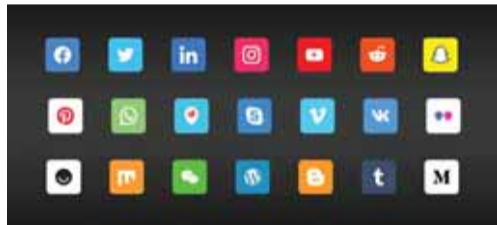


Going viral: the dark online gags soothing youthful angst

Climate change, debt, mental health struggles and now the coronavirus: life is no laughing matter. But for under-30s the best way to stay sane is often to wisecrack. "We joke that we post because none of us can afford therapy," says Chuck Wentzell, 26, a member of Twitter group chats where gallows humour is the order of the day. "Posting about it or making the jokes about it makes it feel somehow less real but also more manageable," the high school science teacher from New Haven, Connecticut, tells AFP.

The tone of the humour isn't to everyone's taste—some may find it a little on the nail, and not exactly laugh-out-loud funny. But for younger social media users, a gag that others could find flippant is sometimes a howl of frustration over the powerlessness of a generation unable to jam on the brakes in a world heading for the cliff edge. These callow comics have been particularly prolific during the pandemic, which has infected six million people, killing 360,000 and laying waste to the global economy. "Guys will stand 5'8" from you and call it six feet," tweeted a woman in New York, taking a sideways look at social distancing—and men's tendency to exaggerate their physical attributes.

Other humorists focus on the absurdity of the business-as-usual approach to a worldwide crisis. "People who are quarantining in jeans: what are you trying to prove?" tweeted New York-based writer @sarafcarter. Another meme of uncertain provenance, but widely-shared among millennials, displays the caption: "Looking at the map for some weekend travel ideas." The image underneath is not of some faraway tropical paradise, but a floor plan of a three-room apartment. The jokes, says academic Peter McGraw, are largely the product of "psychological distancing"—a mental retreat that gives the keyboard comedian the perspective to see through life's ridiculousness.



Humour "has this interrupting feedback loop," the behavioural economist and head of the Humour Research Lab at the University of Colorado Boulder told AFP. For McGraw, a joke "makes the moment more bearable, the bearable moment makes the joke more likely, and so on." Like meditating or stress-cleaning your apartment, humour is "a way to kind of give yourself a sense of control in a world that seems uncontrollable."

Embracing absurdity

Society has long turned to grim humour in dark times, of course, in political cartoons, comedy clubs, topical TV shows and numerous other forms. But the new generation of morose mirth-makers has been able to take gallows humour out of smoke-filled bars and into the pantheon of internet virality (pun intended). And as 2020 grows increasingly unpredictable and absurd, the onslaught of boundary-pushing irreverence has intensified. In January, budding wits flooded social media with jokes about getting conscripted for World War III, after the death of top Iranian commander Qasem Soleimani in a US airstrike. "Really looking forward to dying in the Strait of Hormuz just so Trump can get reelected," Nick Golden, 26, quipped in a now-deleted Facebook post, just after the news of Soleimani's death broke.

Golden, a government employee in Haverhill, Massachusetts, knew it was unlikely that the government would actually start drafting conscripts. But for young men turning 18, the reality of even having to be on a register from which they could be plucked for battle brings with it the ever-present, low-level thrum of existential angst. Joking, then, "is the only way to cope," says Golden. "We have no choice but to indulge in the absurdity." A key element of the jokes is that they stem from what McGraw, the academic, calls "benign violations." The idea is that a situation can be invidious—a violation of the norm—without actually doing you much harm. A joke acknowledges the fear but also points out its absurdity.

And that, says McGraw, is why much of the coronavirus humour focuses on the banal, ridiculous but essentially harmless aspects of life under lockdown, such as the annoyance of people hoarding toilet paper. Far less common are jokes about catching the virus or the pending global economic recession. "It might be too big a violation right now," McGraw said.

'OK to laugh'

Ultimately, the weird memes and the inappropriate jokes are a way for younger people to express their frustration with the world at large. By poking fun at problems, people achieve a sense of control, deflating their crisis into something less overwhelming. "One of the things that is incredible about the human condition is our ability to find moments of levity, even in the worst situations," said McGraw. "The fact that people are making jokes is a good sign, because it means that they're being connected."

Back in New Haven, science teacher Wentzell couldn't agree more. "If it's okay to laugh at something, then it's not so serious that it's the end of the world right this second," he said. And if nothing else, "it's so much more comforting to be with 50 other people also screaming that than to be the only person yelling on the street that the world's about to end."—AFP



This photograph shows an aerial view of Chateau Chenonceaux on the River Cher, some 30kms east of Tours.



This file photo shows the Castle of Chenonceau, in Chenonceaux, Central France. — AFP photos



In this file photo tourists visit the Castle of Chenonceau, in Chenonceaux, Central France.

TIMID REOPENING FOR FRANCE'S LOIRE VALLEY CHATEAUS

Staff far outnumbered visitors to the elegant Chenonceau castle in France's Loire Valley as it reopened on Saturday with meticulously prepared safeguards against the coronavirus. The Renaissance jewel, which in a normal year attracts upwards of a million visitors, could not justify reopening on financial grounds until Parisians are again allowed to travel beyond a 100-kilometre (60 mile) radius from home, communications director Caroline Darrasse told AFP. But reopening a few days early—the relaxation takes effect on Tuesday—gave the site a chance to test the precautions the staff have put in place, Darrasse noted.

A strict one-way route has been marked out inside the castle, and parts that risk crowding were either cordoned off or restricted to small numbers at a time—such as the impressive kitchens on the lower level. "It's her first chateau," grinned Lucile Daron Van Gennepe, 32, whose eight-month-old daughter was strapped to her front. She and her 35-year-old husband Coenraad had the castle's gallery spanning the Cher river—where Catherine de Medici once threw sumptuous balls—all to themselves. "It's a nice surprise," Lucile said, speaking from behind her obligatory face mask. The couple live in Saumur, just within the 100-km limit. Many smaller sites such as the Chateau d'Usse, famous as the purported backdrop of the Sleeping Beauty fable, reopened at the very start of France's deconfinement on



This file photo shows the reproduction of the apothecary of France's queen Catherine de Medici composed of more than 500 vials, pots and bottle at the Castle of Chenonceau, central France.

May 11. In the Renaissance town of Amboise, the Clos Luce, where Leonardo da Vinci spent the last three years of his life—the 500th anniversary of his death was last year—reopened on May 20.

'Intelligently done'

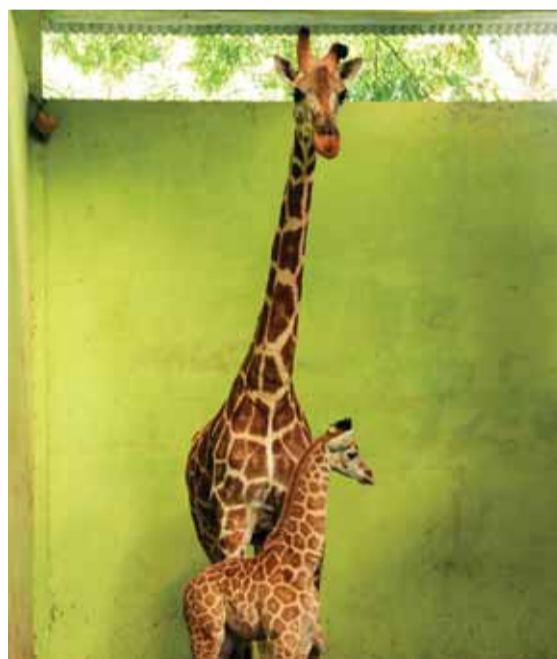
"We did all we could to reassure people" of the safety of visiting the imposing manor in the heights of the town, director Francois Saint Bris told AFP on Friday. "It's intelligently done." The lockdown

cost the site around one million euros (\$1.1 million) in lost revenues per month, with outgoings totalling around 250,000 euros, he said. On Friday however, visitors to the site were few and far between. Similarly, things were slow at another early bird, the royal fortress of Chinon, where the 17-year-old Joan of Arc had a pivotal meeting with Charles VII in 1429.

Marie-Eve Scheffer, the curator of the fortress, said the four-day Ascension weekend, normally the busiest of the year, drew some 450 visitors, compared

with a normal flow of around 3,800. "We expect a bigger return next weekend," Scheffer told AFP by telephone. Historian Stephane Bern, who spearheaded a regional pressure campaign to persuade French President Emmanuel Macron to allow the chateaus to start welcoming visitors again, urged patience. "It will take off again," he told AFP. "It's a matter of priming the pump, kickstarting the machine."

Bern, a champion of France's cultural and historical heritage who is a frequent radio host and television presenter, noted that as long as the sites cannot reopen their eateries and gift shops, visiting them is "less attractive". The doyen of the region that was once the playground of French kings—the sprawling Chambord castle—will not reopen until next Friday. Tourism accounts for 15 percent of the Loire Valley region's economy, compared with nine percent nationally. The sector normally brings in some 2.9 billion euros annually. The Loire Valley—collectively a World Heritage site—jostles with Paris and Provence as a top French tourist destination, and is well positioned to edge out the French capital as the country emerges from lockdown. At Chenonceau, one attraction has remained a constant throughout the confinement: a bucolic picnic area along the castle's canal, where a couple dozen visitors were enjoying lunch on Saturday.—AFP



This handout picture shows a baby giraffe, which was born on April 9 and named "Corona", standing with its mother at the Bali Safari Park in Gianyar on the Indonesian resort island of Bali.—AFP

Bali zoo's newborn baby giraffe named Corona

A Bali zoo has named a baby giraffe Corona in honour of her birth during the global pandemic. The calf was born on April 9 to mother Sophie and father Matadi, joining two other siblings at Bali Safari Park on the Indonesian holiday island. A video released by the zoo showed the calf being born in a small enclosure.

She was born during the COVID-19 pandemic so the environment minister... named her Corona," said zoo spokesman Anak Agung Ngurah Alit Sujana. "Corona is healthy and is still breastfeeding. We'll keep her under observation for three months." Bali Safari Park has been closed to visitors since late March as part of efforts to stem the spread of coronavirus infections.—AFP

Italy unearths Roman mosaic after century long hunt Negrar

Archaeologists have discovered an exquisitely preserved Roman mosaic under a vineyard in northern Italy after a century of searching, the local mayor said on Thursday. The brightly coloured geometric design, partly unearthed outside Negrar di Valpolicella near Verona, is thought to have been part of a villa archaeologists first started looking for in 1922. "When I saw the mosaic it was very impressive because of the quality, the well-preserved colours, the preservation of the mosaic itself," mayor Roberto Grison told AFP.

Locals have known for years there were Roman artefacts in their part of the famous wine region, a survey and some initial digging a century ago hinted at what lay beneath—and the area of the discovery is called Villa, said Grison. But until now there had not been any big finds. Verona municipal archaeologist Gianni de Zuccato says the moment they came across the red, brown, grey and white mosaic deep underground was "like entering a time machine."—AFP



This photo taken on May 20, 2020 and handout on May 28, 2020 by the Superintendent of Fine Arts and Landscape of Verona, Rovigo and Vicenza shows an archaeologist uncovering an ancient Roman mosaic floor discovered under vines in Negrar, near Verona.—AFP



In this file photo taken on April 10, 2020, monkeys eat fruits on a street during a government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus in New Delhi. — AFP

Indian monkeys snatch coronavirus samples

Monkeys mobbed an Indian health worker and made off with coronavirus test blood samples, spreading fears that the stealing simians could spread the pandemic in the local area. Indian authorities often have to grapple with primates snatching food and even mobile phones. After making off with the three samples earlier this week in Meerut, near the capital New Delhi, the monkeys scampered up nearby trees and one then tried to chew its plunder.

The sample boxes were later recovered and had not been damaged, Meerut Medical college superintendent Dheeraj Raj told AFP on Friday, after footage of the encounter went viral on social media. "They were still intact and we don't think there is any risk of contamination or spread," Raj said. He added that the three people whose samples were stolen were retested for the virus. Coronavirus has been detected in animals, though there is no confirmation that the disease can then be passed on to humans. India's coronavirus death toll passed neighbouring China's on Friday, with 175 new fatalities in 24 hours taking the total to 4,706, according to official data. India, home to some of the world's most packed cities and a creaking healthcare system, is emerging as a new hotspot with record jumps in new cases in recent days.—AFP