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Staycation

Dr. Jack Denham

'r/watchpeopledie' was an internet forum dedicated to viewing and commenting on user-uploaded video content of real-life deaths. At its peak it held almost a half-million subscribers, tuned into watch brutal killings or particularly gruesome fatal accidents. It was banned from the host website, Reddit, in 2019 after the mass shootings that took place in Christchurch mosques, New Zealand, attracted critical media attention – highlighting the forum's breach of Reddit's rules for 'glorifying or encouraging violence'. But r/watchpeopledie was not the first or only online space for consuming violence and death, as evidenced by Wood's (2016) article on Facebook's similar street-fighting pages, provocatively titled, *I just wanna see someone get knocked the fuck out* – they are relatively widespread. It was the spiritual successor of Rotten.com, an early internet shock-site of similar character. And a cursory Google search performed today will reveal a deluge of websites still hosting the most graphic and infamous deaths, such as photos from the crime scenes of serial killers Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer.

This work will treat the internet as a space, and consider in what ways visiting that space can be understood through the lens of 'Dark Tourism'. After that, it'll consider the hidden harms attached to online Dark Tourism, using the lens of 'violence', and highlight two specifically: the trauma and offence caused when this content is consumed accidentally, and the ways in which a focus on this type of violence obscures its causal harms.

Seeing online content sharing as Dark Tourism isn't immediately easy because theories of Dark Tourism have been rooted in physical space. A clear place to start is Phil Stone's *Dark Tourism Spectrum* (2006) that differentiates 'sites of death and suffering' from 'sites associated with death and suffering', the latter of which is 'less dark', but could certainly be applied to r/watchpeopledie. Stone cites 'location authenticity' as being a key factor in how valid, and how 'dark', a dark tourist site is – with places where atrocities did not actually occur being maligned in this dichotomy – that's strike one against the internet. These sites are also not particularly educational in their framing (although it would be difficult to make the argument that one isn't learning something by viewing), and they are usually not of historic or commemorative importance – strike two and three.

r/watchpeopledie did lack tourism infrastructure, though. It was an organic space where users would come together to voluntarily share and view images of all human atrocity relatively indiscriminately, as long as it depicted the loss of life. It also benefitted from a shortness of timescale from the tragic events themselves in a way that traditional Dark Tourism attractions could not compete – people would be able to capture human suffering on a smartphone and have it viewed by the world in a few minutes. Because of this short timeframe and lack of curatorial scaffolding, it could be perceived by the user that this product is quite authentic – but authenticity is a challenging concept with too many meanings to discuss here (Enli 2015) – suffice to say that it hasn't been tampered with, and users

experience a perceived authentic product interpretation. That's three more of Stone's qualities of Dark Tourism that the internet provides well.

Online sites of death are certainly pretty 'dark', then – but are they tourist attractions? Now that r/watchpeopledie is banned, the site itself is dead. It has become a historic artefact with users regularly posting elsewhere on the host site, Reddit, to collectively sleuth out cached content on sites such as 'webarchive'. This development represents another turn in r/watchpeopledie's trajectory, where content can still be viewed but barriers to entry have been erected, superimposing the element of pilgrimage, travel, and ponderousness attached to traditional Dark Tourist visits.

There's confusion in Dark Tourism studies as to whether a site being purposefully created for the consumption of death makes it darker, or somewhat less dark – with Sharpley (2005) arguing that the deliberate curation of encounters intended to satisfy a desire to consume death is much darker – but Stone (2006) countering with the idea that these types of site are often highly mediated, and the darkest experiences are conversely more organic. Online we have a meeting of the two poles – with user generated content appearing in almost real-time being extremely organic, but curated in a contrived and artificial 'space' and setting. Stone refers to Dark Tourism as 'a diverse and fragmented [...] product' (2006:157) – and nowhere is the product more fragmented than the internet. Certainly, the internet is a place that some users go to to recreationally consume death – and by that definition we can understand some internet spaces as Dark Tourist attractions.

There are some obvious harms that could be applied to online Dark Tourism – to mention a few, the potential emotional distress suffered by relatives or friends of victims if it is known that their demise is being consumed, the potential desensitising effect of consuming death regularly, the potential for content creators to put themselves in harm's way for 'likes', or the general questionable morality of watching death online that *The Guardian* has referred to as 'exploitation' (Dahl 2018). What I draw attention to here is the second-hand objective violence that can occur when this type of content is deceptively shared as a source of dark humour, stumbled across, or maliciously inflicted on unwilling participants – all uniquely enabled by the networked and shareable nature of online Dark Tourism – and the ways in which this focus on gruesomeness distracts from more prominent forms of harm.

Several high-profile incidents of content spilling out from r/watchpeopledie have drawn attention to one key way in which this form of Dark Tourism differs from the traditional: it lacks definable borders. On social media sharing sites, especially ones with the anonymity of Reddit, content can break free of the usually reliable algorithms that constrain the internet user's experience by being 'crossposted' (into a segment of Reddit that you do usually frequent), or 'upvoted' into your line of sight on Reddit's catch-all homepage, r/all. This, coupled with well-established bait-and-switch meme tactics tantamount to a gruesome 'rickrolling', have meant that the bulk of this morbid content can drip on the average user through social media's leaky sieve. Perhaps the most prominent example is the post titled *teenager waves bye, then blows head off with a shotgun on YouTube Live*, which was featured

on r/watchpeopledie and quickly spread through other, more mundane corners of the host forum, outrage and trauma along with it.

Ellis (2009) has referred to the viewing of moments of crisis through traditional media as 'mundane witnessing', something which demands a moral reflection and engagement from the viewer – but Silverstone (2007) draws attention to the mediating work that these outlets conduct, often framing the events as 'distant', or toying with concepts of 'otherness' which can result in a muted, packaged or predictable reaction from the viewer. In the case of the content that spills out from sites like r/watchpeopledie, witnessing is often unpackaged, unexpected, and brutally uncensored. It is harmful in the absence of packaging, and lack of ability for the viewer to be prepared, in its shocking nature without a trigger warning as an act of discursive symbolic violence.

We can turn to Žižek's (2007) call for us to resist the fascination of subjective violence (like these gruesome deaths, stabbing and killing) in favour of the objective (like structural violence, or the violence embedded in discourse and language) to understand the second harm attached to online Dark Tourism. The creators of r/watchpeopledie justified its existence as an educational space in which to 'document and observe the disturbing reality of death' – they position themselves, against the host forum's rules, as an emancipation of 'real' violence that is so often constrained by media – tantamount to what Benjamin (2007/1921) would call a 'divine violence', something which represents a strike at power in favour of justice. But they trade in subjective violence, drawing attention to the very form of harm which is distracting from what Žižek refers to as the 'true locus of trouble' (2007:9), objective violence, which for the purposes of this essay can be understood as systems which exploit and oppress. Žižek (2007:3) writes that 'the overpowering horror of violent acts and empathy with victims inexorably function as a lure which prevents us from thinking' – precisely of the underlying systemic causes of such horror. r/watchpeopledie, then, is a clean and literal example of an objective violence, exploiting of its characters and oppressing of its accidental viewers, which hides behind the distraction of the subjective.

The presence death-material online, then, is doubly harmful; in its involuntary consumption, offensive nature and ability to elicit potentially traumatic, disturbing and distressed reactions – or the ensuing fear when navigating the internet, sometimes referred to as a 'risky click'. And second, in its distracting glorification of instances of subjective violence without acknowledging the objective harms which hide behind them.

The internet has been studied alongside Dark Tourism predominantly as a mode to improve or supplement the Dark Tourist experience for traditional, physical sites (see Bolan & Simone-Charteris 2018) – but there is scope to consider the internet's role more broadly, as a destination in and of itself. When we do, the networked nature of the space makes a zemiology of online Dark Tourism challenging, but here I have proposed one lens – violence – through which to understand its negative or harmful outcomes.

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