Jan Chovanec*

Early Titanic Jokes: A disaster for the theory of disaster jokes?

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Abstract: This paper contributes to our understanding of the inception of disaster humor by refuting the position of 'technological determinism' that is central for the theory of disaster jokes. This view, developed by Christie Davies, ties the emergence of this form of humor to the visual presentation of disaster events on television. The paper reports on the discovery of several contemporary instances of pre-television disaster humor on the topic of the sinking of the Titanic from 1912, thereby explicitly challenging the premise that prior to televised coverage, there were no disaster jokes. While the data come from a culture that was cognitively very distant from the disaster (and, thus, more likely to give rise to instantaneous disaster humor creation), the paper suggests that a modification to the original theory is possible, arguing that disaster humor can be interpreted as a reaction to the more general process of mediatization, whether televisual or exclusively verbal, which constructs a shared body of knowledge that people can draw upon as a resource when constructing humor. That is particularly the case with iconic disasters, such as the sinking of the Titanic, which can be seen symbolically as an epic fail of modernity rather than a mere tragic disaster.

Keywords: disaster jokes, dark humor, sick humor, historical humor, Czech humor

1 Introduction

Among the many categories of jokes that Christie Davies focused on in his research, a special position is held by disaster jokes. Davies's central argument is that this category of jokes is inescapably connected to modernity: he relates their existence to what he calls "televised disasters". It is the over-saturation with disaster news on TV that leads to cynicism and the emergence of disaster humor; as also noted by Oring, "disaster humor comes into being with the omnipresence of television" (2008: 196). It is Davies' contention that older

***Corresponding author: Jan Chovanec,** Department of English and American Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czech Republic, E-mail: chovanec@phil.muni.cz

media forms were so different from the modern media that they did not enable the emergence of humor about disasters.

This paper seeks to challenge and revise Christie's theory of disaster jokes. Based on the discovery of very early jokes on the Titanic disaster, all obtained from a contemporary Czech humoristic sources, I suggest that Davies' position that "there are no *contemporary* jokes" about pre-television disasters (2003: 17; original emphasis) is no longer tenable in view of the recently discovered data. Various forms of humor did exist about *current* disasters even before the advent of television (and later the Internet), which are otherwise considered as central to the production of sick humor and joke cycles on disaster events (cf. Ellis 2001; Kuipers 2002).

While the lack of historical data makes it difficult to speculate about whether we can actually talk about "joke cycles" or "set disaster joke pieces", the mere existence of contemporary Titanic jokes requires us to reconsider the privileged role of television, as propounded in Christie Davies's model. Apparently, the mediatization of disaster news through early print media was quite sufficient to trigger the generation of humor – possibly serving as a counter-discourse to the official, mediatized narratives of negative disaster news but also, possibly, as a human reaction to tragedy and suffering, though a socially unacceptable one. As regards the Titanic disaster itself, the contemporary potential of the tragic event as a source of humor and a point of reference may be seen in the symbolic meaning of the sinking of the Titanic as an epic fail of modernity.

Contrary to Davies, the data lead me to conclude that the *spiritus agens* for disaster humor does not lie in the modality through which the information about the disaster is conveyed. Thus, it is not crucial for the emergence of disaster jokes that the information about disasters be mediated through modern technologically-mediated forms of communication, such as television, the internet and the social media. Specifically, it is not important for the people to be confronted with the visual aspect of the disasters, and the spread of the information about the events can be equally well achieved by such pre-televisual means as the telegraph, the radio or even the printed press. What these forms of communication achieve is a more or less instant spread of the information from a single, typically institutional source to the mass audiences – in a very short time, the information is shared globally and becomes a part of the shared cultural knowledge that humorists can draw on. While some disaster humor may be motivated by people's reaction to the emotional mediatization of distant tragedies, it would be, in my view, limiting to see that as the only explanation.

The aim of this paper is to critically reconsider Davies' work on disaster humor, particularly its central premise that disaster jokes "*only* emerged and flourished after the rise of television ... in the 1960" (2011a: 11, original

emphasis". After an overview of his theory and other relevant literature in Section 2, the paper discusses the recently discovered data in its relevant socio-historical context in Section 3. Then, individual examples are presented according to the different genres they represent: a narrative anecdote (3.1.), canned jokes (3.2), humorous cartoons (3.3.), and a newspaper feuilleton (3.4). On the basis of the discussion of the data in Section 4, I suggest a modification of the theory of disaster humor by calling upon the need to consider the broader role of mediatization, particularly in cultures and communities that are cognitively distant from the disaster scene. While visual mediation of the disaster and some temporal distance from the event may play a role, they are not crucial for the emergence of disaster humor.

2 Disaster humor

One of the defining characteristics of disaster humor is the fact that it references unexpected events affecting human lives. Disaster jokes appear in the wake of such major events as assassinations, major accidents, terrorist attacks and natural catastrophes that result in the loss of life of prominent individuals or large numbers of people, and where the acts are committed in gruesome and often horrific ways (Oring 1987; Davies 1999; Kuipers 2002; Ellis 2003; Blank 2013). It is marked by the transgression of norms, with humor capitalizing on other people's suffering and death.

Disaster humor is related to several other kinds of humor, namely sick and dark humor, but it needs to be distinguished from them as a separate type. Thus, disaster humor forms a specific category of sick humor, where incongruity is posited between the gruesome and the innocuous (Kuipers 2005: 71). Sick humor typically deals with taboo topics or issues that are deemed to be beyond the limits of decency and mainstream morality (Dundes 1987; Lockyer and Pickering 2001; Hoffstadt and Höltgen 2011). However, while it may involve obscenity and vulgarity and give rise to disgust, it need not involve the death of people. Dark humor, by contrast, involves "death, sickness, disability, and extreme violence" (Bucaria 2008: 219) and can be defined more generally as humor produced "in response to precarious, dangerous and/or traumatic situations or incidents", without necessarily making fun of them (Dynel and Poppi 2018). Such humor can also be self-disparaging, i.e. created by the people affected by the negative phenomenon, as a coping mechanism, as, for instance, in the case of humor produced by cancer patients (Demjén 2016).

Disaster humor has attracted much attention among folklorists and social scientists, who have sought to find the reasons why humor occurs after such major negative events, how it spreads and what its characteristics are. The most prominent among humor scholars is Christie Davies, who developed a sociological theory of disaster jokes (Davies 1999, Davies 2003, Davies 2011a, Davies 2011b). The central element in the theory is the notion that their existence is conditioned by television. More specifically, the very motivation for the existence of the genre of disaster jokes is an incongruity between the horror of media disasters and the TV audience's distant reception of disaster news:

> Television tries to tell people that they should be feeling the same emotions in the light of the distant events shown on the screen that they would feel if they were present on the spot or if the disaster had involved individuals close to them. From this absurd incongruity jokes emerge. (Davies 2011a: 12)

Davies then elaborates on the moralist dimension of the media discourses: "[w]hen people are incessantly preached at, they respond by telling jokes that breach the conventions imposed on them by the preachifiers" (Davies 2011a: 38).

This form of "preaching" is perceived to consist in the television's constant attention to the tragic events and the preferred emotional response that it sets as a model for the audience. Hence, in a pre-televisual age, disaster jokes are alleged not to have existed because modern technology (television) actually stands at the very core of the disaster humor. As Davies suggests about pre-television disasters and the deaths of famous people, "[j]okes 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" (2003: 17). However, as I demonstrate in the analytical part of this paper, that statement is empirically untenable.

Apart from Davies, a number of other scholars addressed the issue of disaster jokes in their studies, many dealing with how a culture uses humor as a reaction to tragedies. Ellis (2001) discusses the situation in the USA shortly after the September 11 attacks. He argues that the event constitutes a typical "media disaster", during which a society's response goes through several stages. In the initial stage, people are constantly confronted with the media coverage of the disaster:

> 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. (Ellis 2001)

Ellis notes that society's reaction can even be to suppress humor altogether, e.g. by cancelling shows involving topical humor. After this "period of humorlessness", however, the status of the event passes from the present to the past, leading to a mental adjustment that gives rise to some joking, e.g. among rescue workers as a way of coping with the disaster. There is evidence of such black humor circulating among firefighters at Ground Zero during the 9/11 disaster (Ellis 2003: 37), as well as among victims of other disasters (Enarson 2000).

However, with large mediatized disasters, there is a disconnect between the event and the large audiences who learn about it. Following Oring (1987) and Davies, Ellis argues that such increased institutionalization provokes "grassroots anger", when the "shock over the actual events becomes necessarily intertwined with resentment over the way in which we learn about them." It is argued that international cycles of jokes about classic media disasters come into existence in precisely this way. Well-documented joke cycles have included such events as the 1963 JFK assassination, the 1984 United Carbide industrial accident in Bhopal, the 1986 Challenger shuttle disaster (Oring 1987), the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster (Fialkova 2001), the 1997 Princess Diana's death (Davies 1999), the 2001 World Trade Centre attacks (Kuipers 2002; Tsakona 2003; Csaszi 2003), etc.

Based on such previous disaster joke cycles, Ellis went on to predict the characteristics of the 2001 World Trade Centre disaster jokes: a period of latency, the referencing of the dominant visual images, the recycling of elements from previous cycles, and the primary channel of distribution being e-mail communication. Reflecting on the disaster in a later text, he notes that there was a latency period of about a week during which some humor emerged (among people on message boards) but was heavily sanctioned by other users. He observes that "[i]nformants have often commented that jokes about disastrous events sprang up almost immediately after the event, although folklorists have found it difficult to document these until they emerged as a cycle" (2003: 42). Apparently, the very first attested instance of humor on the 9/11 event was circulated as early as two hours after the tragedy.[1]

1 It concerns the following item posted on the *alt.humor* message board (Ellis 2003: 44):
What does World Trade Centre stand for:
- *Welcome to Canada*
- *World Terrorist Convention*
- *What? Trade Centre.*

The material on the 9/11 disaster was subsequently collected by, among others, Kuipers (2002, 2005). Similar to Davies, she argues against the coping function of disaster jokes, suggesting that such jokes have different functions for different people, which is hardly surprising given the different emotions that the same disaster images evoke in different contexts. In case of such global genres as internet humor, it is thus a simplification to equate disaster jokes with the need to cope with grief (2005: 72). Kuipers concentrates on pictorial jokes produced and shared by users on the internet. She interprets such a practice as genre play, where users exploit generic conventions and construct incongruities in their images through a clash of domains. Importantly, she also mentions the role of cultural references, noting that while some jokes are truly global, others are localized in specific national contexts.

While Kuipers is one of the first studies to deal with the pictorial and verbal conventions of emerging Internet humor, the creative practice of drawing on multimodal resources has now become the rule across social media and in many other genres of technology-mediated communication, such as memes (Shifman 2014; Marcus and Singer 2017; Piata 2018). The interactional dimension of this phenomenon is yet to be documented and analyzed in relation to media disasters; although there are some recent studies that have, for instance, analyzed humorous online reactions to the 2015 migrant crisis in Europe (Tsakona 2018; Chovanec 2018) and the 2016 Nice terrorist attacks (Dynel and Poppi 2018). These studies indicate that various forms of humor motivated by disasters and other major negative events, including dark and sick humor, can have socio-pragmatic functions. Humor can operate, among others, as criticism of official policies, mainstream media, ineptness of politicians, etc. Thus, media disasters give the users – who may be physically or cognitively distant from the events themselves – the pretext to communicate their dissatisfaction about other issues and serve as a welcome opportunity for their self-positioning vis-à-vis the current social and political situation.

Evidently, such communicative practices go beyond the mere format of the canned joke genre, which – as maintained by Davies – has no consequences. For Davies, disaster jokes as such do not have a political dimension, "though they may well have political references", since, in his view, "[j]okes are never truly tendentious nor political, nor do they have any consequences" (2011a: 27). This position sums up the difference between social scientists and scholars in linguistic pragmatics in their views on this issue: the former tend to stress the defining role of modern technologies (i.e. television, in Davies' case) and allege the a-political nature of disaster jokes, while the latter tend to focus not only on the mechanics of humor construction but also on the humor producers' possible intentions and the effects that their acts (whether humorous or non-humorous) have on recipients.

3 Material and analysis

Since the central argument in Davies' theory of disaster jokes is that a distant calamity would not give rise to disaster jokes before the advent of television (Davies 2011a: 11), my goals are (1) to determine whether earlier examples exist and, if so, (2) account for their existence. Davies himself does acknowledge the possible existence of pre-television disaster humor when he states that

> [t]here was no shortage of sick humor in the past [...], 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. (2003: 16)

Given Davies's focus on the genre of the canned joke and his interest in joke cycles, two issues appear to be conflated in his work on this topic: the existence of disaster jokes as such, and their existence in (extensive) joke cycles about a given disaster.

To make his point in a more forceful way, Davies would also claim in his lectures[2] that "there were no Titanic jokes at the time of the disaster", with Titanic jokes appearing only significantly later, e.g. in connection with the shooting of the eponymous 1997 movie starring Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio (for this claim, see also Davies 2003: 17). Intuitively, this claim appears flawed because it seems to privilege the role of modern technologies (television) to such as extent as to essentially dismiss the possibility of people freely joking on distant disasters during the pre-television age. It would appear to be human nature to joke about such disasters – including the sinking of the Titanic – even in the absence of televised images of the disaster.

In order to test this basic premise of the disaster joke theory, it was thus decided to turn to historical sources in search of any possible humorous texts about the Titanic disaster. For the purpose of this study, two contemporary sources of humorous materials were inspected: (1) the writing of the Czech humorist Jaroslav Hašek, who humorously glossed many contemporary affairs, and (2) the archives of *Humoristické listy*, the best known Czech weekly humorist magazine. The data are intentionally taken from non-English publications to ensure as large a cognitive distance from the disaster as possible: while UK and US cultures were closely affected by the sinking of the ship, other western

2 E.g. at his workshop at the 2012 ISHS conference in Kraków and his lecture series at Masaryk University in Brno in 2015.

European countries (France, Germany, Holland) were sea-faring nations where a nautical disaster could have been expected to have a different impact from an entirely land-locked country such as the Czech lands. Moreover, the Czech culture had rather local, rather than global, interests at that time, with the political agenda being defined by repeated calls for full or partial independence from the Austrian empire of which the country was a part.

As regards the first source, the online collection of the writings by the Czech humorist Jaroslav Hašek (1883–1923) was treated to a keyword search that revealed that he did indeed reflect on the Titanic disaster at the time of its occurrence, i.e. in 1912.

The second source for the analysis is the magazine *Humoristické listy* ('Humorist Times') founded in 1858 by the journalist and publisher Josef Richard Vilímek. The magazine was in continuous existence for 83 years, finally closing in 1941. It was a pictorial weekly that contained not only political satire but also various kinds of non-political humorous texts, both visual and verbal. The humor was aimed at the popular masses, which was reflected in the subject matter as well. Rather than displaying wit, the magazine's content consisted of humor that appealed to the lower middle classes. Prior to the establishment of Czechoslovakia in 1918, the magazine catered to the Czech readership in what was then a multicultural and multilingual province of the Austrian Empire, where German was used by a large proportion of the population and German-language periodicals were widely circulated as well.[3]

The magazine was subjected to a qualitative analysis of all issues published over the period of two years after the Titanic disaster in April 1912. While the magazine is available online in the digital archive of periodicals of the Institute of Czech Literature,[4] the text does not enable a keyword search. The manual search, however, offered the possibility of inspecting the visual content of the magazine as well, leading to the discovery of a drawn cartoon on the subject of the Titanic disaster.

The search across these sources revealed five instances of Titanic-related humor that appeared in print within the first two months after the disaster. One may thus suppose that it could not have been an individual freak occurrence. These five examples could be considered to be the proverbial tip of the iceberg,

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3 The contemporary relationship between humorous magazines published in Czech and German around the turn of the twentieth century still remains an under-researched topic. Interestingly enough, a keyword search in the publically accessible online archives of the German *Fliegende Blätter*, a popular humorist magazine published at that time, did not yield any findings concerning the humorous treatment of the Titanic disaster.

4 The collection is available at the following website: http://archiv.ucl.cas.cz/.

since it is likely that the humor that is preserved to us in printed sources actually makes up a miniscule amount of humor that must have circulated among people at that time. Interestingly enough, the examples are representative of three distinct genres of humor: narrative anecdotes, jokes, and humorous cartoons.

3.1 Jaroslav Hašek's narrative anecdote

During his short career before dying at the age of 39, the writer Jaroslav Hašek managed to create an impressive literary heritage, establishing himself as the Czech (and international) humorist writer par excellence. He is, of course, most famous for his satirical novel *The Good Soldier Švejk*.[5] The book is a dark comedy – a "politically incorrect comic masterpiece" (Davies 2000), which tends to be read as a critique of military authority and the stupidity of war. In his naïve good-naturedness, Švejk becomes an epitome of the passive resistance of an individual to the establishment (as well as that of a subjugated nation to a dominant power). While the novel is the most translated literary work from Czech into other languages, the main character has also come to be seen as a stereotypical representation of the Czech national character.[6]

Hašek also wrote over 1,200 short stories, which were published in various newspapers and magazines. It is in one of those pieces of writing that the first humorous treatment of the Titanic disaster is to be found. The piece, stylized as a critical letter to an editor and titled 'A letter from Prague', is dated from April 28, 1912, i.e. only 13 days after the sinking of the Titanic in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on April 15, 1912. This makes it – so far – the oldest attested humorous treatment of the disaster. The context of the mention is as follows[7]:

(1) I could tell you, my editor friend Pelant, about the disaster of the Titanic. But you may have read it in the Právo lidu newspaper, where the chaplain

5 The book was held in a high esteem by Christie Davies, who was an expert on the novel (cf. Davies 2000, Davies 2014). Shortly before his death, for instance, he engaged in an exchange with the present author, analyzing the multilingual nature of the swearwords found in the novel. The swearwords reflected the multilingual situation in the Austro-Hungarian empire at the time of the First World War, when the novel is set.

6 This national self-image is simultaneously cherished and hated: it is loved for its humor, survival skills and irreverence to authority, and disliked for the passivity and avoidance of conflict. Noteworthy in this context is also the association between Švejk and another Czech national stereotype – beer-drinking. There are Švejk pubs in many European countries and one Polish brewery even produces "authentic Czech" beer called Szwejk.

7 All translations into English by the author.

> Josef Ptáček explained the matter to a girl from the fifth grade of the basic school in Hostivice. He said that two big ships made a bet about which one would get to America first. One of them hit an iceberg and sank because they [the passengers] were not praying on its board throughout the voyage. They did so only when the ship was sinking but God punished them, it was too late and of no use to them and they all drowned. I also have an opinion on this matter. The iceberg prayed and so nothing happened to it. Personally, I know another case illustrative of what mild religious feelings can lead to. The football team of Bubeneč was playing against Vršovice. The left wing player for Bubeneč moved the ball to the Vršovice goalpost and the goalkeeper for Vršovice let the ball pass. Once he saw that it flew through the goalpost, he shouted "Jesus Maria!" One of the spectators could not hold himself from expressing his just indignation and shouted: "You idiot, you should have thought of God earlier!"[8]
> (Jaroslav Hašek, A letter from Prague, Vršovice 28. IV. 1912; Source: *A Gallery of Caricatures*)

The piece is a satirical criticism of the Catholic church, a topic that was particularly popular with Hašek, recurring over and over in his writing. It pokes fun at the moralist preaching of Catholic church officials. The humorous narrative is constructed around the reported account of a simplistic religious interpretation of the disaster, as provided by a chaplain to a schoolgirl. The absurdity of the scenario of two ships making a bet, and one of them being sunk as a result of God's punishment for the lack of religious fervor of its passengers, is further developed when Hašek ups the chaplain's ridiculous explanation and suggests that not just the ship, but – thanks to its religiosity – the iceberg, too, was delivered from disaster during the crash.

Although this anecdotal narrative does not have the traditional structure of the joke culminating in a punchline, it is quite typical of Hašek's humor. The readers are aware of the mounting absurdity, often enjoying the humor at the expense of the ignorant narrator. This technique is partly evident in how Hašek further develops the narrative: in the example above, he adds another mini-narrative, switching from the rather serious topic of the Titanic disaster to the more mundane occasion of a local football match. The two tales are connected with the general theme of the negative effects of weak religious feelings, taken *ad absurdum*.

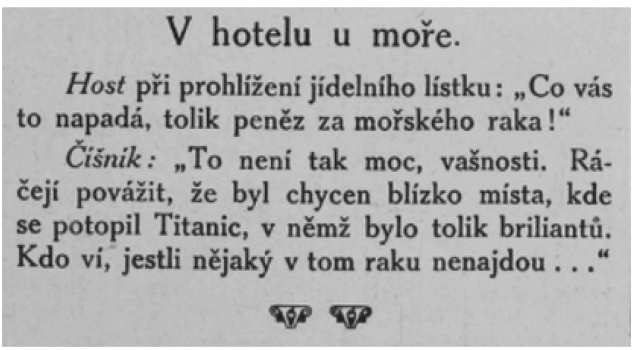
The role of the Titanic disaster in the anecdote calls for some explanation. As suggested above, the disaster is evidently not the main focus of the story. Rather, it has an ancillary role, being used as a vehicle through which Hašek conveys his

8 http://www.svejkmuseum.cz/doc/povidky/galerie_karikatur.pdf.

criticism of the church.[9] In this sense, the disaster serves as a cultural point of reference – a piece of background knowledge that is taken for granted. The Titanic constitutes the set-up for a humorous verbal act that targets the church rather than the disaster or its victims. The sinking of the Titanic was, of course, a heavily mediatized event, which had, by then, been already occupying the front pages of newspapers in many European countries for many days, with the Czech-speaking parts of the then Austro-Hungarian empire not an exception. After all, this was the most important news event in the history of modern journalism (Rodgers 2015). The short story shows that Hašek could easily assume the readers' familiarity with the Titanic disaster story – this was a negative news event of an extreme intensity comparable to modern televised disasters.

3.2 Canned jokes

The second humorous text is a canned joke. As was the standard practice with many jokes and other jocular texts in *Humoristické listy* at the time, the joke has its own headline that provides some introductory context for the joke narrative. In this case, it sets the scene by establishing the location ("In a seaside hotel"), with this piece of information being crucial for the punchline. The joke is reproduced in Figure 1:



V hotelu u moře.

Host při prohlížení jídelního lístku: „Co vás to napadá, tolik peněz za mořského raka!"

Číšník: „To není tak moc, vašnosti. Ráčejí považit, že byl chycen blízko místa, kde se potopil Titanic, v němž bylo tolik briliantů. Kdo ví, jestli nějaký v tom raku nenajdou . . ."

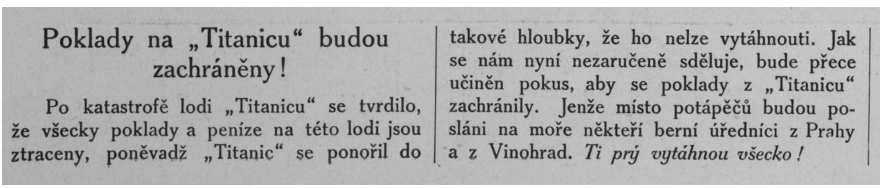
Figure 1: A Titanic disaster joke (*Humoristické listy* 55 (26), p. 309, June 14, 1912).

9 The role of church officials in matters relating to the sinking of the Titanic appears to have been, to say the least, somewhat ambivalent. For instance, as early as April 20, 1912, the Czech daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* published a very scathing criticism of the dismissing and unsympathetic statements that the Catholic clergy made with respect to the casualties of the Titanic disaster, based on the clergy's strong anti-Semitism.

(2) In a seaside hotel.
A guest going through the menu: "Why is that, so much money for a sea lobster!"
The waiter: "That's not so much, sir. Will you please take into consideration that it was caught close to the place where the Titanic sank, with so many diamonds in it. Who knows, maybe you'll find one of them in that lobster..."

The joke deals with the disaster itself, rather than using the Titanic as a set-up for making a joke about some other phenomenon, as was the case with the previous example. Still, it does not directly target the victims, unlike some of the jokes that qualify as instances of dark or sick humor that are found in modern disaster joke cycles. It exploits, for humorous purposes, the material losses suffered during the sinking of the Titanic, which could be seen as insensitive to the victims. Interestingly, the information about the material losses was heavily reported on in the print newspapers at the time in addition to the lists of casualties that included millionaires and other socially prominent people. The material aspect of the disaster will certainly have captivated the imagination of the common people, and thus motivated the emergence of the joke.[10]

The same humorous theme in connection with the Titanic appears in one more humorous text that was, incidentally, published in the very same issue of *Humoristické listy*. This time, the humorous text appears to mimic a brief news article that is concluded with a punchline in italics, cf. Figure 2:



Poklady na „Titanicu" budou zachráněny!

Po katastrofě lodi „Titanicu" se tvrdilo, že všecky poklady a peníze na této lodi jsou ztraceny, poněvadž „Titanic" se ponořil do takové hloubky, že ho nelze vytáhnouti. Jak se nám nyní nezaručeně sděluje, bude přece učiněn pokus, aby se poklady z „Titanicu" zachránily. Jenže místo potápěčů budou posláni na moře někteří berní úředníci z Prahy a z Vinohrad. *Ti prý vytáhnou všecko!*

Figure 2: Treasures on the "Titanic" are to be saved! (*Humoristické listy* 55 (26), p. 305, June 14, 1912).

10 For instance, in its article on April 18, 1912, the Czech daily newspaper *Lidové noviny* published a drawing of the ship with the following caption emphasizing the material aspect of the loss: "We're bringing you today a picture of the Titanic. The steamboat had the capacity of 46,328 tons and cost a trifle – 56 million crowns. It was on its maiden voyage to New York but never completed it. Now it lies, together with the millions that it was transporting, as a shipwreck at the bottom of the sea at the depth of 3,000 meters under the surface." The "treasures on the board" were mentioned as early as in the first news report on the tragedy on 16 April, and were a regular part of the reporting on the event in the subsequent days.

(3) Treasures on the "Titanic" are to be saved!
Following the catastrophe of the "Titanic", we were told that all the treasures and money on this ship were lost because the "Titanic" sank into such a depth that they can't be retrieved. As we are now being told, without a guarantee, an attempt will be made after all to recover the treasures from the "Titanic". However, instead of divers, some tax officers from Prague and Vinohrady [a prestigious Prague neighborhood] will be sent to the sea. *They are said to* [be able to] *retrieve everything*! [original emphasis]

While the humorous text targets the local financial authorities, making a jibe at their over-diligence, it uses the Titanic theme in a rather clever way. The text has a title that resembles an informative headline and starts off by making a factual statement that sums up the Titanic disaster. This sets up a plausible scenario, much in the same way as humorous "spoof news" articles do. With reference to Ermida (2012), the text above contains all the components of a successful spoof news article: an intertextual component (made up of the characteristic news structure and style, cf. the editorial voice in the phrase 'As we are now being told'), a critical component (poking fun at specific social actors and practices, i.e. the ardent fervor of tax collectors), as well as a comic component (on the lexical level, the opposite scripts are triggered through the dual meanings of the lexical item 'retrieve', and on the pragmatic level, the readers' knowledge is needed to appreciate both the allure of the lost Titanic treasures and their inaccessibility).

It is quite clear that shortly after the sinking, the Titanic disaster passed into people's shared background knowledge, having developed a range of themes that could be actively deployed in humorous texts.

3.3 Humorous cartoons

The next instance of Titanic-related humor is a cartoon that appeared in the *Humoristické listy* magazine less than three weeks after the disaster. Figure 3 shows the cartoon together with its humorous caption. The cartoon depicts a man sitting on an iceberg, with a camera in his hands and an ocean liner passing in the background. There are two other men in a nearby boat, who are apparently engaged in a talk with the photographer. The caption captures the conversation between the men in the image as follows:

(4) "Hey man, what are you doing on that iceberg?"
Photographer for a biograph: "I'm waiting for some new disaster. With that "Titania", we missed the chance to make quite some money..."

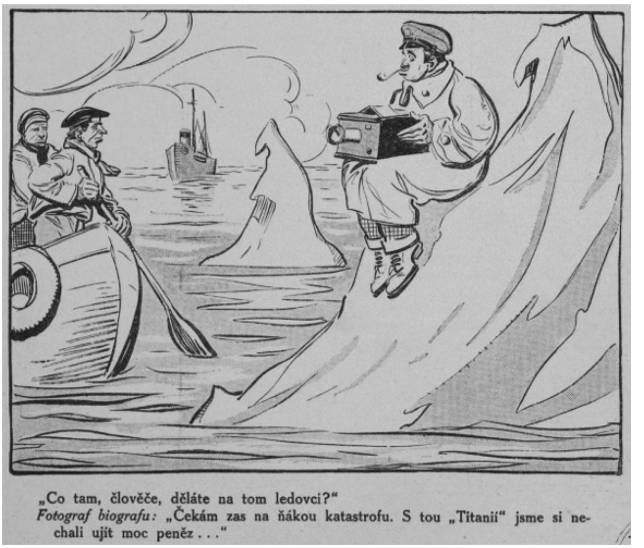


Figure 3: A Titanic cartoon (*Humoristické listy* 55 (20), p. 231, May 3, 1912).

The cartoon is remarkable in that it can be read as providing a negative social commentary on the contemporary media. The latest technology of the day was cinematography, and newsreels were just starting, as a new documentary genre, to capture the current news and bring it to city audiences – the first (silent) news cinema was established in London in 1909. The cartoon thus ridicules the media's obsession with gathering scoops and simultaneously criticizes the economic basis of this practice. While the cartoon engages the then very current practice of cinematic journalism (that was to be replaced by television coverage several decades later) in relation to a major disaster, it can be more generally interpreted as applying to other media's coverage of news events as well, and their cynicism in securing news content for their readers.

Eventually, the visual image of a ship headed for a disaster by approaching an iceberg looming on the horizon came to constitute a powerful visual metaphor for other kinds of imminent failure. An early example of what is essentially an early cultural 'meme' is found in another cartoon that appeared in *Humoristické listy* only two weeks later (see Figure 4). The full-page cartoon shows a ship, sailing under the flag with the Czech national symbol of a lion. The sail and the stern bear the inscription "Czech-German conciliation". Among the motley crew of characters on board, one can catch a glimpse of a couple of sacks under the deck identified as "the social issue" and "finance for the provinces". The caption interprets the looming iceberg as German treachery and makes an explicit reference to the Titanic disaster:

Figure 4: The wandering voyage. (*Humoristické listy* 55 (22), 1912, May 17, 1912).

(5) THE WANDERING VOYAGE.
Will the ship finally escape the danger of treacherous German icebergs or will it smash against them like the Titanic?

Here, the theme of the disaster is appropriated for the local national context, in a manner similar to what Kuipers (2005) observed on how the 9/11 issue was localized within the Dutch culture. In addition to the Titanic theme, which is articulated visually as well verbally in the caption, the cartoon contains another intertextual reference that is more subtle. This is related to the adjective "wandering" in the main caption. The original Czech expression *bludný* [lit. "wandering, erratic"] strongly collocates with sea ships: it appears in the lexicalized designation of the

mythical ship *The Flying Dutchman*, which is known as *Bludný Holanďan* in Czech.[11]

The role of the Titanic disaster in the cartoon is, once again, merely ancillary: it serves as a cultural point of reference that is used because it will be broadly recognized by the contemporary audience as a metaphor for failure.[12] While the cartoon satirically tackles what was then a hot political issue, it appears to take a rather dim view of the coexistence between Czech-speaking and German-speaking inhabitants and of the appeals of the Czech political representatives for an increased autonomy. To this end, the cartoonist exploits the Titanic disaster theme, as well as the intertextual allusion to the Flying Dutchman, a Europe-wide mythical ghost ship sailing without a crew on the high seas and, in some accounts, loaded with treasures.[13]

3.4 A newspaper feuilleton

In addition to the three distinct forms of humor found in the early twentieth century humorist sources, let me briefly refer to another remarkable text that is potentially relevant for our understanding of dark humor in the context of the Titanic disaster. When researching the contemporary materials, I came across a feuilleton printed in the mainstream Czech language newspaper *Lidové noviny* ("*The People's Newspaper*") that was headlined "*Before the catastrophe*". The anonymous article appeared on April 18, 1912, i.e. only 3 days after the sinking of the ship and 2 days after the first news report was published.

The text is a rather long, half-page account of a fictional conversation between passengers on board of the Titanic. The figures represent the national stereotypes of the interlocutors – there is a Russian, who discusses arts, criticizes American politics and mentions a revolution; a German, who is likewise

11 Some of the earliest literary popularizations of this pan-European myth came from the English playwright Edward Fitzhall, who published *The Flying Dutchman; or the Phantom Ship: A Nautical Drama* in 1824, and the English writer Frederick Marryat, whose Gothic novel *The Phantom Ship* appeared in 1839 (eventually translated into Czech as *Bludný Holanďan*). Richard Wagner's famous eponymous opera *Der fliegende Holländer* (The Flying Dutchman) was written in 1843. We can plausibly assume that the cartoon alludes to this sea-sailing myth.

12 This is, of course, one of the cultural meanings of the Titanic disaster until the present day. Cf. the recent Czech version of what is an international Titanic joke inspired by the 1997 movie:

The Czech economy and the Titanic.

What's the difference between the Czech economy and the Titanic? None. Only the Czech government didn't get an Oscar for it.

13 Thus, in a note to his poem "Rokeby" (1812), Sir Walter Scott explains that "the demon frigate" refers to "a fantastic vessel ... originally ... loaded with great wealth, on board of which some horrid act of murder and piracy had been committed" (Scott 1841, note S, p. 355).

critical of American egoism; an Englishman, who is proud of the ship's cutting-edge technology; and an American, who makes boastful claims, proclaims American expansionism, as well as praising the Titanic on its record-breaking maiden voyage. When the ship hits the iceberg, the German falls overboard, the Russian criticizes the anti-social behavior of the American, the American egoistically tries to save himself and the Englishman refuses to acknowledge that the Titanic could be in trouble. The feuilleton concludes as follows:

(6) Englishman: Throw yourselves overboard! Hold on!
Russian: The German, the German – where is the German guy?
American: He flew over the railings!
Englishman: No, the ship is not going to sink!
American: Why should I care? I go to the boats. (He takes out a revolver.) I have eight shots, I must stay alive!
[...]
Russian (in horror): Sir, Mister American – you won't shoot at those who stand in your way, will you?
American (takes aim at him).
Russian: There are women and children here – !
Englishman (in anger): The Titanic shall not sink – !
American: Save your skin!
Russian: Ah! You monster! Egoist! Titan! (He swoops at him, while all around there are screams and signals of a catastrophe that the world had not seen before...)

While this is patently not a humorous text, it does contain an element of satire, e.g. in how it conveys a mocking contempt for the dogmatism of the Englishman and the egoism of the American, and passing a general comment on the social and political context of the early 1910s. It works with the readers' knowledge of contemporary international politics, the national stereotypes, as well as the early telegraphed reports of alleged shooting on board of the Titanic while it was sinking.

The feuilleton does not have the necessary joke structure but it is strongly reminiscent of the modern three-nation jokes that, among other functions, serve to ridicule national stereotypes and involve ethnic humor (Laineste 2011; Krikmann 2012). This fictional dramatization of the last moments of the people on board of the ship also attests to the fact that mainstream newspapers of the time (i.e. non-humorist publications) would move beyond their established role of giving information and opinionated commentary. By dramatizing the event and mocking the national stereotypes, the feuilleton could, in the context of the

day, be labelled as an instance of contemporary sick humor, despite its *prima facie* classification as a non-humorous genre.[14]

4 Discussion

In view of the material presented in the previous section, let us consider some of the implications that the discovery of several forms of early Titanic-related humor has for the theory of disaster humor. I suggest that the findings may lead us to either correct Davies' technological determinism or modify his theory by shifting from the "televisualization" to a more general form of "mediatization".

First of all, the Titanic disaster was not an event in any significant way different from modern disasters. Its sinking was a news event that must have been certainly equal, if not stronger, in its impact on the contemporary audience. At the time of its launch, the Titanic was hailed as the biggest, most luxurious and safest ship ever built, the high-tech of transcontinental travel of the early twentieth century – at a time when humanity was so full of optimism in its technical inventions and progress and prior to the trauma of the First World War. Thus, the Titanic was a true symbol of modernity. Its symbolic status at the time was certainly similar to other phenomena that the Western civilization has identified with in the past decades, from space exploration and nuclear energy to supersonic aircraft and gravity-defying skyscrapers. If dark humor is one of the folk reactions when such objects of human/national pride turn into disasters, from the Challenger explosion and the Chernobyl nuclear plant meltdown to the Concorde crash and 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, it comes as no surprise that such reactions should have emerged with respect to the Titanic as well. The Titanic disaster can be read as an epic fail of modernity. Despite the horror and the human losses, it is understandable that there will be some malicious or cynical reactions once an unsinkable ship, previously described only in superlatives, sinks on its maiden voyage in defiance of all the expectations, instantly becoming "the biggest catastrophe the world has ever seen".[15] After all, the accident was an unexpected, incongruous event.

Apart from the intensity of the event and its symbolic significance, the Titanic disaster was already subject to much very intensive mediatization at

14 Ellis (2003: 44) documents some of such extreme negative reactions to the earliest 9/11 joke posted on internet message boards.

15 This is the description of the event from contemporary Czech press – the daily newspaper *Lidové noviny*.

the time. Thanks to the telegraph, the news of the disaster spread globally in a matter of hours. The event became front page news for many days, with stories focusing on the disillusionment with technology, accusations of mismanagement, as well as allegations of violence on board of the Titanic. The contemporary press was publishing very graphic descriptions of the horror and suffering of the victims, based partly on eyewitness accounts from survivors (relayed via the telegraph from the Carpathia ship that saved them) and partly on the papers' own dramatized versions of the events. As there was no photographic documentation of the disaster, all the accounts were only verbal, leaving the extent of the tragedy entirely to the imagination of the readers. Save for the absence of visual data, the media coverage of the Titanic disaster was not that different from how the modern media focus on current disasters. In that sense, the Titanic disaster was just one of many disasters that became subject to early emergence of dark humor, with the only difference being that it concerned a different media modality. Where humor about the 9/11 attacks was related to the digital/online media mode (cf. Kuipers 2002), and humor about other modern disasters from the JFK assassination to Diana's death emerged from the televised coverage (Davies 2003), then humor about the Titanic represents the print mode, the primary modality of the pre-televisual and pre-digital era. Early Titanic-related humor falls within the print media but at the time when the telegraph made instant global communication possible. It remains to be seen how other catastrophes, earlier than the Titanic, became reflected in joke-lore in the pre-telegraph era.

As to the theory of disaster jokes, the findings mean that the emergence of disaster humor is not conditioned by the existence of television – or some other visual documentary material that becomes available to the media audiences at the time (photographs, newsreels, etc.). The Titanic case is truly an example of a media disaster (cf. Ellis 2001). If we need to deal with the question of why it occurs, then it can be argued that disaster humor can emerge as a reaction to a "mediatization" of a tragic event, marked by the intensity of the coverage of the disaster news. Disaster humor then becomes a form of news counter-discourse – a reaction of the public against the institutionalized accounts of reality. This is in line with Davies's contention that "the jokes are a form of resistance to compulsory political correctness" (2003: 32). Oring suggests a similar interpretation when he mentions that disaster jokes do not target the victims because they are "a form of resistance against institutional constructions of reality and the reactions that constructed reality is designed to provoke" (Oring 1992: introduction to book *Jokes and Their Relations*).

All this would hold as long as we subscribe to the "mediatization" theory of disaster jokes that seeks their emergence in the public's reaction to official/institutional/media discourses, i.e. interpreting this kind of humor as having a

responsive, counter-hegemonic function. An alternative position might be to resign oneself to a more common-sense position that it is simply human nature to joke and make fun of the suffering of others, no matter how big the suffering is and no matter how people learn of the tragedy or how close to or distant from it they are.

5 Conclusion

To sum up, there are several issues related to the discovery of early Titanic jokes that are of interest to disaster humor theory. First of all, there is (1) the mere existence of pre-television disaster jokes, or jokes about disasters. Evidently, the data indicate that Davies' theory needs to be amended in this respect. Pre-television disasters were subject to contemporary humorous treatment – and in quite diverse forms of humor, ranging in genre from canned jokes and cartoons to literary anecdotes and spoof news. This is humor that is attested to us in printed sources, which thus stands as evidence of what is likely to have been a more extensive contemporary oral joking practice on the disaster topic. The visual presentation of the disaster is not a prerequisite for the emergence of disaster humor; verbal descriptions can take over this function quite well.

Another issue consists in the (2) quantitative nature of this phenomenon, i.e. the existence of joke cycles about disasters. This is difficult to apply as a criterion (Davies himself does not do so consistently in his treatment of disaster humor) since one could hardly specify with sufficient empirical precision what constitutes a "cycle", i.e. how many distinct and how many similar jokes and instances of humor are needed to qualify for a disaster joke cycle. Ellis (2003: 45), referencing John Dorst, suggests that the moment a list of "canonical" jokes was circulated about the 9/11 disaster possibly marks the emergence of the genre as a cycle, and "not a group of individual jokes that happen to appear during the same period". It is not my aim to try to argue whether or not early Titanic jokes constituted a "cycle" in the sense that humor scholars and folklorists use that concept, especially since there is also the problem of documentation: to what extent are the jokes that are attested or preserved representative of the humor constructed by lay people around the topic of (global) disasters? Are documented joke cycles representative of such humor? We may assume that there were a great many folk jokes that were not recorded anywhere and, thus, were not preserved. The reliance on the "joke cycle" criterion might unjustly privilege modern disaster jokes that not only happen to coincide with the televisual era but are also recorded – thanks to widespread literacy, technological developments, and humor scholars' fieldwork.

This brings us to another dimension of the theory of disaster jokes that emerges from the literature on the topic, namely (3) their spontaneous creation. This refers to their production from below – by common people rather than entertainers, since the latter's incorporation of the disaster themes in their humor performances is not seen as "authentic" enough to qualify as proper grassroots disaster humor. Once again, the problem concerns the availability of the data: obviously, no fieldwork can be carried out among speakers from a hundred years ago, although one should not rule out the possibility that some contemporary evidence (e.g. incidentally collected by ethnographers, folklorists, local historians) may eventually emerge at some point in the future. The data that have now become available about pre-television disaster jokes, as attested by the early Titanic jokes in the Czech material analyzed in this article, come from published sources (and literary heritage). However, the published data are already illustrative of humor that was considered as publishable at the time, i.e. somehow within the bounds of the current social norms of acceptability. While most of the humor attested about the Titanic disaster does not concern vicious, sick or black humor at the expense of the victims of the tragedy, the appearance of these forms of humor in print sources can be taken as indicative that there may have been other instances of humor on the Titanic at the time of the disaster.

This, of course, links with the final element of the theory of disaster jokes, namely (4) the necessity for the jokes to appear shortly after the event, not with a significant time lag. In the case of the newly attested Czech data, this criterion is met quite appropriately. Should we aim to construct a timeline, then the sequence of events is as follows:

- April 6, 1912 (early morning) – the Titanic sinks;
- April 7, 1912 – the news reaches New York and is telegraphed to Europe;
- April 8, 1912 – the first news report is published in the Czech newspaper *Lidové noviny*;
- April 18, 1912 – a feuilleton on the unsinkable Titanic appears in the *Lidové noviny* newspaper (this was also the date the survivors disembarked off the Carpathia ship in New York, revealing the full extent of the tragedy);
- April 28, 1912 – a humorist treatment of the Titanic theme is published by Jaroslav Hašek in a short story;
- May 3, 1912 – a cartoon ridiculing media attention to the disaster is printed in the *Humoristické listy* magazine;
- June 9, 1912 – a full-fledged joke appears in the *Humoristické listy* magazine;
- June 10, 1912 – a spoof news/joke appears in the *Humoristické listy* magazine.

Clearly, this is no singular occurrence: there is a pattern across different media (serious newspaper, humorist fiction writing, humorist magazine) as well as across

different genres of humor that engages the theme of the sinking of the Titanic – as a rather serious event and shocking event – for humorous purposes. The earliest of these examples (the four-nation stereotype feuilleton in *Lidové noviny*, cf. Section 3.4) is attested only 3 (!) days after the news of the sinking reached Europe, and the first humorous account emerged 13 days after the sinking. This is, by all means, contemporaneous with the event, even by modern standards. What all that shows is that the extensive mediatization of disasters, particularly where they can be endowed with additional meanings (such as the "epic fail of modernity" that the Titanic symbolizes) has contributed extensively to the cultural background knowledge of the readers, making various humorous references possible.

Finally, there is the issue of (5) the cognitive distance between the event and the community in which disaster humor emerges. So far, no contemporary humor on the Titanic has been attested from cultures and communities that are cognitively "close" to the Titanic disaster, i.e. the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as other (Western-European) sea-faring nations for which the catastrophe must have been seen as highly relevant. In a land-locked Central European country, such as the Czech-speaking Bohemia, media reports about the Titanic disaster must have appeared, back in 1912, as something hardly imaginable: the vast majority of the readers of the Czech news never sailed on a ship (or were to the sea, for that matter), and could hardly visualize an iceberg sinking the most modern of ships. Transcontinental sea voyages would have been familiar as a way of emigrating to the United States (mostly via German and Belgian ports), which is also the only vaguely relevant link that the Czech-speaking community would have had at the time with respect to the crossing of the Atlantic. So, the emergence of disaster humor on the Titanic in Central Europe may have been pre-conditioned by the cognitive, cultural and linguistic distance of the community from the disaster. The distance between the disaster event and the readers' own daily realities could not be bigger; this is, in fact, parallel to what Davies says about television: "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 accident with which they are being confronted" (2003: 25). Of course, once other examples of Titanic humor are found in those cultures that are cognitively closer, this argument will become invalidated.[16]

An alternative to such a universalist explanation might be to posit the existence of specific culture-based humor traditions. Then, one might want to make a case for a Central European tradition of irreverent/dark humor (cf., for

16 As one of the reviewers has pointed out, some examples of a humorous treatment of the Titanic disaster can be found in early twentieth century American folklore, namely in the "blues ballads" sung by African Americans. While some of the songs poke fun at the rich (white)

instance, Jaroslav Hašek's counter-authority humor) that could explain the early emergence of Titanic disaster humor. However, it is quite possible that data similar to those found in the Czech historical periodicals may be present in some other cultural communities, and are just waiting to be uncovered and explained in relation to the existing examples. Tragic as the sinking of the Titanic disaster was, it did give rise to early disaster humor; it is now only up to humor scholars to systematically uncover and theorize the phenomenon.

All in all, the (tele)visual technology should not be over-emphasized in relation to disaster humor. Television is, after all, nothing but a recent and relatively quicker form of mediatization of events. Other news media can, quite well, serve the function of spreading news globally to communities and audiences far removed from the disasters, such as the print news throughout the history of journalism and the telegraph in the late 19th and early twentieth centuries. Clearly, since the graphic descriptions could equally well be supplied by verbal accounts in the press, we do not need to wait for televisual images to appear in front of us in the comfort of our living rooms as a prerequisite for disaster humor coming into existence.

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people, they may have originated as the reaction by a suppressed subculture who saw the disaster not "as tragic but rather as a fitting end to people engaged in racist exploitation". In other words, due to their social position in the racially divided American society, the African American community was cognitively distant from the disaster and its victims. (For more information about Titanic disaster songs, see also Abbott and Seroff 2017: 182.)

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Bionote

Jan Chovanec

Jan Chovanec is associate professor in English linguistics at the Department of English and American Studies, Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic. He has done research on various genres of written, spoken and online media from the points of view of discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and interactional pragmatics. He's the co-editor of *The Dynamics of Interactional Humor* (2018, with Villy Tsakona) and *Language and Humour in the Media* (2012, with Isabel Ermida).