Even before the missing OceanGate submersible (above) was found, or its fatal implosion confirmed, it became the subject of perverse online jokes and memes which attracted scores of "likes" on social media platforms. But there was also fierce condemnation from netizens outraged by the gross insensitivity of such memes. PHOTO: AFP

When online humour crosses the line

A downed passenger plane and an imploded submersible – why have the deaths in these two incidents become a source of jokes?

Lim Sun Sun

The missing OceanGate submersible carrying five men to the Titanic wreckage deep in the ocean was the stuff of movies. The sheer rarity of this extraordinary endeavour led it to quickly dominate news headlines and online chatter. But well before the submersible was found, or its fatal implosion confirmed, it became the subject of perverse online jokes and memes.

Some morbidly counted down to when the oxygen supply would run out, while others jibed at the obscene wealth of the five individuals, lampooning them for squandering their riches on this foolishly risky undertaking. These jokes attracted scores of "likes" on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram, but also drew fierce condemnation from netizens outraged by their gross insensitivity.

Critics took umbrage at how the memes capitalised on the men's demise, remonstrating that death was no fodder for jokes. This begs the question – is death indeed no laughing matter?

Closer to home, we also had a recent brush with macabre humour when US-based comedian Jocelyn Chia joked about the ill-fated Malaysia Airlines Flight MH 370. A TikTok video featuring that segment of her act went viral and drew the ire of Malaysian audiences, triggering an apology from no less than Singapore's Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, and even a request for Interpol to arrest her.

Chia's mockery of Malaysians' inability to fly was decried as hurtful and offensive – a thoughtless trivialisation of the deaths of the 239 passengers and crew on board. She defended herself by citing how some American comedians have even joked about the horrifying Sept 11 tragedy and that her video was taken out of context when shared over social media. She also argued that Asian audiences are just not ready for "harsher, edgier and more in-your-face" humour than her American crowd was accustomed to.

Academics A. Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren theorised that some people find humour in situations of "benign violation", where they perceive that an ethical, social or physical norm has been violated but do not find the violation to be particularly offensive, despicable or disturbing. Accordingly, audiences who view violations as mild or harmless will find such jokes funny, whereas those repulsed or disgusted by the violations will derive no humour.

Humour has indeed always been a matter of taste, shaped by cultural norms and local contexts. A gag that elicits raucous laughter in one country may draw a pained groan in another.

But the online environment defies geographical boundaries. Furthermore, the online culture of memefication – creating hilarious or witty online memes – motivates people to exploit feverish headlines and spout extreme views because algorithms reward shock value.

In the quest for virality, sensationalist or incendiary content is guaranteed to provoke consternation and boost audience engagement. Whereas you would think twice about sharing perverse jokes with known acquaintances, the cloak of online anonymity permits you to be grossly offensive. In the virtual world, one can cast off the shackles of political correctness and social niceties with wild abandon.

Consequently, sick and macabre humour has understandably flourished on large and anonymous forums like Reddit and Twitter. Beyond merely causing offence, even more troubling is the tactic of disguising racist and nationalist views as dark humour on such platforms. Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old boy whose body was washed up on a Turkish beach, became the tragic face of the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015. This poignant image of Alan was heavily repurposed and ridiculed in a community of interest within Reddit.

In a 2018 study, academic Robert Topinka analysed

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user-generated images and posts based on the photograph shared in the specific subreddit r/ImGoingToHellForThis. With over half a million subscribers and claims to mock political correctness in the interest of promoting free speech, posts on this subreddit are unabashedly racist and nationalist. In the wake of Alan's death, this subreddit lit up with posts denigrating immigrants and refugees from the developing world, using humour to mask fundamentally discriminatory and xenophobic views.

Similarly, toxic masculinity is also being propagated under the guise of humour, thereby normalising disturbingly sexist views.

Clearly, a line has to be drawn for online humour. As the experience with the OceanGate submersible and Jocelyn Chia's standup routine demonstrated, tolerance for offensive humour is far from universal and nor should we assume it to be so.

But the interconnected world that we inhabit labours under the spectre of a "forced" global culture wrought by the Internet. There is constant violation of shared rules of decency that were previously deemed sacrosanct but today seem trifling. Once impenetrable cultural barriers are crossed and inviolable social norms compromised with technologically enabled audacity.

We cannot allow crude algorithms designed for drawing eyeballs and generating profits to determine what every society deems funny or acceptable. The chorus of opposition to the offensive OceanGate memes was tantamount to community self-regulation, which is a key pillar of a healthy online environment. However, human protest is no match for the algorithmic amplification of offensive and toxic views slyly disguised as humour and fabricated to shock.

Online platforms must take greater responsibility for ensuring that their community standards continue to adhere to societal norms that enjoy broad consensus. These standards cannot be a case of "one and done" but have to be regularly reviewed as online users seek to constantly push against the limits of acceptability.

Beyond standards, content moderation and downranking procedures must also be constantly refined to expunge or demote content that is harmful or discriminatory.

To this end, consultation with broad swathes of the community and with ethicists should be undertaken to develop platforms that reflect the best rather than exacerbate the worst of humanity. After all, like death, the safety and integrity of the online world is no laughing matter.

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