Chapter 3
Untouchable, or Merely Untouched?
Satirical News Websites and Freedom
of Expression Limitations in Southeast
Asia in the Age of Online “Fake News”

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Abstract  The Philippines had, among others, So, What’s News? Thailand had, until recently, Not the Nation. Singapore has New Nation. Malaysia has The Tapir Times, previously known as Fake Malaysia News. Indonesia has Pos Ronda (Guard Post). All of these were created when virtually anyone with access to the Internet can publicly share content online. These satirical news websites—all, save for Pos Ronda, in English—may appear to be little more than derivative reproductions of American satirical news outfits such as The Onion. They seem to be worthy of about as much scholarly scrutiny as their American counterparts—hardly any, being mere “info-tainment,” as some scholars say. However, their peculiar contexts make it difficult to trivialize them. Philippine satirists have long seemed vulnerable to prosecution under the country’s defamation laws, including a recently-enacted cybercrime law. Thailand has a strict lèse majesté law and has been under martial rule twice in the past two decades. Singapore is one of the world’s “authoritarian democracies.” Malaysia, sharing the colonial British legal heritage of Singapore, also has various legal restrictions on online expression. Indonesia’s Internet law makes online defamation and blasphemy a punishable offense. Yet the writers behind these websites seem to have been able to flout undemocratic laws and/or bypass the restrictions of repressive regimes without punishment. Is their largely unimpeded functionality under their respective regimes evidence that online satirical news is capable of pushing the boundaries of freedom of expression even in “illiberal” democratic states? Or are they tolerated annoyances by often anonymous authors? This chapter attempts to derive preliminary answers to these questions by determining how aware the writers are of the subversive potential of their work, first by focusing on whether the challenges to state policies in selected articles from these websites can be considered legally fair, then by examining the textual and non-textual responses of these websites to events affecting free speech within their particular contexts. The articles in these websites are considered a distinct genre, not simply a digitized form of preexisting printed satirical news—especially in an age of online “fake news”—distinguished by not being intentionally deceptive, but still similarly parodic of the news (following

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Pierre Macherey’s definition of parody)—a genre that, given its easily “shareable” nature and the ability of readers to participate in its world-building, is peculiar to the Web 2.0 era.

**Keywords** Online satire • Satirical news • Southeast Asia • Freedom of expression • Legal restrictions

**Introduction**

“Clone Army of Francis Tolentino to Help Ease EDSA Traffic”; “Increasing Number of Otters Applying to Become S’pore Permanent Residents”; “Prayuth Orders Deployment of Concerned Facial Expressions”; “Police: Extraterrestrials Infiltrating Opposition”; “Salt Prices Soar, Citizens Turn to Tears and Sweat as Substitutes.” These are among the more ridiculous headlines in *So, What’s News?* (SWN),1 *New Nation* (NN),2 *Not the Nation* (NTN),3 *The Tapir Times* (TT, formerly *Fake Malaysia News* [FMN]),4 and *Pos Ronda* (Guard Post, PR),5 respectively, which are (or were) perhaps the best-known satirical news websites in Southeast Asia, at least within their countries of origin. There is little indication that the readers of one are also readers of the others; content-wise, each site relies heavily on prior knowledge of news in its country of origin, likely making each site’s readership largely domestic. Dismissing these as national curiosities, however, would be ignoring the non-coincidental similarities of these websites, which, I contend here, are telling of a common humor that is meant to test, directly or indirectly, the limitations of or counter-restrictions on freedom of expression in Southeast Asia.

This chapter discusses how these websites, given where their authors are based and what subjects they tackle, are more than mere imitations of Western (Anglo-American) satirical news outfits such as *The Onion*. Like their Western counterparts, all five publish, or published, satirical news items that are often critical of public officials and/or other known local personalities. However, these five exist—or until recently, existed—in countries with laws that are (potentially) hostile to their primary content.

This research investigates how the authors of the satirical news articles in the aforementioned websites have circumvented or otherwise reacted to these restrictions, through both legal-literary content analysis and discussion of pertinent contextual and/or paratextual information. As a preliminary study, it seeks to reveal similarities in each site’s content to determine comparativity. In addition to detailing a common,

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1[https://sowhatsnews.wordpress.com/](https://sowhatsnews.wordpress.com/); currently a protected blog.
2[https://newnation.sg/](https://newnation.sg/).
3Formerly accessible at [https://notthenation.com/](https://notthenation.com/).
4[https://thetapirtimes.com/](https://thetapirtimes.com/).
5[https://posronda.net/](https://posronda.net/). All the content on this website discussed here was translated from Bahasa Indonesia into English with the help of machine-translation software and the author’s own elementary knowledge of the source language.
Satirical News: Toward a Definition from Existing Scholarship

A crucial matter of definition remains unanswered above: what exactly is satirical news?

Satirical news is viewed here as a parodic genre. Dentith defines parody as “any cultural practice which provides a relatively polemical allusive imitation of another cultural production or practice” (2000, p. 9). Satire may be parodic, but “satire need not imitate the structure of its object while parody must do so, and satire presumes a more stable commitment as opposed to the greater ambivalence of parody” (Hariman, 2008, p. 268). Formally, satirical news articles parody journalistic news articles; often, in the case of the sites discussed here, the former builds upon preceding factual news articles, and they invariably have a target or targets that they wish to criticize through mockery or ridicule.

Viewing (online) satirical news as parodic also allows analysis of such articles in line with Pierre Macherey’s notion that literary production is a parodic/distortive activity, or a “mingling [of] the [everyday] uses of language in an endless confrontation, [a process which involves] experimenting with language rather than inventing it, [producing a] literary work [that] is both the analogy of a knowledge and a caricature of customary ideology” (2006, p. 68). Macherey adds that “literary discourse [is] parody, a contestation of language rather than a representation of [reality; it] distorts rather than imitates” (2006, p. 68). This conceptualization of literary production allows for analysis with the focus on how a text tacitly critiques itself through silences and contradictions. Such a reading refuses to distance texts from the historical exigencies that molded them, nor does it divorce the authors from their written work, without descending into biographical readings. Drawing from this, this chapter discusses satirical articles as works that parody the language of journalistic objectivity/straight reportage but often mock authorities—being informed by a broadly liberal democratic foundation; however, these works are constrained from fully inhabiting a more subversive role in (quasi-)authoritarian contexts by a self-enforced legal liability-avoiding limitation that the websites on which they appear are meant for entertainment purposes.

Holbert and Tchernev define “satire news” as “a type of political media content that combines elements of both entertainment and public affairs” (2014, p. 665). They
identify two television-based (sub)genres of satire news: “nightly television news broadcast (e.g., *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* [now Trevor Noah], *Saturday Night Live*’s “Weekend Update”),” and “news commentary and punditry programming ([the now-defunct] *The Colbert Report*)” (Holbert & Tchernev, 2014, p. 665). Consistent with the preceding description of satirical news as parodic, Holbert and Tchernev note that “satire news can reflect the basic formatting of other media outlets such as the daily newspaper (*The Onion*)” (2014, p. 665). Holbert and Tchernev point out that the study of “news satire” was still, in 2014, “a very young area of research” that has focused on “descriptions and predictions,” lacking in publications that explain or theorize the emergence/effects of satire news.

What is specifically stated in this body of literature, which has grown significantly in recent years? Even today, most of the articles written specifically about satire/satirical news discuss television programs, with many of them focusing particularly on American programs. Feldman, for example, notes that “[for] many journalists […] *The Daily Show* seems to resist classification as information or entertainment and in doing so, renders the journalistically ingrained impulse to distinguish between the two largely ineffectual” (2007, p. 414). He further expounds: “*The Daily Show* offers the challenging proposition that journalism itself is an arbitrary cultural form that, by definition, is amenable to reconsideration” (2007, p. 423). Baumgartner and Morris classify *The Daily Show* as “soft news,” or news programs that seek mainly to entertain rather than to tackle public affairs information (2006, pp. 341–342). They contend that young Americans who learned about presidential candidates from Jon Stewart’s program had a diminished opinion of those candidates, also noting a connected finding that “exposure to *The Daily Show* increased internal efficacy by raising viewers’ perception that the complex world of politics was understandable [in] presenting politics as the theater of the absurd, Stewart seemingly simplifies it” (pp. 361–363). Grondin uses the term “televised entertainment news” or “infotainment TV” to describe Stewart’s program, explaining that Stewart was plainly aware at least in one broadcast that “he could be blurring the lines between the comedian, the media pundit, and the activist, but he did not care” (2012, p. 364). Distilling Jenkins, Grondin states that “with forms of popular culture such as parody news, we may be witnessing the rise of a ‘new form of popular expertise,’ in which politics is turned into popular culture but citizens may be taught to act politically by getting their news information through *The Daily Show* instead of mainstream news outlets” (2012, p. 354). Grondin explains that his views on *The Daily Show* are “predicated on the belief that satirical/political infotainment TV is an important locus of the [American conservative-liberal] culture wars and must be studied carefully because it plays a political role” (2012, p. 356).

Glazier (2014) focuses on a very particular role of *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* in politics: the potential pedagogical role such programs play in the political science classroom, particularly their view of their political agency or efficacy. Her main finding was that there are “consistent—although statistically insignificant—*gains* in political efficacy with the use of satire,” in contrast to findings such as Baumgartner and Morris’s that satirical news generally increases political cynicism
(Glazier, 2014, p. 870); both are, as discussed by Holbert and Tchernev, behaviorist in either case.

Even within the latter half of the 2010s, most satirical news studies still focus on how such works are received or understood by readers/viewers, or otherwise deviate little from preexisting scholarship. Nevertheless, some articles (e.g., Bardan, 2012; Cosentino, 2012; Doyle, 2012; Kleinen-von Königslöw & Keel, 2012; Meikle, 2012) do discuss satirical news in mostly Western/American/European contexts, largely focusing on the genre’s televised variety, but actually accomplish something that previously detailed articles hardly do, if at all: most of them use textual analysis or attempt a contextualization of satirical news. Kleinen-von Königslöw & Keel (2012), for example, focus on *heute show*, a “localization” of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart, comparing and contrasting it with its American counterpart, showing how the former diverged from the latter due to particularities in Germany’s political climate. Meikle (2012), meanwhile, analyzes the journalistic elements that the British program *Brass Eye* used to “highlight and sabotage the cultural authority of public figures who appeared in it” (2012, p. 15).

In light of “fake news” becoming more closely associated with intentionally deceptive works that parody (in the Machereyan sense) journalistic forms and conventions rather than satirical news, particularly after the deception-suffused 2016 United States elections (Baek, Kang, & Kim, 2019, pp. 309–310), various scholars have put forward typologies of news-like productions (e.g., Fallis & Mathiesen, 2019, who, like many others, agree that satirical news does not deliberately make falsehoods appear true) and, proceeding from these, have developed ways to distinguish among various types of (online) misinformation, at times automatically, such as the work of Rubin et al. (2019). Although these studies also examine content, their thrust is counter-disinformation; implicitly or explicitly (e.g., Molina, Sundar, Le, & Lee, 2019), they identify satirical news as harmful to discourses that should be informed by truth.

Among later studies, Basu’s (2018) stands out in extensively theorizing a function of satirical news as both a retaliation against highly politicized and corporatized news media and a means of making sense of today’s barrage of cross-platform news through “memory work,” in other words, by directly countering revisionism by persons in power or pundits, historicizing or establishing “news genealogies” to interconnect what would otherwise be largely disparate and quickly disposable reportage. This chapter attempts to describe another possible social function of satirical news, while at the same time reaching back to the historical, pedagogical, and response-focused thrusts of previous scholarship. In so doing it hopes to encourage further inquiry into the relatively unexplored subject of satirical news in Southeast Asia. Indeed, the review of literature conducted for this chapter did not yield any published scholarship focusing on Southeast Asian satirical news websites. Perhaps this lack is due to the relative novelty of online satirical news in Southeast Asia, as will be discussed in the next section.
Online Satirical News: From the US to Southeast Asia

Having discussed what this study focuses on and where it is positioned in the existing literature, two more important concerns must be dealt with prior to any analytical discussion: When did satirical news articles find a platform on the World Wide Web? When did such sites emerge in Southeast Asia?

Discounting prototypical satirical news, outright media hoaxes with a satirical intent such as Richard A. Locke’s nineteenth-century “Great Moon Hoax” articles in *The New York Sun* (Vida, 2012), currently existing satirical news, especially of the printed variety—texts that imitate the news but are never intended to deceive, as indicated by, say, a clear disclaimer—can probably claim a common ancestor in the “one-off” known as *Not the New York Times* (1978), which featured articles such as “An Exotic Drug, ‘Cocaine,’ Appears Popular” (Dwyer, 2008). This was the first of many *Nots*, including the British sketch comedy/satirical news television program, *Not the Nine O’Clock News*, first broadcast in 1979 (Roberts, 2012, p. 46).

Leaping to the Internet age, a candidate for the basis of all online satirical news websites is the online version of *The Onion*. *The Onion* started in 1988 as “material to surround pizza ads,” according to a former editor-in-chief, Robert Siegel (Derby, 2005); the first issue, published by founder Tim Keck, was primarily made up of “beer and pizza coupons,” with one story about “a monster running amok at a local lake” (Beato, 2007). *The Onion*’s website was launched in 1996. Supposedly, it was so popular for a time that when one searches “onion” on Google, “*The Onion* pops up first”; allegedly, it was even the first search result when Googling “the” (Beato, 2007).

*The Onion* is implicitly or explicitly cited by Southeast Asian online satirical news writers as the model for their work. In several interviews—including one I conducted via email—the person behind SWN, known only as Stewart, stated that he launched his website in 2011 because he wanted a Philippine version of *The Onion* (personal communication, September 30, 2015). Specifically, he decided to create SWN after viewing a video story on *The Onion* about the Canadian singer Justin Bieber being a cleverly disguised pedophile (SABAT, 2011). One of the founders of NN, Terence Lee, stated that after “[struggling] to find [their] identity for a while,” he and the co-founders of NN, Belmont Lay and Fang Shihan, “settled on becoming a satirical news blog—sort of like *The Onion* of Singapore” (2013). They launched NN in 2010 (Lukman, 2014). Although the NTN website made no explicit acknowledgement anywhere that it is based on *The Onion*, it does contain indicators that the anonymous author behind the former was indebted to the latter. There is no easy way to contact the person(s) behind it—there were never any actual contact email addresses,

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6Stewart was definitely not the first to come up with a satirical news website in the Philippines. The long-dormant *Mosquito Press* (https://mosquitopress.tumblr.com/) was launched in February 2011 by an unknown author. Before that was *Good Times Manila* (https://goodtimesmanila.com/), which, like SWN, can now only be accessed via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine (e.g. https://web.archive.org/web/20090316211853/https://goodtimesmanila.com/about/). *Good Times Manila* was live from about March 2009 until some time in 2010. SWN has published more articles than these two other sites combined.
Facebook pages, or Twitter accounts featured in or linked to NTN’s website, which, through the Internet Archive, has accessible archives dating as far back as March 2007. When asked during informal conversations, none of my associates from Thailand have any clue who is producing the content for it. However, in addition to the *Onion*-style satirical news articles, NTN has a “Hearing Voices” section (https://notthenation.com/category/hearing-voices/), in which a trio of “persons-on-the-street” give inane/insane one-line opinions on a public affairs issue, reminiscent of the “American Voices” section in *The Onion* website (https://www.theonion.com/features/american-voices). Thus, even as the title *Not the Nation* is meant to parody Thailand’s major English-language daily, *The Nation*—as well as intentionally or unintentionally alluding to other Nots—it clearly wants to pay tribute to the world’s best-known satirical news outlet. Finally, TT’s anonymous author(s), back when it was FMN (which went online in 2012), and Shaka Mahottama, credited in one interview as the founder and editor of PR (established in 2014), have both acknowledged the influence of *The Onion* in their work (Chan, 2016; Jakarta Globe, 2014). It is not coincidental that these websites were born when content from *The Onion* became easily shareable thanks to Web 2.0 and social media sites.

**(Possible) Legal Challenges Faced by Satirical News Websites**

Although the people behind *The Onion* have claimed that the singer Janet Jackson almost filed a lawsuit against them in the 1990s for publishing an article that stated that she had acceded to a dying boy’s wish to have coitus with her (Derby, 2005), it was highly unlikely that such a case would have prospered in light of *Hustler* v. *Falwell* (1988). The case establishes a “loophole” in American libel law that may be made applicable to a criminal case in jurisdictions with similar laws. In this case, a parody advertisement in the magazine *Hustler* depicted the public figure Reverend Jerry Falwell as having had drunken incestuous sexual relations with his mother in an outhouse. Falwell filed a lawsuit for libel and intentional infliction of emotional distress (*Hustler* v. *Falwell*, 1988). According to the Federal Supreme Court decision on the case, Falwell had to prove actual malice in order to recover damages (*Hustler* v. *Falwell*, 1988). Since the advertisement was “such that a reasonable man would not think that its contents were true,” the Court believed that actual malice could not be proven; therefore, Falwell could not recover damages (*Hustler* v. *Falwell*, 1988). According to the Federal Supreme Court, “the State’s interest in protecting public figures from emotional distress is not sufficient to deny First Amendment protection

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7The author of one NTN article mentions the claim that he is actually the expatriate journalist Craig Knowles; since the NTN post was written on the occasion of Knowles’s death, he/she debunked this claim (see https://notthenation.com/2015/10/notthenation-writer-surprised-to-learn-he-isactually-some-dead-guy-named-craig/).
to speech\(^8\) that is patently offensive and is intended to inflict emotional injury when that speech could not reasonably have been interpreted as stating actual facts about the public figure involved” (\textit{Hustler v. Falwell}, 1988).

The following sections detail other legal precedents and/or legislation pertinent to the five satirical news websites given focus here. That the five sites exist or existed under regimes without jurisprudence similar to \textit{Hustler v. Falwell} emphasizes how legally tenuous their existence has or had been.

\textbf{So, What’s News?}

The elements of the crime of libel in the Philippines are: (1) a defamatory statement; (2) made with malice; (3) that is given publicity; (4) and has an identifiable victim (cf. Revised Penal Code, Art. 355; Defensor Santiago, 1999, p. 803). There is always a presumption of malice, save for certain cases. The truthfulness of the defamatory statement is immaterial if “the defendant [is unable] to show good intention and justifiable motive [to] overcome the legal inference of malice” (Defensor Santiago, 1999, p. 804). Meanwhile, section 4(c)(4) of the Cybercrime Prevention Act defines online or cyber-libel as libel, as defined in the Revised Penal Code, that is “committed through a computer system or any other similar means which may be devised in the future” (Heffron, 2014, p. 100).

\textit{Hustler v. Falwell} has been referenced in Philippine jurisprudence, but not in tackling a libel-and-satire case. However, given that the Philippines has adopted the \textit{New York v. Sullivan} test that “honest criticisms on the conduct of public officials and public figures are insulated from libel judgements” (cf. \textit{Borjal v. Court of Appeals}, 1999), SWN’s author has jurisprudence to cite should a libel case be filed against him/her for mocking public personalities. Nevertheless, SWN’s author thought it prudent to “lie low” after the Cybercrime Prevention Act was affirmed as (largely) constitutional by the Philippine Supreme Court in February 2014. The author, via email, told me that he went on hiatus after that decision was promulgated because he was frightened by the possibility of the law coming down on him due to SWN (personal communication, September 30, 2015).

The hiatus of SWN lasted only a few days. Indeed, looking at the responses before and after the Cybercrime Prevention Act was declared constitutional, Stewart need not have worried, at least under the previous administration. Among the most viewed stories in SWN is one on Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe’s alleged declaration that Korina Sanchez, Philippine news/public affairs broadcaster and wife of career politician/bureaucrat Manuel Roxas II, is a \textit{persona non grata} in Japan. The fictionalized Abe stated this in reaction to Sanchez’s real-life statement on national

\(^8\)“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances” (https://www.law.cornell.edu/constitution/first_amendment).
television that she wanted an incoming typhoon to hit Japan instead of the Philippines because Japan can “handle it better” (SWN, 2014). The article was quickly shared on Facebook over 2000 times; unsurprisingly, due to its popularity, or notoriety, it caught the non-satirical news media’s attention. International Business Times, for instance, decided to “debunk” what it called a hoax two days after the latter was published (Varghese, 2014).

The publication of the article has not been met with any protest from Sanchez, Roxas, or his powerful party-mate, former President Benigno Aquino III. In fact, this silence of the satirized is a common response to such articles in the Philippines. Probably the most “retaliatory” response one can find to an SWN article in the Philippines came from legislator Jack Enrile. After a fiasco involving his father, then-Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile, exposing certain secrets of the father of his fellow senators the Cayetano siblings, SWN bannered Jack Enrile’s “withdrawal” of his candidacy for senator in the 2013 elections, allegedly because he was afraid of the possible secrets his father would reveal should they ever become estranged (SWN, 2013). Enrile denied this withdrawal, calling SWN’s article the “product of misguided minds” (Calonzo, 2013). This is a noteworthy choice of words, as he could have said that the SWN article was written by “malicious minds,” which would be imputing malice on Stewart’s act of writing the article. However, it seems that Enrile’s response was that of a candidate for a national position capitalizing on an opportunity to increase his visibility for campaigning purposes.

According to Stewart, as of 2015 no one had seriously tried to make him withdraw any article from SWN, the closest attempt being “a mother who called me different things on Twitter and told me to take down an article […] after she mistook it as real after her daughter shared it to her” (personal communication, September 30, 2015). He did practice self-censorship, admitting that “[there] are a few tweets [in SWN’s Twitter account] that were deemed inappropriate or have gone overboard that, upon further reflection on my part, I decided to delete” (personal communication, September 30, 2015). This is probably a prudent policy; as online satirical news articles remain undiscussed in a courtroom in the Philippines, Stewart and others like him may still potentially face harassment libel lawsuits, especially under the administration of Rodrigo Duterte, who is known worldwide for his authoritarian tendencies. The seeming normalization of attacks and threats against journalists under Duterte (Cariño, 2018) may be why SWN’s website has not been publicly accessible since about the middle of 2018.

If it was still active and posting about the Duterte administration’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic, SWN may have fallen prey to the “creative” interpretation

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9In fact, a headline-only satirical news twitter account, Barurot News, was sued for libel in October 2019 by the spokesperson of the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), because the now-deactivated account tweeted a picture of the spokesperson accompanied by the parody headline (originally in Filipino), “MMDA to commuters: If you can’t catch a ride, just don’t go to work.” However, as pointed out by Barurot News, a 2015 Supreme Court decision affirmed that satire is protected speech in the Philippines (Maclarang, 2019). As of this writing, there are no updates on the case; it has not been revealed publicly if the person behind Barurot News has been identified by the complainant or the authorities.
by the police of two laws. One is Article 154 of the Revised Penal Code, which
punishes persons who publish “any false news which may endanger the public order,
or cause damage to the interest or credit of the state” (Seares, 2020). Another law,
the now lapsed Bayanihan To Heal As One Act, contains various provisions related
to addressing the pandemic, including a provision punishing the spread of false
information specifically on COVID-19 that is “clearly geared to promote chaos,
panic, anarchy, fear, or confusion” (Lardizabal-Dado, 2020). Both have been cited in
the arrest of an artist who posted supposedly “fake news” that may also be construed as
a satirical expression of opinion—which protected speech—based on false information
(Seares, 2020).

New Nation

In Singapore, Article 499 of the Penal Code defines defamation as an act whereby
a person, by “words either spoken or intended to be read, or by signs, or by visible
representations, makes or publishes any imputation concerning any person, intending
to harm, or knowing or having reason to believe that such imputation will harm, the
reputation of such person, is said, except in the cases hereinafter excepted, to defame
that person.”10 The Singaporean Defamation Act (Chapter 75), originally enacted as
M. Ordinance 20 of 1957 and most recently revised on 28 February 2014, considers
slander and “unintentional defamation” actionable offenses.11 It also outlines limi-
tations to newspaper press privilege: under Section 12 of the Defamation Act, if a
newspaper publication is proved to be “made with malice” or if it is “blasphemous,
 seditious or indecent matter or of any matter the publication of which is prohibited
by law, or of any matter which is not of public concern and the publication of which
is not for the public benefit,” then it can be considered defamatory. Conditions for
publishers are also distinct during elections: “[a] defamatory statement published by
or on behalf of a candidate in any election to the office of President or to Parliament
or other elected or partially elected body shall not be deemed to be published on
a privileged occasion on the ground that it is material to a question in issue in the
election, whether or not the person by whom it is published is qualified to vote at
the election” (Section 14 of the Defamation Act). The Act gives an exhaustive list
of privileged statements for newspapers, which are prefaced with the qualifier “fair
and accurate.”

Moreover, regarding journalism, “it is not only the author of an allegedly libelous
article, or the editor, who can be sued; those who are indirectly involved, such as
printers and news vendors, may also be sued” (Kelly/Warner Law, n.d.a) under Article
501 & 502 of the Penal Code. Also, in Singapore, “persons holding public office or

10The text of the law may be viewed at https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/PC1871?ProvIds=pr499-. Note
that it is based on British-era Indian Penal Code provisions.
11The full text of the Defamation Act can be viewed at https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/DA1957.
politicians are equally entitled to have their reputations protected as those of any other persons” (Kelly/Warner Law, n.d.a).

With this in mind, how had the New Nation team been able to avoid going to court over their content, much of which makes fun of politicians or the ruling People’s Action Party, including the revered “founding father of Singapore,” Lee Kuan Yew? Besides the disclaimer that NN is a satire site—the “50% real news” tagline, the description of NN in the site’s “About us” page: “NewNation.sg is quite obviously, the most dysfunctional, satire site in Singapore” (NN, n.d.)—most of the articles are fairly harmless when juxtaposed with SWN’s or NTN’s content. One article “accuses” Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of “stealing” the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Pink Dot SG movement’s “idea of standing [as a group] in a grass field and forming a circle [holding single-colored umbrellas above them]” by doing precisely that—forming a crimson circle—for Singapore’s fiftieth anniversary in January 2015. The article described what Prime Minister Lee did as a “coup” against the Pink Dot SG movement (NN, 2015a). Aside from what amounts to a veiled accusation of plagiarism, as well as calling such anniversary activities “superficial” (NN, 2015a), the article makes no clear negative imputation on the character of Prime Minister Lee. In a 2013 article “S’poreans Agree PAP Doing Well Upholding Democratic Socialist Ideals,” posted with tongue firmly in cheek, (one of) NN’s writers describes one Singaporean, Li Guan Yao, as thinking that “one way of living up to the democratic ideal is having a one-party system after 50 years of nationhood” (NN, 2013).

Generally, NN does not “attack” people in power; if it does make fun of powerful individuals, it does so in a benign manner or with a level of ambiguity. For instance, in another article “criticizing” Lee Hsien Loong, NN reported that Singaporeans “from all walks of life” will remember the current Prime Minister Lee’s father fifty years from now, but not the son (NN, 2015b), which can be seen both as critical of the Prime Minister and as a constructive challenge for him to match the achievements of Lee Kuan Yew. Furthermore, authors of NN articles often attribute opinions from “Singaporeans from all walks of life,” likely to disperse (imagined) liability to an aggregate, even national mass. In any case, the material in NN is largely in line with critical writings that point out that democracy in the liberal sense remains non-existent in Singapore (e.g., Margolin, 2005; Thompson, 2015).

However, it should be noted that from April 5, 2019 up to June 25, 2020—a few days before the start of campaigning for the 2020 Singaporean general election—no new content was uploaded on NN’s website. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, or POFMA, was passed by the Singaporean parliament on May 8, 2019, assented to by the president on June 3, 2019, and came into effect on October 2, 2019. Although the act does not explicitly say so, satire is supposedly not penalized by the law, which criminalizes making “false statements of fact” that are seen as detrimental to the public interest in Singapore. However, the state’s Media Literacy Council included satire among the forms of “fake

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12The full text of the law can be accessed at https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Acts-Supp/18-2019/Published/20190625?DocDate=20190625.
news” both in a Facebook post and a printed booklet distributed to schools (Zhuo, 2019) before POFMA was implemented. The Law and Home Affairs minister, K. Shanmugam, has stated that the council committed an error (Zhuo, 2019), but time will tell whether POFMA—which has thus far seemingly only targeted members of the opposition (Aravindan, 2019)—can be used to at least harass satirists.

Not the Nation

NTN can be considered the most subversive of the websites discussed here, given how far it was willing to go in terms of targets for satire. Among its frequent subjects of ridicule between 2008 and 2014 were the country’s elected prime ministers, Abhisit Vejjajiva and Yingluck Shinawatra. Later articles that were published in NTN are about the then-ruling military junta, the National Council for Peace and Order (NCPO), which came into power in May 2014. Many of these articles were blatantly anti-junta or critical of junta-appointed Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha. Some of these included the aforementioned article on his “concerned facial expressions” as his main response to terrorist bombings (NTN, 2015b), and an earlier article that “praised” Prayuth’s masculinity, describing him as wrestling a monitor lizard to the death and crying out, “This is your democracy!” while shirtless (NTN, 2015a).

If one had a dictatorial mindset, one might say that the above may be punishable according to Thailand’s sedition law (Article 116, which penalizes “[making] an appearance to the public by words, writings or any other means […] which is not an act within the purpose of the Constitution or for expressing honest opinion or criticism in order [among others] to raise unrest and disaffection amongst the people in a manner likely to cause disturbance in the country” (iLaw, 2017). Indeed, after NCPO took power, at least 20 cases of violation of the sedition law by criticizing the junta have been filed (iLaw, 2017).

Another relevant law, the Computer-Related Crime Act B.E. 2550 (2007), was amended by the Computer-Related Crime Act (No. 2) B.E. 2560 (2017). Among the amended sections is Section 14, which lists “ill or fraudulent intent” as an element in “putting into a computer system distorted or forged computer data, partially or entirely, or false computer data” that “is likely to cause damage” to the public or individuals, and that crime is now distinct from the “defamation offense under the Criminal Code.” Before the amendment, the law could be understood to criminalize the uploading of potentially defamatory false information online, regardless of intent (iLaw, 2014).

Aside from the aforementioned laws, Thailand also has an infamous lèse majesté law that has also been used to silence critics of governing powers. Such laws “prohibit insults, defamation, and criticism towards royal sovereigns of States” (Baber, 2014, p. 693). Thailand’s lèse majesté law, stated in Section 112 of the Thai Criminal Code,

13The full text of both laws, in Thai and in English translation, can be viewed at https://thainetizen.org/docs/cybercrime-act-2017/
is worded as follows: “‘Whoever, defames, insults or threatens the King, the Queen, the Heir-apparent or the Regent, shall be punished with [a prison sentence] of three to fifteen years’” (in Baber, 2014, p. 693).

*Lèse majesté* has been described as a paradoxical feature of a modern nation-state (Streckfuss, 1995). Prayuth believes that strict enforcement of *lèse majesté* is necessary to save the country from destruction by “‘unlimited democracy’” (Post Reporters, 2015). It should be noted that as per Wikileaks, every website blocked by Thailand’s Ministry of Information and Communication Technology, at least as of 2008, was supposedly blocked for violation of the *lèse majesté* law (Wikileaks, 2008).

One can be charged with violating *lèse majesté* for comparing oneself to Thai royalty during a political campaign (Streckfuss, 1995, pp. 449–452) or for stating that the king is out of touch with Thai realities or can be “bullied” by the military (Streckfuss, 1995, pp. 463–465). In 1976, one group even attempted to have the authorities punish the newspaper *Thai Rat* for daring to “juxtapose” a picture of the Crown Prince’s fiancé alongside musicians with that of a picture of a dog in the company of musicians, even if the latter picture was published in the newspaper a day after the former (Baber, 2014, p. 697). Fortunately for *Thai Rat*, the police at the time found the claim ridiculous, though the incident “gained much attention and was a concerning indication of how easily Thai *lèse-majesté* law can be provoked” (Baber, 2014, p. 697).

Has NTN’s author published anything that might make him/her liable under Thailand’s *lèse majesté* law? It once published an article titled “Palace Censors Naked Photos of Prince,” which is about naked photographs of Prince Harry of the United Kingdom and the newly enacted British law “Penal Code 112” (NTN, 2012). It also published an article (NTN, 2013) on then-King Bhumibol Adulyadej’s dog, Thong-daeng, abdicating in favor of Air Chief Marshal Foo Foo, the then-recently deceased poodle of Crown Prince Vajiralongkorn. Such articles show the knack for comedic allegory of NTN’s author, who may have banked on the dismissal of the 1976 *Thai Rat* case at the time of publication of these articles.

That last version of NTN, which can still be viewed via the Internet Archive’s Wayback Machine, 14 appears to have been an attempt to relaunch itself (apparently after a brief domain name expiry) from a satirical news website to another form of satirical attack against the NCPO-led state, while still offering readers the content they expected from NTN. A banner stated that the site is “STILL NOT THE NATION,” and that “EVERYTHING IS THE SAME AS BEFORE,” followed by a photograph of Prayuth gesturing as though to listen intently. Visitors are requested to give their email address under a form with the heading “WE ALREADY KNOW YOU ARE [sic], SO GIVE US YOUR ADDRESS.” Entering one’s email address apparently initiated a subscription to NTN’s content, though this was already inactive when I attempted to do it. A physical address, partly in Thai, was written on the website; it leads to a convenience store.

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14Specifically, at [https://web.archive.org/web/20171017014630/](https://web.archive.org/web/20171017014630/), [https://notthenation.com/](https://notthenation.com/).
Based on the cached pages in the Internet Archive, this version of the site was accessible from at least September up to October 2017. Accessing the site now leads to a 404/not found error. I have not been able to locate any publicly accessible (leaked) list that may indicate that this deactivation was related to either subversion or lèse majesté. However, given that in 2017, “the number of lèse-majesté cases has increased sharply under the NCPO” and at least one well-known journalist was charged with “sedition and spreading false information” (Freedom House, 2018), it would not be surprising if, at the very least, NTN’s author(s) decided to hide from what is essentially a military dictatorship, whose leader had been handed an elected mandate as prime minister, albeit by a bicameral parliament whose upper house members are selected by the military.

The Tapir Times

Malaysia’s Sedition Act has been described as a “colonial-era relic” (Amnesty International, 2016). According to Amnesty International (2016), “[those found guilty of violating the Act] can face three years in prison, be fined up to 5000 Malaysian Ringgit (USD1300)—or both—for their first offence. Those convicted for a subsequent offence can face up to five years in jail.”

When TT started as FMN, publications were considered to have a “seditious tendency” if they, among others, “[brought] into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against any Ruler or against any Government”; “[excited] the subjects of any Ruler or the inhabitants of any territory governed by any Government to attempt to procure in the territory of the Ruler or governed by the Government, the alteration, otherwise than by lawful means, of any matter as by law established”; or “[brought] into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in Malaysia or in any State.” 15 There were a few exceptions, but the law generally made it very difficult to be critical of government in Malaysia. “Printing, publishing, selling, offering for sale, distributing, reproducing [and importing] seditious publications” were all considered offences (Lim, 2015). Amendments in 2015 ostensibly allowed criticism of government, and added “causing seditious material to be published” and replaced importation of seditious materials with “propagating seditious publications” as offences, but still retained all other definitions of publications with seditious tendencies, including those that cause ill-will/hostility/hatred against religious groups (Lim, 2015). Moreover, the amended act explicitly included online publications (Lim, 2015).

Laws such as these were wielded by the Najib Razak administration, even against satirists, especially in the wake of the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal, in which then-Prime Minister Najib was accused of stealing over US$1

15The 1948 Sedition Act, as amended up to 1 January 2006, can be viewed at https://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/LOM/EN/Act%2015.pdf. I am grateful to Ariff Hafizi bin Mohd Radzi for his insights on Malaysian law.
billion intended for national development (Today, 2017; BBC, 2018). In 2018, shortly before the national elections, the Malaysian parliament even enacted an Anti-Fake News Act,\textsuperscript{16} which is precisely what it sounds like: a law providing penalties for “creating, offering, publishing, etc., fake news or publication containing fake news,” funding such activities, and “failing to carry out duty to remove publication containing fake news,” as well as allowing courts to order the removal of fake news. The law was immediately moved to be repealed by members of the parliament formed after the historic loss of Najib’s Barisan Nasional to Pakatan Harapan, which was led by Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. It was successfully repealed in October 2019.

One statute that was also introduced during Najib’s premiership, which may potentially be used against online satirists, remains in effect. Section 124B of the Malaysian Penal Code, introduced in 2012, makes a crime out of “activity detrimental to parliamentary democracy.”\textsuperscript{17} This poor definition was wielded against anti-Najib forces, including peaceful protestors (Malay Mail, 2015).

How did what was then called \textit{Fake Malaysia News} circumvent or otherwise avoid being prosecuted under these laws? Apparently, changing the publication’s name to \textit{Tapir Times} was not motivated by the then-pending enactment of the Anti-Fake News Act. The decision to discard the name \textit{Fake Malaysia News} was announced on Facebook on February 7, 2018, more than two months before the enactment of the law. The announcement stated that “today, in the world of [United States President Donald] Trump, ‘fake news’ doesn’t mean funny parody news or satire, it means sending out bogus terrorist attack alerts or fooling Facebook algorithms with damning information to affect election outcomes.”\textsuperscript{18}

Indeed, TT/FMN seemed unperturbed by all of these developments; it published numerous clearly anti-Najib articles after the 1MDB scandal broke, with headlines such as “Be Alert for Suspicious Activity Not Involving the PM, Nation Told” and “Fitch Gives PM’s Bank Account AAA + Rating.” Perhaps the author felt that anonymity was a sufficient defence. Also, he/she/they have tried to sell himself/herself/themselves as a non-partisan critic(s); among the sites discussed here, only TT has a tab under a “politics” navigation bar button dedicated to the “opposition”; clicking this tab shows articles that are critical of then-opposition politicians, notably Anwar Ibrahim, who was in the ruling coalition under Mahathir from 2018 to 2020.

Perhaps the only notable recent development in TT’s output is the apparent reluctance of the site’s author to publish content criticizing Mahathir after his remarkable return to the premiership at 92 years of age, after his coalition’s defeat of the sole political coalition that has ruled over Malaysia since independence. Prior to his return, the

\textsuperscript{16}The text of the law as enacted can be viewed at https://www.cljlaw.com/files/bills/pdf/2018/MY_FS_BIL_2018_06.pdf.

\textsuperscript{17}This and other 2012 Penal Code amendments can be viewed in full here: https://www.federa lgazette.agc.gov.my/outputaktap/20120622_A1430_BI_Act%20A1430%20BI-penal%20code%20(amendment).pdf.

\textsuperscript{18}See the February 7, 2018 post at the \textit{Tapir Times} Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/the tapirtimes).
site found him an easy target for ridicule, from parodying his odd enumeration-style blog entries\(^\text{19}\) when a fictionalized version of him was featured as a guest blogger (TT, 2015b), or highlighting that he was once notorious for stifling press freedom during his twenty-two-year-long premiership (e.g., TT, 2015a). Within Mahathir’s recently concluded term as prime minister, TT tended to avoid articles solely about Mahathir or painting him in a relatively positive light; for instance, a 2018 article (TT, 2018) describes him as the choice to head the opposition party, which seems to defer to the view of him as immensely popular. It is unclear whether this was due to a belief that Mahathir was needed in Malaysia at the time, or fear that he may revert to his formerly repressive ways, or for any other reason. It does betray the contradictoriness of the non-partisanship it supposedly projects.

**Pos Ronda**

Indonesia has long been considered one of the most democratic countries in South-east Asia after the fall of the Suharto dictatorship in 1998 (Pradjasto et al., 2012, pp. 108–109). Indeed, the post-dictatorship *reformasi* era saw immediate sweeping legislative changes, including laws guaranteeing the protection of freedom of expression (Yuniar, 2017). However, defamation remains a crime (Articles 310–321 of the Penal Code of Indonesia), and such laws can be and have been used against critics of public officials, even in supposedly democratic times (Kelly/Warner, n.d.b). Articles 1365 and 1372 of the Civil Code of Indonesia govern civil defamation suits, under which “truth is only a limited defense, opinions are not protected, [there is no] ‘good faith’ exception with only a limited ‘public interest’ defense, and it places the burden of proof on the defendant rather than the person claiming to be defamed” (Kelly/Warner, n.d.b).

Indonesia’s controversial Electronic Information and Transactions Law, or Law No. 11 of 2008, amended by Law No. 16 of 2016, may be more readily applicable to PR. The crimes defined in the law include distributing, transmitting, or making accessible “electronic information or documents that contain insult or defamation” and “electronic information or documents that contain threats of violence or frightening information (including cyberbullying)” (Molina, 2016). The 2016 amendment reduced the penalties for these crimes, but they remain laws in a fearsome legislative corpus that facilitates harassment of critics of the powerful. Indeed, as recently as 2017, a well-known Indonesian caricaturist, Muhammad Misrad, had said that “[satire] here is different from the West…[in] Indonesia, I need to be really careful, this country is very sensitive” (qtd. in Yuniar, 2017).

Nevertheless, PR seems to flout these restrictions and threats. As with NN, the identities of the people behind PR are public. As previously mentioned, Shaka Mahottama, the website’s founder and editor, has stated that *The Onion* is *Pos Ronda*’s

\(^{19}\)He blogs at chedet.cc. A counter on the site boasts of nearly 30,000,000 visitors since it was launched in 2008.
main inspiration, though he also mentions other satirical news websites, including the *Unreal Times* of India, which he praises for their professional quality, which his publication aimed to emulate (Jakarta Globe, 2014). *Pos Ronda* readily identifies itself as a satire site both in its English-language tagline “Indonesia’s Political Infotainment” and in a disclaimer easily accessible through a prominently located navigation bar link. The summary, translated into English, states that “POS RONDA is a site that contains writings, articles, and stories that are created and compiled as WORKS OF FICTION, are SATIRICAL, and function as ENTERTAINMENT.” So far, this seems to be adequate protection for PR; Mahottama and his team have not uploaded new content since July 2017, but their site remains online. A meme using the “two buttons” template, shared on PR’s Facebook page on January 15, 2019, suggests that the people behind PR are aware that their content can be construed as deliberate inflammatory “trolling” by sensitive persons (“orang baper”) or can inspire hoaxes, showing that they are more concerned with the social than the legal consequences of their output.

Further evidence that lawsuits or repression are not a significant concern of the publicly identified staff of PR is that even Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, Indonesia’s president since 2014, is a frequent target of criticism in their articles. One article, satirizing Jokowi’s apparent admiration for the development track taken by China—particularly through massive infrastructure spending, without caring where the funding for such projects came from—states that Jokowi was found praiseworthy by an Indonesian Sith lord, a master of the evil “Dark Side of the Force” in the fictional universe of the *Star Wars* franchise (PR, 2014). Another article satirized the news that Jokowi met with civilians, including the leader of the major Indonesian Islamic organization Muhammadiyah, in military attire, by quoting fictional presidential staff as saying that Jokowi has a penchant for cosplay—rather than, as is implied in the article, because he sees himself primarily as the armed forces’ commander-in-chief (PR, 2015).

As such articles suggest, PR’s content criticizing Jokowi and his administration warns of the possibility of a democratically elected leadership transforming into a repressive autocracy with a highly limited notion of national development, ignoring those on the economic and geographical margins. Indeed, were Jokowi so inclined, he could legally suppress all his critics. Although various abuses against journalists have persisted under Jokowi (Human Rights Watch, 2017), there is currently no evidence that Jokowi himself can be directly tied to such violations. Perhaps aiming at a target that is unlikely to retaliate despite being the country’s most powerful individual, and largely avoiding sensitive subjects such as religious and racial strife, may account for why PR has remained untouched by Indonesian authorities. One wonders if PR will retain this strategy if Indonesia falls under a less accommodating leader, who was re-elected in 2019 to another five-year term.

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20This may be viewed at https://www.facebook.com/idposronda/photos/a.304331929716196/1200728260076554/?type=3&theater.
Beyond the Jokes: An Anti-“Fake News” Genre

Based on the above discussion, it would seem that, though what they do write can be considered “infotainment” or “soft news,” unlike in the United States the writers of SWN, NN, NTN, TT, and PR worked, or are working, within constraints that make what they do construable as acts of self-endangerment. The fact that they still proceeded with their work, even though they are or were clearly aware of the possibility that the law might be employed at the very least to harass them, makes it easy to attach a subversive character to their work. However, that characterization is tempered both by the very laws that they are (potentially) bypassing or challenging, and in the cases of SWN, NTN, and TT, the level of identity disclosure that their authors are or were willing to make.

Moreover, the “subversiveness” of these websites may be seen as questionable in light of a common “cultural taboo” of sorts that can protect the authors of these websites from being prosecuted should anyone try to do so. There is scholarly and anecdotal evidence to buttress this. Ancheta, for instance, has discussed how humorous works serve as means of navigating the harsh realities of life in the Philippines (Ancheta, 2006; Romero, 2010). To paraphrase from Ancheta, humorous works have, on the surface, both suppressant and regulatory functions, thus making them valuable as means of reifying an existing class structure, such as how the comedic personas of Dolphy, a famous Philippine comedian, allegedly romanticized poverty (Ancheta, 2006). They also have an underlying subversive potential, forcing juxtapositions that challenge traditions and other norms (Ancheta, 2000, 2006). Humor is thus highly valued across the Philippine class hierarchy; a corollary of this valuation is the social injunction against being “pikon” or being “easily angered by jokes or jests” (Bansa.org). In Thailand, half of the duo behind the satirical web series Jow Kow Tuen (Shallow News in Depth), Nattapong Tiendee, stated that in Thai culture, “[funny] people are forgiven more than serious people” (AFP, 2014). This recalls the “Sacred Clowning” in traditional Thai shadow puppetry theater, which apparently satirized actual people instead of mythical characters, as is the case in other Southeast Asian shadow puppetry traditions (Johnson, 2006, p. 155).

In the case of Singapore, Lee Kin Mun, the man behind political humor website mrbrown.com, who has been called “Singapore’s most popular satirist,” (Lim, 2011), believes that the reason he has mostly been tolerated by state authorities is the likelihood that he is “[is not] seen as a threat [because he is] just the guy with the big mouth, the class clown at the back of the class” (Lim, 2011). Similarly, Tan argues that a certain YouTube video that can be seen as humorously mocking Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has such an “incoherent façade” that it is “too ludicrous to be taken seriously by official censors: the video says something without actually saying anything” (2011, p. 64).

Some studies (e.g., Nanda, Sukyadi, & Sudarsono, 2012) have shown that in Indonesia, humorous teasing, at least among willing participants, is well-tolerated in various forms of entertainment media. This extends to political humor, wherein “benign” teasing or poking fun of, for example, political leaders, is, based on one
study, more readily appreciated in Indonesia than potentially defamatory or offensive “subversive” humor, especially those targeting particular socio-religious groups (Murti, Prayoga, Abraham, & Mursitama, 2018). A similar milieu can be found in Malaysia. In a study of Malaysian ethnic and political stand-up comedy routines, Chan, Tan, Abdullah, and Chan, (2018) note that some Malaysian entertainers have publicly made jokes that may offend or be construed as subversive, but that these are “softened” by “politeness strategies” such as expressions of sympathy toward the ridiculed, or self-effacement. Thus, even among the countries examined here, in which certain cultural/sociopolitical cleavages are particularly evident, one can joke about sensitive subjects without serious consequences, as long as one tells the joke in a socially and legally acceptable manner.

The above discussion seems to suggest that online satirical news writers in these Southeast Asian countries have been largely “untouched” because they are culturally “untouchable.” If the governments of the Philippines and Thailand wanted to find Stewart or NTN’s author, respectively, they likely have the means to do so, but they have apparently refrained from doing that, possibly because of the cultural acceptability of clowning (ostensibly) for clowning’s sake. However, given the lack of news or fanfare about the effective deactivation of either site, it seems likely that both were taken offline by their authors themselves as preemptive moves to ensure their personal security. NN is one of many products of Singaporean satirists, which, despite possibly fanning the flames of pro-democracy sentiments in Singapore, are likely seen by authorities as trivial. The adaptative strategies of TT, outlined above, may in retrospect seem unnecessary, as a name like Fake Malaysia News clearly communicates that the “news” on the site is fictional. Indeed, despite the observed strictness of anti-fake news or disinformation measures throughout Southeast Asia during the COVID-19 pandemic (AFP, 2020), TT continues to publish articles humorously satirizing those in government while the crisis is ongoing, and does not seem to be in any danger of being forced offline. Finally, there is no indication that PR’s recent inactivity is due to threats or harassment from state apparatuses or instrumentalities.

These are all informed presumptions, however. Given how evidently personal security is as high a concern among the authors of these websites as the satirical bite of their content, the possibility that they have also cooperated (willingly or unwillingly) with authorities to deactivate their sites, go on hiatus, or make certain subjects off limits cannot be discounted, and the authors may have decided not to make such interventions, if any, public, perhaps to avoid further interventions or causing a scandal. In any case, that they persisted as long as they did, or have, shows that they were, or are, not only motivated by dedication to their craft or mere pecuniary benefit, though it is perhaps not coincidental that the remaining active sites, TT and NN, followed The Onion’s lead in terms of monetizing their content through advertising and/or merchandise. Their work—especially now that numerous writings have tried to ensure that all are aware that they are satirists, not hoaxers (e.g., Chan, 2016; de Leon, 2013; Farrelly, 2007; Jakarta Globe, 2014; Lukman, 2014)—has a defined and engaged readership, one that can potentially help navigate a World Wide Web that has become a quagmire of fiction dressed up as fact.
As of this writing, the last tweet posted on SWN’s Twitter account is dated March 13, 2019, and appears to be a potential headline without any further text. SWN’s Twitter page remains public; as of this writing, it has over 4800 followers.\(^{21}\) NN is, as of this writing, followed by over 16,700 people on Facebook.\(^{22}\) NTN has no currently accessible statistics on followers/readers, but it was featured several times in the Australian National University-based academic blog *New Mandalal* (Farrelly, 2007, 2011; Walker, 2010) and had readers among expatriates in neighboring Cambodia.\(^{23}\) As of this writing, TT’s Facebook page\(^{24}\) is followed by over 20,000 people. Finally, PR’s Facebook page\(^{25}\) states that it has over 6600 followers as of January 2019. Certainly, these follows are dwarfed by those of the social media pages of mainstream national news—or even of *The Onion*, the Facebook page of which\(^{26}\) currently has over 6 million followers—and looking at what can still be accessed of these sites and their social media pages, they rarely have any contents that are shared more than a few dozen times. Thus, quantitatively, calling all of these websites enduringly popular seems to be an overstatement.

However, observing the on-site and social media comments on SWN, NN, TT, and PR’s contents, and how NTN, in various ways—including its last iteration as a “confession site”—has tried to include readers in the satirical world(s) it had built (see Walker, 2010, in which the author and another individual were sent NTN shirts to serve as a scarlet-letter like badge), makes it clear that the sites offer, or offered, readers means not only to further process and memorialize the news (Basu, 2018), but also to interact with fiction that has parodied the self-destructive immediacy of news media. In the form of posted comments, readers can build upon online satirical news articles without being members of a fanfiction writing fandom or otherwise having extensive knowledge of certain fictional worlds. This is evident in the comments under articles shared by *The Onion* on Facebook; typically, such comment threads include parody headlines from readers that take off from an article’s headline/content.

However, a cursory examination of SWN, NN, TT, and PR comments show that many of their articles that receive the most attention, if based on shares and likes, were mistaken by readers, including members of the media, as real. Although some articles from *The Onion* are still sometimes shared by users who believe them to be real news, the site’s longevity has allowed most of its readers to participate in its collective production of fiction. Perhaps, in time, readers of satirical news websites in Southeast Asia will also be consistently “in on the joke” and may possibly spread this knowledge beyond these websites’ usual readership.

\(^{21}\)https://twitter.com/sowhatsnews?lang=en.

\(^{22}\)https://www.facebook.com/newnationsg/.

\(^{23}\)See https://cambodiaexpatsonline.com/thailand-news-and-discussion/articles-not-the-nation-since-may-t3363.html.

\(^{24}\)https://www.facebook.com/thetapirtimes/.

\(^{25}\)https://www.facebook.com/idposronda/.

\(^{26}\)https://www.facebook.com/TheOnion/.
Conclusion

To reiterate, the generic characteristics of online satirical news allow readers to easily and immediately participate in a fiction production process without being knowingly deceptive or deceived, provided that they are aware of the fictive nature of satirical news. Online satirical news does not only give readers pleasure/enjoyment, which encourages sharing of both the pleasurable/enjoyable content and the ethos of the author behind it (see Fife, 2016, p. 324) or affects their political efficacy/knowledge (Baumgartner & Morris, 2006; Glazier, 2014), but also reveals both the formulaic selectivity of news media and the ease by which falsities—even patently absurd ones—can be inserted into purportedly fair and true accounts of immediate realities.

It is interesting to note that in parodying the media, the authors of these sites also project themselves as advocates of freedom of expression, even if they occupy a gray zone that allows them to function like real news media (reporting news) while also engaging in what amounts to culturally and/or legally protected punditry. However, writers of online satirical news in Southeast Asia are not (necessarily) activists. Even so, what they write is perhaps the most easily accessible and effective means of highlighting the demarcation between “objective” news and patently skewed/outright fabricated reportage, and of participating in the same linguistic games that allow authorities to stretch or exploit “ambiguities” in laws related to freedom of expression.

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