were in place, namely major cycles of sick jokes, told mainly but not exclusively by young people, and the beginning of the production on a large scale of question-and-answer riddle jokes, notably those about ethnic minorities:

How do you get a Polack out of a swimming pool?  
Throw in a bar of soap.  
(In oral circulation in America in the early 1960s)

The emergence of such jokes in America by the early 1960s indicates the growth of a mocking sense of humor, especially among the young, which violated the American pieties of the late 1950s. These included the belief in the equality, assimilation, and Americanization of immigrants, respect for religion (crucifixion jokes are not anti-clerical, but about the very core events, narratives, and faith of Christianity), and obsessive cleanliness. The humor also defied the appropriate sense of gravity and concern to be adopted towards death and disaster. These jokes of the late 1950s and early 1960s occurred during a period of confident modernity, and of faith in progress and science and in economic growth through the beneficent oligopolistic competition of big business, which were producing endless product improvements and wealth. The emergence of such jokes at this time completely refutes the explanations for the emergence of these jokes, put forward in terms of the much more

recent emergence of a supposed period of post-modernity and its associated doubts (Paton, Powell, and Wagg 1996, 7; Ellis 1996, 226). Indeed, the much earlier emergence of such jokes further undermines the usual understanding of post-modernity as a distinctively *fin de siècle* phenomenon. The timing of the origins of the jokes demonstrates once again that there is no such thing as post-modernity (Davies 1999), and it is ironic that a generation ever more trapped in an iron cage of modernity should think that they have escaped into post-modernity. That said, we live in an unreflective, non-reflexive age (Davies and Neal 1998).

#### KENNEDY AND THE FIRST DEAD CELEBRITY JOKES OF AN ELECTRONIC AGE

All that was missing in the jokes of this time was any specific references to current events. This element only emerged and fell into place in the 1960s, with the total triumph of television as the medium that provided a new kind of disaster reporting, in which the audience cannot avoid the intrusive pressure of dominating pictures combined with insistent moralistic commentary about how they ought to feel. You are watching Big Brother, and he is talking to you.

This was the crucial new factor that precipitated the new sick disaster jokes based on current events. We can see it emerge through the evolution of jokes about the death of President Kennedy. Before his death, there were already jokes about his Roman Catholicism and the decisive effect that it might have on his politics (a very controversial issue at the time), and the form of the jokes was well-established. With Kennedy's assassination, and the first ever tear-jerking television coverage of the death of a celebrity, came the first cycle of dead celebrity disaster jokes. Possibly it had a precursor in the one-liner joke about the assassination of Lincoln from the 1950s cited earlier, but Kennedy's assassination provided the first joke cycle about a contemporary disaster, and coincided with the growth and dominance of television coverage of a particular style and type. First the political jokes about Kennedy's religion:

Have you heard the Kennedy jokes? Well, he (JFK) was asking everyone to save their old bowling balls—he was going to make a rosary for the statue of liberty.

(UCBFA<sup>2</sup> Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4.  
Collected by Michael Denas 1965, circulating in 1961)



Did you hear that President Kennedy is going to reinstate Roosevelt's "fire-side chats" program? It's going to be called "coast to coast with the Holy Ghost."

(UCBFA Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4.

Collected by Marcia Rasumoff)

Then came the assassination:

Question: What did Johnson say to Mrs. Kennedy?

Answer: I guess John needed that trip to Dallas like a hole in the head!

(UCBFA Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4. Collected by Jane Rudofsky. In circulation in Los Angeles in 1962 a few days after the assassination)

What did John-John get for his fifth birthday?

A Jack-in-a-box.

(UCBFA Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4.

Collected by Denise Adelman)

The latter joke was collected by a woman who heard it "shortly after President Kennedy's death" and felt "rather sick and disgusted with whomever it was that told it to me." She adds that JFK's son John-John's fifth birthday fell on the day of his father's funeral.

What's Jackie Kennedy's new name now?

Jackie Idlewild.

(UCBFA Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4.

Collected by Susan Knopow, 1965)

The joke reverses the tendency to arbitrarily rename all manner of things 'Kennedy' after JFK's assassination, such as Idlewild Airport, and suggests that Jackie to-be-Onassis was now wild and idle.

These jokes set a pattern for the later Kennedy jokes about disaster—the assassination of Robert Kennedy, the slaughter of Mary Jo Kopechne through the drunk driving, negligence, and cowardice of Edward Kennedy, and the loss of John Kennedy, Jr. (the "John-John" of the jokes) while flying his own plane. Each wave of jokes was numerically larger, and the best of the jokes cleverer than in the preceding cycle. Disaster jokes were now on an ascending curve, and were partly driven by the ever-increasing pervasiveness of television and partly by the rise of the "anti-risk society," in which early death had become rare due to improved nutrition, public health, and medical treatment. Occasional loss of young life through violence or accident was now seen as the ultimate tragedy (Davies and Neal 1998, 43–44).

In the jokes about Edward Kennedy, we can also see a precursor of the later and equally media-driven jokes about President Clinton. In the case of America's "Father Ted," public shock and horror were mixed with private laughter:

What did Edward Kennedy say to his secretary when she told him confidentially, "I've got a problem?"

He said, "We'll cross that bridge when we come to it."

(UCBFA Anglo-American file. Jokes II-2, F3, P6 U9 K4.

Collected by Richard Peters, 1970)

Kennedy drove off a bridge at Chappaquiddick and his aide, Mary Jo Kopechne, was tragically drowned. The joke plays quite unfairly with the notion that either she or some subsequent secretary might have been pregnant, and that this was his way of dealing with such a problem.

#### THE GLOBALIZATION OF THE DISASTER JOKE

The television jokes discussed thus far have been concerned with events occurring in and reported in the country where the jokes were told. However, the *global* television reporting of distant disasters has led to jokes that place these events within a framework of *local* trivia.

The following phrase was habitually used when a bar was due to close for the night in Britain, but it acquired a double meaning at the time of the Armenian earthquake:

What does a pub landlord say at the end of the evening in Armenia?

All right, you lot, closing time. Haven't you got homes to go to?

(In oral circulation in Britain in the 1980s)

Regarding the Mexico City earthquake of 1985:

What did they rename the Hilton Hotel in Mexico City?

The International House of Pancakes.

(UCBFA Anglo-American file II-2 T6, D5 Topical Disasters

Miscellaneous. Collected by Andrea Collette, 1986)

Regarding the assassination of Ghandi:

Why doesn't India have Halloween anymore?

Cause they ain't got no Gandhi.

(UCBFA Anglo-American file, Jokes II-2, F3, P6, N6 Famous political

Non U.S. Collected by Lewis Rosman)

Successive waves of recycled jokes about African famines also circulated on both sides of the Atlantic—the Biafran, Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali famine jokes (Christopher 1984–5; Gruner 1997, 57–8):

How do you get an Ethiopian into a phone box?  
Throw a tin of baked beans in.

(In oral circulation in Britain 1980s)

What's black, round and covered in cobwebs?  
An Ethiopian's asshole.

(Christopher 1984–85, 39)

What's new about the McDonald's restaurant in Ethiopia?  
It features a crawl-up window.

(Christopher 1984–85, 40)

What did Poland send to Ethiopia for famine relief?  
4000 pounds of after-dinner mints.

(Christopher 1984–85, 41)

What do Yoko Ono and Ethiopians have in common?  
They both live off dead beetles.

(Christopher 1984–85, 41)

These were perhaps the first famines to be shown directly on television. The horrific pictures, with a strong emphasis on starving children, were accompanied by a rhetoric that implied that viewers should not only feel shocked and upset, but guilty, even though there was no connection between them and the racist and ideology-driven warring African governments who were responsible for causing the famines. Show business personalities now ran highly publicized fund-raising events that cashed in on the television pictures. Significantly, no one thought to make a major television news story out of that, or to put on a show to raise money to ameliorate the steady high death rate of children and adults alike from malnutrition or diarrhea caused by dirty drinking water in very poor countries. Nor were there jokes on this subject.

Many young people were clearly responding to being lectured about their moral responsibilities by inventing jokes that mocked their media mentors. Such a response is very common. In Israel *after* teaching about the Holocaust became *compulsory* in secondary schools, there was a wave of sick jokes on this subject (Zajdman 1995), something that had never happened in Israel before. There is no point in searching for “deeper”

(i.e., inaccessible and untestable) reasons for these responses, or speculating about coping mechanisms or systems of meaning. Young people resist secular preaching, and that is all that need be said. It is for this reason that secular moral crusades to alter their behavior tend to fail.

#### TELEVISION AS THE CAUSE OF DISASTER JOKES

The explosion of the *Challenger* space shuttle on live television in 1986 set off what was probably the first of a series of joke cycles about accidents. A leading humor scholar, Elliott Oring, soon noticed the significance of the incorporation into the *Challenger* jokes of references to commercial products and phrases from television advertising (1987, 1992). Oring wrote:

A number of the shuttle jokes (as well as other disaster jokes) increasingly employ the names of familiar and amiable commercial products from television advertising: Coke, Seven-Up, Tango, Head and Shoulders, Ocean Spray, Bud Light. "What were the last words said on the *Challenger*? I want a light. . . . No, no a Bud Light." In this joke an incongruous image is created of the *Challenger* destruction being caused by someone mistaking an order for beer as a request for an explosion. The incongruity is appropriate because incendiaries were indeed part and parcel of Budweiser Light beer commercials in the mid-1980s. . . . Like the *Challenger* newscasts themselves, they were so omnipresent that it was almost inevitable that they would be employed in parody. . . . But the juxtaposition of commercial products with images of disaster seems a particularly appropriate commentary on the television medium and images it presents to viewers at home. Television news programs regularly conjoin images and stories about death, disease and destruction with images of commercial products. Virtually every television report of a news disaster is preceded and followed by a commercial message (or each and every message is preceded and followed by the report of a disaster). Thus the concatenation of brand name products and images of disaster achieved in the jokes is really no more incongruous than that achieved several times each evening by national and local news programs. (1992, 38–9)

Q. What's the favourite drink at NASA?

A. Seven-Up with a splash.

(Oring 1992, 32)

Q. How did they know Christa McAuliffe had dandruff?

A. Her head and shoulders were washed up on the beach.

(Oring 1992, 32)

Q. What was Christa McAuliffe's favourite drink?

A. Ocean Spray.

(Oring 1992, 33)

Christa McAuliffe was a civilian schoolteacher travelling as a *publicity passenger* on the space shuttle to show how safe it was. It exploded in full view of those watching the launch on live television, scattering the inmates as molecules over the shore and sea at Cape Canaveral.

To Oring's *Challenger* examples we can add:

Why did Indira Gandhi change her deodorant?

Because her right guard was killing her.

(UCBFA Anglo-American Jokes II- Political Non U.S. Collected by Christina Bartolucci in California in 1984, two days after Mrs. Gandhi was shot by her Sikh bodyguard)

Biafran housewives every day open a tin of beans and say, "One each."

(In oral circulation in Britain among young people in the late 1960s. Sung to the author by Dr. Anne Curry, distinguished singer and military historian, over a cafeteria lunch in 1999)

The latter joke is a play on the words of the television advertising jingle: "Millions of housewives everyday open a tin of beans and say 'Beanz Meanz Heinz.'" Baked beans are, as the advertisement implies, an instant convenience food for the young and are, as it happens, a source of flatulence and hence comedy. Heinz meanz fartz.

Elliot Oring's insights and observations can be extended to form a general theory of how television reporting of disasters such as the Biafran famine, the *Challenger* space shuttle, the sinking of *The Herald of Free Enterprise*, the *Piper Alpha* fire, Chernobyl, and the deaths of celebrities generates sick disaster jokes through new forms of paradox and incongruity. Before television, these forms of paradox and incongruity were not nearly as strong a part of people's "mediated" experiences, and distant shocking events could not and did not give rise to cycles of sick disaster jokes.

The first incongruity is that television is a rubbish sandwich. The announcement of sad and shocking disasters alternates not merely with advertisements, but with programs that are by any standard banal and trivial, such as low I.Q. quiz shows, costume dramas from England which are far more costume than drama, American sanitized thuggery for cheap excitement, and saponaceous operas. Television is a world of free circuses and advertisements for white sliced cardboard bread, in which

trivia are used to sell trivia and appearance takes precedence over analysis. In consequence, messages about disaster arrive in an incongruous package. It is as if an official letter telling a family that one of their members in the armed forces had been killed in action were to arrive in a glitzy envelope with smiley face stickers, accompanied by advertisements for soap powder and chocolate bars. Whilst it is true that newspapers potentially have the same problem when they run a disaster story on the front page, a trip down naked mammary lane on page three, and sports in the back section, these are arranged in a known and segregated spatial pattern. There are no cartoons on the obituary page, and the reader who is upset by a disaster reported in the news section can postpone reading, or even consign to the bin, other potentially incongruous parts of the paper. A television viewer, by contrast, is hit by a bizarre mixture of messages in an almost random temporal pattern decided in advance by other people, to which only minimal changes are made when a disaster hits the news. Controllers might pull a comedy about trains or aircraft if there has been a bad crash, but in a normal evening's solid viewing or channel switching, incongruity is unavoidable. The incongruity of things seen is greater than that of things read or heard, and more likely to give rise to jokes. When disaster strikes, the dead donkey does not get dropped, but merely occurs later on the television news.

There is a second source of incongruity in television: the frequent and deliberate blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, or between reality and fantasy, in television programs. There is the fakery of the drama documentary, those mendacious films purporting to represent real events; the fly-on-the-wall program from which anything that would bore, offend, or frighten the average fly has been deleted; and the reconstructions of distant history that boast of accuracy but from which fleas, facial blemishes, and ordure-filled streets have been eliminated. These may deceive and entrance many viewers, but they reduce others to cynical amusement. This cynical amusement is then extended to television news reports, whose only claim to truth is that they are showing you the pictures. When the pictures are accompanied by insistent moralizing, instructing the viewer on how to respond to them, it is no wonder that disaster jokes become not only possible, but also popular.

Finally, there is the incongruity between the viewer's situation, seated safely and comfortably at home in a clean, well-lit place, eating a more-than-adequate TV dinner, and the pictures of death by starvation or by accident with which they are being confronted. Television tries to

deceive people into thinking they are being witnesses, when they are merely seeing pictures—selected, edited pictures at that. The broadcasters then exhort the viewers to respond to these distant events *as if* the disaster had directly impinged on them, their families, and communities, and harmed people they know directly and are attached to as particular individuals (Davies and Neal 2001). As Smyth shrewdly noted in relation to the *Challenger* disaster:

The general public was made to feel as if they were there as witnesses and participants. To not feel shocked by this event would be unusual, yet at what point and for what reasons might one say “enough of this” and repeat or perhaps just laugh at jokes about this event? . . . How well do people really know these media figures and how long do they feel obliged to mourn for them? For the most part there is no real familiarity with them as persons, only the one-sided exposure to images absorbed by sitting in front of a television set. The shuttle crew members had never been woven into the fabric of most people’s lives. They were not persons, only media personalities. (1986, 255–56)

The same point may be made in regard to the death by disaster of ordinary members of the public. Other than their particular loved ones, who have suffered very real personal bereavement, who else in the twenty-first century cares about the victims of *Piper Alpha*, *The Herald of Free Enterprise*, or the Clapham rail crash, or knows any of their names? The incidents were *tragic in and of themselves*, but television turned them into ephemeral media disasters and thus a fit subject for jokes. Television created the conditions for the jokes to be invented, but, of course, the jokes were never broadcast on television (Davies 1996). Before the Internet, the jokes could only be found in archives or in books of jokes labeled “gross,” “tasteless,” or “offensive,” and often edited by unknown persons with female pseudonyms (Alvin 1983a, 1983b, 1984; Knott 1982, 1983a, 1983b, 1984; Thickett 1983a, 1983b).

#### DISASTER JOKES AS RESISTANCE TO A HEGEMONY OF FEELING: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

The driving force behind the popularity of disaster jokes is the emotional hegemony enjoyed by those controlling television, who feel able to tell viewers what to feel in the same sense that authoritarian governments, such as those of the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, told their subjects what to think. In consequence, the same kinds of jokes emerge in opposition to an illegitimate monopoly—political jokes

under socialism (Davies 1989, 1998b) and disaster jokes in the West. I am *not*, of course, saying that Western viewers hate the controllers of television, much of the content of which is market-driven and consumer-led, so that viewers get the lowest common denominator of what they want—a sort of K-Mart of images. But it was also the case that *many* citizens under the old East European socialist regimes who were supporters, beneficiaries, or even privileged members of these regimes enjoyed anti-socialist political jokes (Deriabin and Gibney 1960, 173–5). Likewise, in National Socialist Germany, political jokes of an ostensibly anti-Nazi kind sometimes revealed insider knowledge of what was going on within the Nazi hierarchy (Gamm 1963, 23). Political jokes are sometimes not so much an index of political opposition as a way of playing with the forbidden, of taking time off from the official line. Individuals in authoritarian societies may well tell these jokes regardless of their political views, just as in democratic societies they may tell disaster jokes regardless of their emotional responses to disaster. Many true believers and true mourners may exclude themselves, but this leaves a wide spectrum of responders. There can be an evasion of and resistance to hegemony even from those who do not seek to undermine or even challenge its legitimacy. It is unfortunately probable that most Germans and Austrians supported the Third Reich, even if they sought an escape through jokes from being perpetually told that they *must*.

Likewise, disaster jokes are an evasion of compulsory rhetoric, rather than mere callousness. Viewers are often responsive to and genuinely upset by television disaster coverage, and indeed engage in and collaborate with it. Smyth commented in his analysis of the *Challenger* jokes: ‘When something disastrous happens to a media figure, however, people spread the news and begin to grieve as if they had lost someone with whom they intimately shared their lives’ (1986, 256). The public may even help to drive the media pressure (O’Hear 1998), as when they created a mountain of flowers, messages, and sad redundant teddy bears outside the Princess of Wales’ home in Kensington, England. Such spontaneity even occurred among the faithful in Soviet Russia, some of whom could speak quite genuinely of having been moved by a vivid vision of the long dead Lenin who spoke to them, comforted them, and advised them: the opiate of the *apparatchiks*.

The crucial point, however, is that the old regimes of Eastern Europe, like the Western mass media, made such feelings and thoughts *compulsory*, and the jokes emerged in *resistance* to this, regardless of where the



joke-tellers' own sympathies lay. This phenomenon underpins many types of jokes. Joking consists of playing with the forbidden, whether the 'forbidden' is political, racial, sexual, or gruesome: it is the social fact that is common to them all. In the case of disaster jokes it is unlikely that the joke-tellers relish the reality of the disasters, and equally unlikely that the jokes were their way of coping with grief. We have no reliable way of finding out what their deeper feelings were, and even if we did, these would be of no use in explaining the other types of joke cited above. "Resistance to hegemony" and "playing with the forbidden," by contrast, are general concepts that can be employed to construct hypotheses about many types of jokes.

#### EAST EUROPEAN POLITICIZED DISASTER JOKES UNDER SOCIALISM

Indeed, jokes exist that display these characteristics in more than one direction at a time, as with the East European jokes that followed the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. The nuclear catastrophe in the Ukraine provided disaster jokes in many countries in the West (Kürti 1988f.; Milspaw 1981), but in Eastern Europe the jokes also became part of a much larger genre of political jokes (Kürti 1988).

What's the new shopping craze?

To save money, people are buying Kiev bread instead of fluorescent light bulbs.  
(331)

What did the workers celebrate at the May Day Parade in Budapest?

The radiant friendship between Hungary and the Soviet Union.  
(331)

How was the May Day Parade in Kiev organized?

In rows. In the first row were the party activists, in the second were all the youth communist activists, in the third all the union activists, and finally all the radioactivists.

(333)

A similar fusion of disaster joke and political joke may be seen in an East German joke of the 1980s about the killing by East German border guards of those who tried to escape to the West over the Berlin Wall.

When does a good border guard fire the warning shot?

At the end of the second clip of ammunition.

(Stein 1989, 93)

In the East European case, the jokes probably did generally coincide with resistance to political oppression (Davies 1998a, 1998b); the East European socialist regimes did after all collapse with remarkable speed in the wake of the jokes. However, their key characteristic was not resistance to the regimes as such, but to a hegemonic discourse; the jokes evaded the only form of discourse that was officially permitted. They were funny even to those who accepted the legitimacy of that discourse.

It is the same lack of pluralism in regard to media-mediated disasters that results in cycles of disaster jokes. The disaster jokes are not striking against the victims, nor even against the reporting of disasters as such, but against monopoly; if the disaster jokes are a form of aggression, it is a strange and diffuse kind of aggression, and to conflate it with other forms of aggression is misleading.

#### THE INTERNET AND THE PROLIFERATION OF DISASTER JOKES

The greatest *growth in the numbers* of disaster jokes came towards the end of the twentieth century, with the availability of cheaper, easier, and more accessible and universal forms of electronic dissemination. Cheaper long distance and international phone calls, and an expanding volume of such calls (for instance, between commodity and financial dealers), allowed a more rapid exchange of jokes between individuals. The phone was soon supplemented by e-mail, which enabled large numbers of geographically scattered individuals to convey jokes to a large network of associates in a single dispatch, particularly through the use of mailing lists. Each recipient may, in turn, become the apex of a further pyramid of distribution. Finally, in the 1990s, numerous web pages were created such that anyone who wanted to consult a set of files of disaster jokes indexed by subject could do so, and they could also add to the collection by e-mail. In consequence, disaster jokes proliferated. The *Challenger* space shuttle disaster generated fewer than fifty recorded jokes at the time of its explosion in 1986, even though it produced more jokes in America, and even in Britain, than any previous disaster, and inspired the leading academic studies of disaster jokes (Oring 1992, 1987; Simons 1986; Smyth 1986). The Internet was not at that time important as a means of joke dissemination. Disaster jokes were overwhelmingly still transmitted orally, either in face-to-face situations or by phone. By contrast, when Diana, Princess of Wales, died in a motor accident in 1998, more than three hundred jokes were invented and collected—six times as many as in the case of the *Challenger* explosion, the

previously most successful joke-generating disaster. Diana jokes were banned from the mass media, and no joke book publisher has yet dared to bring out a collection of them.<sup>3</sup>

The key to this growth in the numbers, and also in the international popularity, of disaster jokes has been the Internet. Already, in 1998 itself, there were at least five web sites in English devoted exclusively to Diana jokes, including sites in the Netherlands and Australia. Diana jokes were even found on the web site *Blagues Lourdes* in French.<sup>4</sup> It may be that the Internet simply makes the jokes appear more numerous by enabling these otherwise scattered and forbidden items to be assembled in one place, but it seems more likely that the use of e-mail and web sites has a snowball effect, since the existence of an accessible core of jokes stimulates further jokes through imitation, modification, inspiration, emulation, and legitimation.

The jokes about the death of Diana demonstrate very clearly the antithesis between television and the Internet. Television is a form of centralized and homogenized mass production, from which anything that offends the management, the sponsors, or any significant section of the audience to whom they choose to defer, is excluded. The Internet is decentralized, international, and diverse. Setting up a web site is inexpensive, and censorship is ineffective, though growing. Individuals or small groups with relatively modest resources can send, collect, display, exchange, and read jokes or any other material they choose, including items banned by other media. You can search out what you want when you want it. The square-deal surfers are not dominated by a sequence or pattern of contents controlled by a small group of powerful, narrow-minded broadcasters combining huge resources with politically correct values. The official pieties of the broadcasters can be evaded and defied via the Internet. Television is hegemonic, the Internet libertarian. Jokes as anonymous creations fit into the anonymous Internet very well indeed.

#### THE INTERNET AND THE FURTHER GLOBALIZATION OF DISASTER JOKES

The Internet is not a cause of disaster jokes in the way that television is; it is merely a facilitator of their dissemination and storage that supplements their oral circulation. It has, however, helped to make the jokes even more global. It is particularly striking how the Internet has facilitated and globalized the circulation of disaster jokes referring to local incidents, jokes that otherwise would not have been as widely publicized,

and, indeed, would have had little meaning outside their country of origin. The Deathsucks.com web site in the United States has a “Dead Celebrity Jokes Graveyard” which is activated by clicking on the appropriate tombstone. It even has a collection of jokes concerning the late British crimefighter Jill Dando, prefaced with the comment,

Looks like another Brit has Bit the Dust! First Rod Hull now Jill Dando. I guess there is something to the saying that the English are all ‘a bit of a homebody’. For those of you ignorant Americans (like me), Jill Dando was a popular correspondent who hosted a show called “Crimewatch UK” (kind of like “America’s Most Wanted”). Jill was shot at her doorstep as she was leaving for work, most likely because of her crime-fighting reputation.

([www.deathsucks.com/jokes/jilldando/html](http://www.deathsucks.com/jokes/jilldando/html))

Forty-five jokes then follow. Some are clearly recycled from previous disasters, but most are local to Britain, some of them obviously so:

What does [*sic*] Jill Dando and George Best have in common?

They both ended their careers at Fulham.

([www.Deathsucks.com/jokes/jilldando/html](http://www.Deathsucks.com/jokes/jilldando/html))

George Best was a famous international soccer player from Ulster who, in middle age, played for the Fulham team in London; the late Jill Dando lived in Fulham.

What does [*sic*] Jill and the milkman have in common?

They both leave four pints on the doorstep.

([www.Deathsucks.com/jokes/jilldando/html](http://www.Deathsucks.com/jokes/jilldando/html))

The jokes were presumably in oral circulation in Britain and sent to America in response to the Celebrity Caretaker’s request to “Contribute your jokes to this page, e-mail the caretaker@deathsucks.com with your tasteless Jill Dando jokes or vent your politically correct outrage against our blasphemy.” Anyone in the world with access to the Internet can now read these jokes, but outside Britain Jill Dando jokes are largely a pure art form. They are jokes felt to be funny because they are playing with *someone else’s forbidden notions*, albeit ones that are generically similar to those that are the basis of more familiar local disaster jokes. The very idea that North Americans at home, who do not and cannot watch this kind of British television, are in any sense involved with the jokes is absurd. If the jokes have a victim, it is not Jill Dando but those provoked into “outrage against our blasphemy,” whether the blasphemy is one of content or merely one of

form. Anyone's televised disaster now seems to be good for a joke; the jokes have gone global and are now *two* electronic stages removed from reality. By contrast, in the past Americans and Canadians would have had little access to and would have made no contribution to the British disaster joke cycles of the late 1980s cited earlier in this essay, which were purely local in their origins and appeal. The overall pattern of change due to both television and the Internet is summed up in the table below.

	<i>Televised Disaster News</i>	<i>Disaster Jokes</i>
<i>Television (Stage 1)</i>	national news	local jokes
<i>Television (Stage 2)</i>	global news (as well as local)	local jokes
<i>Early Internet</i>	global TV news	global jokes
<i>Mature Internet</i>	local TV news (as well as global)	global jokes

## CONCLUSION

By the use of the comparative and historical method (Davies 1998a, 1998b, 2002) it is possible to demonstrate that disaster jokes were the product of the rise to dominance of new forms of electronic communication in the last decades of the twentieth century. They were and are caused by television, and their invention and dissemination has been greatly facilitated by the growing use of the Internet. Jokes of this kind were unknown, or at least very rare, prior to television becoming a dominant source of news and cheap entertainment in the 1960s. The jokes are the spontaneous inventions of ordinary people, set off by the incongruous way in which television conveys the news of a disaster or the death of a celebrity to its viewers, an incongruity far less apparent in other media.

Disaster jokes are common in democratic countries dominated by television, but political jokes are relatively rare, and only thrive in authoritarian countries where there is a hegemonic control over political discourse, notably under the former socialist regimes in Eastern Europe. From this we may see that both types of jokes are a form of resistance to compulsory political correctness. The controllers of television attempt to impose an emotional hegemony on viewers that restricts the ways in which they can openly speak about disasters, and the jokes defy this monopoly. Disaster jokes, like jokes about sex or race or, in some societies, religion or politics, are a way of playing with the forbidden for the sake of amusement.

Jokes about televised disasters have little in common with the humor used by those who directly experience danger and death by being involved in a real disaster (Abe and Ritz 1996), or in their everyday lives such as soldiers or high-ironworkers constructing tall buildings (Haas 1977). The making of jokes within small groups of men faced by danger and death may help to maintain morale and solidarity, and to train members in the ways of the group (Haas 1977; Obrdlik 1942). But jokes about current events reported on television have no such social functions; they are for amusement only. It is pointless to speculate as to whether they are a means of coping with a shocking report of sudden death, a means of extracting humor from a shared piece of grim knowledge, or an expression of Hobbesian triumph that it happened to somebody else (Gruner 1997, 41, 60). We do not know, and it would be very difficult to find out, which, if any, of these is the case, given the wide varieties of individuals telling or listening to such jokes, and the differences in the context and tone in which they are told. A large genre of jokes, such as the current-event disaster jokes discussed here, that is made up of many joke cycles is a social fact that can only be explained in terms of other social facts.

The rapid reporting of events on the other side of the globe is a nineteenth century electronic phenomenon that stems from the invention and spread of the telegraph (radio is merely wireless) and the subsequent growth of newspapers for the newly semi-literate. There is nothing new about globalization (Davies and Trivizas 1999). However, television, for the first time, had the capacity to thrust vivid pictures of distant disasters into people's homes and meeting places, and to set them joking about events on the other side of the world. Americans could now invent jokes about the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi, Chernobyl, and famine in Ethiopia, and the British about the *Challenger* space shuttle or an earthquake in Armenia. Disaster jokes have gone global.

As a result of the provision of the Internet and its rapidly increasing use, there has been a further degree of encouragement for and globalization of disaster jokes. The Internet is an electronic facilitator. It enables jokes to be exchanged and disseminated by e-mail, and to be accumulated on web sites in large numbers, which no doubt also stimulates the invention of disaster jokes and of death-of-a-celebrity jokes by providing templates for, encouraging emulation among, and granting legitimacy to disaster joke-tellers. The Internet is also a globalizing force, in that it enables the pooling of jokes from many countries in

response to a globally reported, televised disaster, such as the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, that called in jokes from three continents and at least four European countries. This allowed a truly sharing event in which nation joked unto nation in a spirit of international cooperation. Television, far from creating a global village, destroyed local communities and institutions, leaving behind a mass of atomized and alienated individuals, but the Internet is now enabling them to recreate virtual substitutes for the world they have lost. Now globalization has gone a stage further, with webspinners in one country setting up sites to act as a storage place and a mail box for local disaster jokes from other countries, concerning disasters that would not have received much television coverage or had much impact abroad. The Internet thus goes beyond television, and also circumvents television; it is a free, decentralized electronic medium in an otherwise controlled and restricted electronic age. Whether this freedom to joke will continue is doubtful. Already there is pressure on servers in many English-speaking and European countries from pressure groups<sup>5</sup> to remove collections of jokes to which they object.