

A Model for Collecting and Interpreting World Trade Center Disaster Jokes

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In the wake of the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, and the media coverage of the aftermath, Americans began moving through a grieving process helped by coping strategies. Some of these, such as political speeches and organized vigils, were generated by institutions, but many more sprang up at the grassroots level. This plurality of complex responses was based on previous responses to disaster and to loss. At this point (September 20) one of these strategies is a strategic suppression of humor, which is seen as painful for the survivors and for the families of victims. Nevertheless, folklorists have recognized the important role the re-emergence of humor has played in culture's reaction to tragedy. Thus this essay is intended to help our fellow academics put this suppression of humor into a broader perspective, as well as provide a theoretical model that will help us understand the function of cycle jokes, once they emerge in the next few weeks.

Coping responses such as we have seen are based on traditions generated through a long history of disastrous events. They respond both to the unique stresses caused by this tragedy and to the characteristic way in which the human psyche responds to such stress. Such events produce what Wolfenstein and Kliman (1965) termed a "media disaster syndrome." This especially pertinent book describes the United States' psychological reaction to the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination as based on a normal human response (the "disaster syndrome") to immediate, near-at-hand catastrophes such as tornadoes or bus accidents. In such cases, emotions are dulled in the face of the tragedy, and altruistic willingness to help out survivors is heightened. As a result, individuals put aside their personal needs and feelings and contribute to a common work effort.

But when a "media disaster" occurs, then millions of people are encouraged to view and review visual images of destruction that would normally stimulate them to act. In reality, the events are distant, and there is little they can do to help, directly. So people are stimulated to action by the images that are constantly replayed by the media, but find no effective way to put this impulse into action. So they must fall back on a variety of improvised symbolic actions that at least express solidarity with the people affected by this tragedy. (For instance, blood banks were immediately swamped by people wanting to donate blood, after one of the safety workers said on the air that this was one thing they needed to treat the injured.)

One of the most visible reactions to the attacks was the nearly total suppression of public humor. TV networks' unanimously decided to cancel shows including topical humor, and humorists such as Jay Leno and David Letterman were visibly cautious in their first live performances not to offend viewers. Previous studies of topical humor have not commented on this period of humorlessness, because the emergence of humor has been so regularly described as deviant. Yet in a study of the coping strategies of emergency workers directly involved in tragedies such as the Piper Alpha oil platform in the North Sea, Carmen Moran and Margaret Massam (1997)

observed that use of humor was necessary for them to deal with the scope of the human tragedy they witnessed. Indeed, they note, some forms of humor emerged within days of the event, an ephemeral phenomenon that has therapeutic value for the survivors and rescue workers. .

Nevertheless, Moran and Massam observed that these emergency workers had difficulty explaining the role humor played in their work because, at the time of the events, it was neither understood nor appreciated by the general public.

Similarly, some informants have alleged that topical disaster jokes were circulating almost immediately after the events of September 11th, but I found these early stages of humor difficult to document (Ellis 1991: 111-112). It seems clear that joking does play an early role in responding to disaster, but those who communicate such jokes run a social risk in spreading them beyond a trusted circle of acquaintances. Hence, as Moran and Massam noted, rescue workers are prone to share jokes among themselves, but were reluctant to tell them to any others, including members of their immediate family.

Carolyn Pratt and Robert E. Lane, surveying the reactions of Yale University students to the media coverage of the Kennedy Assassination, identified a group that they termed "compulsive closers," i.e., persons who concluded the grieving process more quickly than the average population. Such individuals indicated overwhelming agreement with statements like "There's been too much attention paid to the President's death." (Wolfenstein and Kliman 1965: 160-65). I noted (1991: 122) that the demographics of "compulsive closers" were identical to the groups most likely to pass on Challenger disaster jokes and questioned why such individuals were necessarily "compulsive," given the obviously therapeutic goal of reaching closure. Christie Davies (1999), in his study of jokes inspired by the death of Princess Diana, similarly found "no evidence that the hard-nosed jokers [who circulate topical humor] are in everyday life callous people who would feel unmoved in the presence of a real disaster or who in the face of misfortune would pass by on the other side of the road." From an objective point of view, therefore, in the case of media disasters, it is the *absence of humor* that is socially deviant.

Once the threat of the disaster is no longer imminent, and once rescue work has dealt with the most pressing needs, the nation's attention turns from the emotional jobs of assisting the injured and comforting the bereaved to the practical tasks of cleaning up the physical damage and assigning blame, internally and externally. The disaster, in short, shifts from being *present* to being part of the *past*. Such a shift requires mental adjustments on several fronts, in particular, the need to "name" the most threatening elements of past events as a way of filing them away in memory. And at this point the strategic role of humor changes. Moira Smith (1990: 76) observed that those who tell a joke must balance the potential benefits they stand to reap by provoking mirth with the social risk of telling an unfunny or "sick" joke. Rescue workers, for example, can improvise and circulate quips among themselves because of the strong bond that forms between disaster responders. However, time must pass and a significant number of citizens at large must reach closure before jokes become strategically successful. That is, the risk of being called "sick" for repeating such a joke must be balanced by the willingness of people outside such high-focus groups to listen to, remember, and pass on such jokes.

In some cases, this may never happen. Sylvia Grider (2001) has observed that no cycle of jokes emerged after the Texas A&M Bonfire disaster, in which 11 students were killed, even though this event also provoked many other traditional disaster responses. However, this event was localized in significance, since the Bonfire was a student tradition specific to Texas A&M

and not well understood elsewhere. Even though it was nationally publicized, those who were most affected by it were also those who were part of the literal community affected. Hence the reaction was a classic "disaster syndrome," and like those caused by natural disasters such as tornadoes and floods, it provoked no joke cycle outside of those directly affected, even though humor must have played some ephemeral role among the emergency workers directly involved.

By contrast, when large numbers of persons distant from the tragedy are involved in an intensive way by the media, the response is paradoxical. Certainly viewers respond with understandable horror to death and hardship. But, as Elliot Oring (1987) and Christie Davies (1999) have both argued, the medium through which we witness horror juxtaposes it dissonantly with other media images: innocuous stories on other channels, commercials for brand name materials, the careers of other celebrities. Having already magnified the impact of the terrorist attacks through intensive and repetitive broadcasting of the images, the media in this case added an additional level of dissonance when they quickly attempted to provide professional advice on how best to respond to this shock. This increased institutionalization--in which the media can both provoke and modulate the grief process--has already provoked grassroots anger. Thus shock over the actual events becomes necessarily intertwined with resentment over the way in which we learn about them. Classic "media disasters" have regularly led to cycles of widely travelled, documented cycles of jokes:

- 1963 JFK assassination (Wolfenstein and Kliman 1965: 67)
- 1966 Aberfan School disaster (Davies 1990: 56)
- 1978 People's Temple/Jim Jones mass suicides (personal collection)
- 1983 Korean jetliner shot down by Russian Air Force (personal collection)
- 1984 Union Carbide industrial accident in Bhopal, India (personal collection)
- 1985 Achille Lauro highjacking/murder of Leon Klinghoffer (personal collection)
- 1986 Challenger Shuttle explosion (Simons 1986, Smyth 1986, Oring 1987, Ellis 1991)
- 1988 terrorist bombing of Pan Am 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland (personal collection)
- 1988 explosion and fire on Alpha Piper oil platform (personal collection)
- 1997 mass suicide of Branch Davidians in Waco (Rec.humor.funny jokes 1998)
- 1997 Princess Diana's death (Davies 1999)
- 2000 Concorde airline crash (personal collection).

True: the September 11 terrorist acts had a much greater death toll and so directly impacted many more Americans than did these previous events. Still, the media coverage broadcast this impact to an even broader audience, which, like those involved in previous media disasters, were not directly involved. When humor, the natural way of resolving such incongruities, is socially suppressed, it tends to emerge dramatically, at the end of this latent period in clusters, circulate actively for a short time, then fade away. Such a wave of humor signals Americans' desire to resolve the key dissonances in the media coverage of disasters, gain control over them, and so reach closure in their grieving process. As Christie Davies argues, "the flourishing of jokes about *specific shocking events* in the last thirty years or so *is a product* of the rise of the mass media and in particular of television and of the direct, dogmatic and yet ambiguous and paradoxical way in which accidents and disasters are presented to the public by the media" (1999).

In short, judging from the similarity of the media coverage of the current terrorist attacks, we can predict that the terrorist events will produce an emergent cycle of topical jokes. Based on previous studies of disaster humor, particularly those published in the wake of the Challenger shuttle disaster, we can make educated predictions about the role of humor in events such as the terrorist attacks. For this reason, this paper proposes a set of empirical projections, for what we can expect to see. Since "WTC jokes" (as I will term the genre) do not currently exist¹ this list can serve as a set of falsifiable hypotheses that we can use to focus our observations of such humor, if and when it does emerge.

1. This cycle will emerge, in a series of waves, after a period of latency.

We have noted that humor is typically suppressed during the early stages of response to the disaster. A similar reaction was noted in previous tragic incidents, where joking on the subject was strongly criticized, both on the public and private levels. The Shuttle disaster, for which we have the best national data, produced a latency period of 17 days (other, less stressful events seem to have had somewhat shorter periods). Because the intensity of the national reaction to the terrorist bombings was at least as strong as that produced by the Challenger tragedy, it is reasonable to expect that the latent period will last as long, perhaps a little longer. I therefore predict that the first joke cycles will reach public attention 17-22 days after the tragedy, or in early October 2001.

Further, these jokes will emerge in more than one wave. My study of the Challenger jokes and the more restricted cycle of jokes that emerged after Pennsylvania politician Budd Dwyer committed suicide before a television camera shows that these jokes do not all appear at one time, but appear a few at a time. The Challenger jokes first referenced a complex mix of reactions but concentrated on denial, displaced anger, and desire to find and assign blame. These are part of the normal grief process, and already we see these themes in the statements of public officials and people-on-the-street. I'm already struck by how many people found the video footage of the real Trade Center disaster strikingly similar to the special effects in popular action movies like the *Die Hard* series. This resembles some of recursive elements in previous topical jokes, in which details from a real catastrophe are equated with a special effect in a movie (or beer commercial!) which is, in turn, designed to simulate a real catastrophe. [2](#)

A second wave, emerging a week later, focused more specifically on "gross" elements referencing clever ways to allude to violent death. This second wave was especially prominent in the Challenger cycles and indeed has characterized a number of cycles of disaster jokes inspired by horrific events in which people were not only killed, but their bodies burned, dismembered, or vaporized as well. (Davies 1990 notes that smaller-scale disasters, such as the 1987 fire at the Kings Cross station of the London Underground, likewise produced topical jokes, even though the loss of life was not as great as many other disasters.)

However, the duration of such cycles has always been short-lived. This appears to be a natural function of the ephemeral role that humor plays in responding to disaster; Moran and Massam (1997) noted that researchers have always found it difficult to get rescue workers to recall specific instances of humor some time after the event in which it emerged. Again, studies of the Challenger cycle record the most specific data, which showed the jokes reaching a peak of popularity about a month after the shuttle exploded and disappearing rapidly from tradition two weeks later (Ellis 1991: 115-16) Overall, the active phase of joking covered no more than a month, at which point informants increasingly found it difficult to remember any of the items they had heard. If the WTC jokes are similar in intensity, we can

predict that joking will be most prevalent during the first two weeks of October 2001 and be essentially finished by the end of the month. However, Challenger jokes circulated mainly by word-of-mouth. It remains to see whether the Internet will have a major impact on the timing and duration of this cycle.

2. One or more of the common WTC jokes will reference the dominant visual images of the tragedy

. Simon Bronner's study of adolescents' "gross" jokes (1985), suggests that the content of the humor that they find most satisfying matches closely the conflicts that they find most threatening at that moment in their development. Hence jokes about female menstruation are most told by males at an age when they are coming to terms with their own sexual changes, but are not appreciated by younger males and not found funny by older males. This suggests that one role of humor is to take an image that embodies a current threat and defuse it by turning it, at least partially, into a joke. In fact, many previous disaster jokes have focused on the most memorable moment of the tragedy, which typically has been viewed and re-viewed on television coverage. With the JFK assassination, this was the poignant reaction of the President's children to the funeral, while in the Challenger disaster, it was the fireball that marked the moment that the shuttle disintegrated in mid-air.

One of the dominant factors of media coverage was the way in which it allowed a wide audience to witness a moment of graphic death and implied dismemberment of bodies through the crashes, the many persons who leaped to their deaths from the towers, and the final collapse of the buildings. Grimly, rescuers have reported finding few identifiable bodies or body parts in the wreckage. As with the Challenger disaster, as Oring (1987) observed, such an event was deemed viewable because the specifics of death were left to the audience's imagination. However, compelling bystanders to view death places an intense strain on private and public language.

Since the explosions and ultimate collapses of the WTC towers were repeatedly aired and featured on front pages throughout the country, it is logical to expect that WTC jokes will also focus on these images.³ Further, since no dominant image emerged for either the Pentagon or Flight 94 crashes, and since many more casualties resulted from the WTC attacks, then all or nearly all the items will focus on the New York tragedies (hence I propose "WTC jokes" as a term for this tradition).

3. The WTC jokes will recycle elements from previous cycles.

Smyth (1986) and Bronner (1988: 129-30) have noted that many of the Challenger jokes had previously circulated about previous tragic events, or at least matched their format. Similarly, contemporary legends frequently recycle motifs and plot ideas from earlier traditions (e.g., "The Choking Doberman," studied in detail by Brunvand 1984: 3-49). Conspiracy theories remain yet another area of tradition in which concepts have been freely adapted to fit emerging events (Yarbrough 1998, Ellis 2000). Previous cycle jokes have found clever ways to express horrific deaths, and we can expect many of the same plays on words to emerge. (I could cite examples here but choose not to, so as not to be accused of creating the tradition that I infer will emerge.)

The WTC jokes will recycle other traditional elements, particularly ethnic stereotypes such as emerged in cycle jokes during the Persian Gulf conflict. We can expect several of the jokes to make allusions to other, more trivial televised materials, particularly advertising slogans and popular media figures. Given the presence of Chelsea Clinton near the site of the attacks, it

is also likely that the Clintons, subjects of an extensive joke cycle, will also appear in one or more of these jokes.

4. The dominant mode of distributing WTC jokes will be e-mail.

> While previous collections from before 1987 stressed oral tradition, the anonymity of frequently-forwarded messages has quickly made this the preferred mode of circulating topical humor. Judging from previous cycles (particularly the Princess Di jokes) we can expect that they will circulate in lists of 3-8 brief texts, with little comment added by either the compiler or the forwarder. This will make gathering contextual information difficult for folklorists. However, if the demographics of the tradition are similar to those observed for the Challenger jokes (Ellis 1991), we would expect that

- I. More males would compile and distribute these WTC joke lists than females.
- II. More females than males would claim no active involvement in creating and circulating these jokes.
- III. Nevertheless, if surveyed, males and females would show little difference in the kinds of jokes they remember hearing.

The role of e-mail in responding to events such as this is a relatively new factor in folkloristics. Where traditionally, folklore has been seen as a localized phenomenon, a community's or group's response to stress, media disasters rely on the instantaneously global nature of such events. The increased internationalism of email conduits now makes it normal, even commonplace, to exchange impressions and reactions across continental and even linguistic barriers. Thus it may be that topical humor may reflect this "community of the world," just as many of the immediately circulating messages stressed images of a worldwide response to the tragedy. Comparing the content and form of these jokes to previous oral-based collections may reveal some significant ways in which the Internet has impacted the folk process.

Conclusion.

The emergence of WTC humor will certainly be seen as a social problem. The jokes will be strongly resisted by cultural custodians, particularly teachers, who will respond to them with "indignation and dismay" (as Wolfenstein and Kliman [1965: 67] noted of the JFK jokes). They will be widely mentioned in media editorials, usually as an indication of a "sick" state of mind. Such a debate will obviously make it very difficult for folklorists to carry out competent fieldwork in this area. (During a previous investigation, a colleague of mine destroyed a set of questionnaires on the topic, because in his estimation the responses were "wicked.")

Given the ephemeral nature of such events, it is essential to record data at the most active point of the cycle, since topical jokes (like contemporary legends) are traditions with an intrinsically short half-life. We either document them at the time they are relevant, or we are reduced to making impressionistic interpretations based on partial recollections. To this point, the reactive role of our research has allowed the media to set the terms for our agenda, and to sidestep the troubling political implications of suppression of humor. Let us therefore accept, with Alan Dundes (1987: 80) and others, that joking is an inevitable and socially therapeutic factor in the human response to disaster, and try to discern exactly what themes emerge from the coming WTC joke cycle.

Therefore, this piece is the first of two essays, the second of which will comment on the extent to which the folk process actually produced jokes of with the features I have predicted. At the same time, I request that folklorists make an effort to observe and document this emerging tradition in a way

that will test the hypotheses given above and provide the data needed to revise them, if necessary. Rather than react to a tradition (and one that is so ephemeral that it is difficult to reconstruct from memory), we should attempt to capture folklore as a *process*. For this reason, I would like to hear from as many observers as possible, receiving not only texts of the jokes themselves but data that would help put them into context:

- When did a given joke first appear in your area?
- How popular is it among your area's population?
- What are the ages/genders of those who report them?
- Why do you think this joke is funny (or not funny)?

A simple questionnaire or class survey would be enough to get meaningful data of this sort. Further, we can predict that the WTC jokes will circulate in many different forms and contexts, and so folklorists should make a particular effort to record them in as many variant forms as possible.

We may have to concede that such jokes have no single identifiable cultural function. Yet their appearance will signal that Americans have gotten over their shock and are ready to return to "normal" life. As Bruce Janoff has suggested, black humor may not simply be pessimistic or amoral, but simply a way of expressing "a terrain of terrifying candor concerning the most extreme situations" (1974: 303). A primary function of disaster joking is the desire to "speak the last word" about essentially unspeakable events. It is an attempt to craft language adequate to the calamity we have been persuaded to view, to "name" dissonant images and so create models of comprehending such horrific. Humor, when it emerges, will join the many other strategies Americans have generated to find closure.

Already there have been prayer meetings, vigils, and masses already being held to express sorrow and provide immediate reassurance. The dead (in particular the emergency squads who were especially hard hit in NYC and the passengers on board Flight 93 who prevented it from reaching its target) are seen as martyrs to a new, faceless style of warfare that has become the norm. I expect the three crash sites to become centers of ritual visits and gifts to the dead, many richly symbolic and meaningful to someone who has lost a family member or friend. Certainly some permanent memorial will mark these sites, even as the buildings are reconstructed. And certainly some regular moment of silence and reflection will mark the anniversary of nine-one-one, as I already hear the date being called. (Sept. 11 = 9/11)

Nevertheless, an essential phase of this coping response includes joking about the event. Humor is a powerful way to test and reaffirm cultural values, and when people are healed enough, this response will reaffirm our human ability to put mega deaths into perspective and choose to live on.

Note

* My thanks to several people who took time to make suggestions on preliminary drafts of this piece, during a difficult time for Americans and for folklorists in particular. These include Camille Bacon-Smith, Simon Bronner, Christie Davies, Anna Gui gne, Sandy Hobbs, and Alan E. Mays.

[1.](#) Up to October 3, only a few items have come to my attention, many of them from overseas, where, as early as the week after the tragedy, TV viewers were increasingly objecting to the intensive broadcasting of the affair (Guigne 2001). The only one that appears to have had any currency is a British item concerning an incompetent military response by the Irish government. Nevertheless, a number of message boards have expressed similar beliefs that a "sick joke" cycle will eventually emerge (Mays 2001).

[2.](#) Also I'm reminded of the way in which the actor Vic Morrow was actually

killed in 1982 during the filming of a special effect for the movie *Twilight Zone*, and how actual footage showing the tragedy was broadcast on television. This event, too, produced topical humor, some of which inspired jokes later applied to the Challenger disaster (Smyth 1986: 250).

3. The first clearly "black humor" item, sent to me on October 3, 2001, from England (see note 1 above), does in fact match this prediction. Similarly, my observation of commemorative t-shirts and other material culture responses to the events have focused on the World Trade Center. Some explicitly play on the irony of the disaster's date, with the twin towers forming two numeral "one's" in "September 11, 2001."

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