

By Invitation

Jokes about politics: The good, the bad and the ugly

Humour can reduce stress and build bonds, as well as spread lies and breed cynicism



David Chan

For The Straits Times

This essay is about the psychology of sociopolitical humour. First, let me assure you that writing or reading about humour does not kill the fun, although you may not laugh out loud. By humour, I mean a joke or a funny communication with a social purpose clear to the audience – to provoke laughter and provide amusement.

Humour can be communicated in written, oral or visual formats. Sociopolitical humour often combines the various formats, as is the case in a cartoon, a video clip or an Internet meme. A popular Internet meme is a photograph with the original image deliberately altered to inject humour.

In Facebook posts and chats on mobile applications like WhatsApp, friends freely share jokes that are sociopolitical in nature, often not knowing who created the humorous item or initiated its transmission in cyberspace. Marketing professionals examine how humour can influence consumer behaviour. In advertising, humour is a serious business. In contrast, politicians, political analysts and social scientists have not given humour the attention it deserves, especially with regard to the sharing of sociopolitical humour in social media.

Sociopolitical jokes can influence us in ways beyond having a good laugh.

HUMOUR AND HEALTH

Political figures are often the butt of jokes in sociopolitical humour, with such humour most common in times of elections and political scandals or sagas.

Sociopolitical jokes circulated on social media are frequently irreverent and sometimes reflect ignorance. But those that centre on issues that are emotive, unpleasant or confusing are often wildly popular. That is because the humour provides comic relief that

temporarily defuses the tense feeling evoked by these issues, be it angst, anxiety or ambivalence.

Research has shown that humour is sometimes associated with subsequent decrease in stress, and this occurs through two pathways.

The first pathway is neuro-physiological. When we laugh and enjoy humour, our nervous system relaxes and our brain releases hormones known as endorphins. This biochemical mechanism helps to regulate emotions and relieve pain, increasing physical and emotional well-being.

The other pathway is socio-psychological. Joking brings people closer together, forges better relationships and increases social support from each other. It also helps us reappraise a stressful situation by seeing things from new perspectives.

But these positive effects on physical, emotional and social health occur only when the joke is acceptable. When we find a joke offensive or feel humiliated by it, it is no longer humour to us. We feel upset and may even react aggressively.

Also, some purported health effects of humour are highly exaggerated. There is no sound scientific evidence for claims that humour can cure cancer or other serious medical conditions. It is a bad idea to replace your medical doctor with a laughter therapist.

WHEN HUMOUR BECOMES HARM

Research has shown that a sense of humour is an attractive social trait, sometimes ranked as high as good looks and intellect. We like someone with a good sense of humour if we think it reflects social confidence, happiness and a healthy perspective on life.

But individuals who use humour often are not necessarily happier and likeable people. Studies show that individuals who use jokes to ridicule others and put people down are disliked at the workplace. They have poor social relationships, and they tend to have lower well-being.

Of course, many jokes among colleagues or friends taking aim at bosses or politicians are mostly harmless. They may even be downright hilarious with a positive bonding effect for those

who get the humour.

But there are situations when sociopolitical humour produces negative effects, and these are not necessarily about the impact on individual physical and mental health.

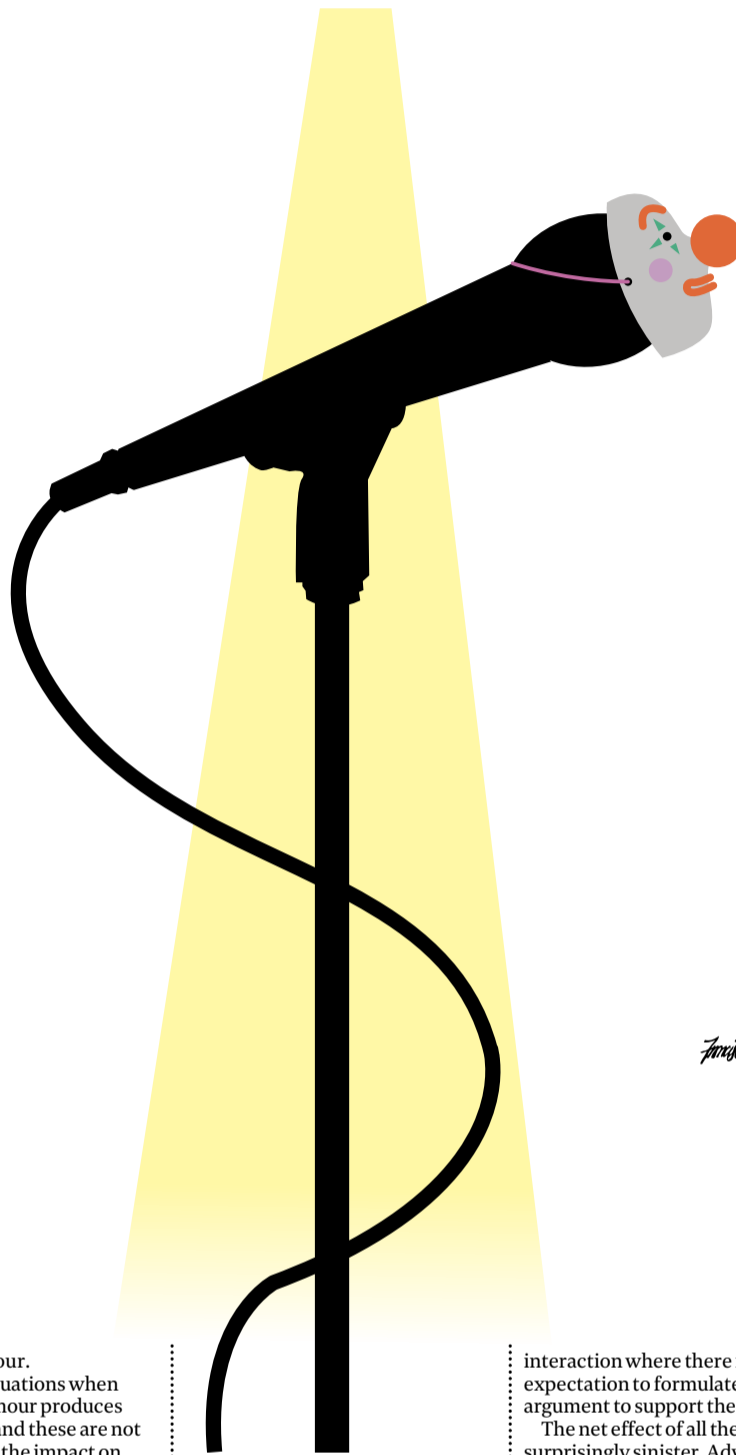
There are obvious ways that sociopolitical humour can cause harm. For example, a joke may contain a claim that threatens or ruins the reputation of the person targeted. Such a claim can also be legally defamatory, even when communicated as a joke in the context of an Internet meme.

Jokes that result from prejudice or purportedly humorous statements that are highly insensitive and offensive to race and religion can result in dismissal, disharmony, distrust and even death. Practical jokes in the form of fake news on the Internet may be funny to those propagating them but can end up wasting public resources or causing serious damage in crisis situations.

But besides these more obvious situations of how jokes can go wrong, there is a potential silent effect that has not received sufficient attention.

SLEEPER EFFECT

Sociopolitical humour in social media oversimplifies the issues that it targets. But it is rare to



Jankin

interaction where there is no expectation to formulate any argument to support the position.

The net effect of all these can be surprisingly sinister. Adverse impact can occur in insidious ways. One way is through a powerful psychological phenomenon known as the sleeper effect. It is so-called because it refers to how we remember a message but not its source, and how a message becomes more persuasive over time even though the source was not highly trusted.

This is how it works. The sociopolitical message associated with a humorous item was not taken seriously when it was first received. After all, it was part of a joke. But over time, through widespread sharing and repeated exposure to the underlying message in recurring humour, a cynical position on an issue or a negative view of a target public figure becomes rooted in public consciousness.

The propagated positions and views in the message become socially acceptable criticisms because they are perceived as widely held beliefs. We freely share them with our friends. They are salient and readily available for people to use to explain political events and actions, especially controversial and complex ones.

The remarkable thing about the sleeper effect is that we believe a message from a source that we had not considered trustworthy. That is possible because we remember the message but we forgot the source.

If you find this hard to believe, see if you find this experience familiar. You and your friends were gossiping when you recalled a story or an allegation about a public figure that someone had told you, but you did not remember who told you and when.

In short, the overuse and over-consumption of sociopolitical humour not only end up reinforcing a preconceived position, but it can also create a public view and develop public cynicism. And the process is subconscious, as it is due to widely shared messages taking root and becoming normalised in public consciousness.

HANDLING HUMOUR

How then do we handle humour?

In the vast majority of situations, humour is harmless, and it can even help in our personal, social and work lives. Continue to have fun. But be sensitive to the feelings of others, especially when it involves race and religion. And remember that "just kidding" is a poor defence when an offence is committed.

Three simple guiding principles may be useful before we create or communicate humour, whether just for laughs or to convey a sociopolitical message.

First, use humour but do not humiliate. Second, fictionalise but do not fabricate. Third, denounce but do not defame.

As for politicians, analysts and social scientists, it may be worth taking time to re-examine a position, conclusion or interpretation on a particular policy or issue if it is a constant butt of jokes.

Persistent and recurring themes in popular humour may be signals for political self-reflection and analysis of public sentiment. If we dislike a certain strain of sociopolitical humour, it does not mean we should treat it as noise.

The science of humour is clear. The benefits of good humour go well beyond adding spice to our lives. Humour brings people together, and it broadens our perspective and bonds us. It can enhance well-being by mitigating stress and tempering our impulse when dealing with difficult issues.

If we have little or no humour, we are not just boring. We may be neglecting an important mechanism to cope with stress and negative events.

But if indiscriminate humour is abundant and discernment is absent, it is no longer funny. Harmful humour means we all end up as losers, and not just jokers.

We all need a sufficient dose of good humour. We live better if we know how and when to be funny – both in producing humour and reacting to it.

Whether in social media or face-to-face situations, humour is here to stay. So we all should learn to relax and embrace it, but not get carried away. Humour can either help or hurt us in a serious way.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.