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### Mocked and shamed: Satirical news and its effects on organizational reputation

Lisbeth LIM

*Nanyang Technological University*

Juliana CHIA

*Nanyang Technological University*

Augustine PANG

*Singapore Management University, augustine@smu.edu.sg*

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# Mocked and Shamed: Satirical News and Its Effects on Organizational Reputation

Lisbeth Lee, Juliana Chia, Augustine Pang

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## ABSTRACT

With fake news the rage (Tavernise, 2016), this study examines one form of fake news, satire news (Reilly, 2010). This study examines factors that lead satire news to be created, how they are used to criticize organizations and the impact on reputations. News on five satire news sites – The Onion (US), New Nation (Singapore), The Shovel (Australia), NewsThump (UK), and Der Postillon (Germany) – were analyzed using social media monitoring tools. Findings suggested that crises or paracrises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012) were likely to be exacerbated. While its effects are not immediate, satire news may have impact on organizations' reputations over time. Satirical news sites have increased in recent years (Koziol, 2014). Insights add to understanding of the phenomenon of fake news. Anchored on the contingency theory of strategic conflict management (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), a framework for organizational response is proposed for practitioners to use.

**KEYWORDS:** Satire news sites, Social media, Social media crises, Crisis management, Reputation management

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Lisbeth Lee, (lisbethleeyh@gmail.com), Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University

Juliana Chia, (julianachiayt@gmail.com), Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University

Augustine Pang, Ph.D., (augustine@smu.edu.sg) is a professor of Communication Management (Practice) at Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University.

## **Introduction**

The advent of Web 2.0 and its traits of widespread user creation, participation, collaboration, communication and interactivity (O'Reilly, 2007; Thomson, 2008) has given rise to the easy sharing of information and creation of an online presence. Today, individuals can easily create social media accounts, set up blogs, websites, and edit wikis for free. Organizations have striven to adapt to Web 2.0 and its new communication channels (i.e. social media) to interact with their stakeholders. Many successful organizations have reported using social media as alternative channels to engage their stakeholders, increase brand awareness, and monitor trends as well as competitors (Barnes, 2010).

The prevalence of social media use has also resulted in the activism of netizens, efficient information sharing and the spread of misinformation (Pang, 2013). There has been an increase in the number of social media crises faced by organizations, such as the hijacking of organizations' social media accounts (Veil, Reno, Freihaut & Oldham, 2015), social media accounts parodying organizations (Wan, Koh, Ong & Pang, 2015) and hashtag hijacking by Twitter users during online marketing campaigns (Pang, Limsico, Phong, Lareza, & Low, 2018). Meanwhile, satirical news sites criticizing organizations and individuals have increased in recent years (Koziol, 2014). Where satire was once reserved for media professionals and organizations, anyone may use satire to critique an issue, individual or organization, and in the process, influence others (Crittenden, Hopkins & Simmons, 2011). Thus, it has encouraged the rise of satire online

(Crittenden et al., 2011). It is important to understand the impact satirical news sites has on organizational reputation. First, given the speed and frequency with which social media crises occur and may go viral (Bridgeman, 2008), it is crucial for organizations and individuals to consider how satirical news sites may affect their brand reputation if they become targets of these sites. Second, as organizations typically have a difficult time recovering from reputational damage during a crisis (Griffin, 2008; Phillips & Young, 2009), understanding how and why satirical news sites manifest prepares organizations for tackling them. Moreover, the results of this study may better prepare organizations in adopting strategic and appropriate responses in reaction to satirical news articles, instead of giving inappropriate responses and fuelling the crisis further (Ott & Theunissen, 2015).

## **Literature review**

### **Social Media Threats**

The emergence of social media in the communication landscape has contributed to the manifestation of several social media threats.

Social media have been identified as platforms where crises are often triggered or escalated (Pang, Nasrath, & Chong, 2014). As the likelihood of paracrises appearing online increases with social media usage, social media have also been classified as a tool for online crisis scanning (Coombs & Holladay, 2012). Paracrises are "a specific type of crisis threat" that resemble a crisis (Coombs & Holladay, 2012, p.409). Organizations

have to cope with the very public management of paracrises online, which increases the stakes for organizations mending stakeholder relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

One threat is social media hype. Social media hype is explained as a “netizen-generated hype that is triggered by a key event and sustained by a self-reinforcing quality in its ability for users to engage in conversation” (Pang, 2013, p. 333). It is characterized by a key event, followed by at least two ‘interest waves’ online which are essentially spikes in interest, and the endurance and spread of interest among netizens, post-event (Pang, 2013). Satirical news articles fit the definition of social media hype, given its sensational nature, the high possibility of its consumption, transmission and discussion online.

Another manifestation of social media threats are social media parody accounts. These are accounts that “purport to present the views of the official spokesperson while posting satirical messages” (Wan, Koh, Ong, & Pang, 2015). They assume an online identity of an organization or individual, and post satirical and inaccurate information for the public, which reinforces existing negative perceptions of the organization or individual involved in the crisis. This worsens the relationship between organizations and their followers online. People seek information to cope during a crisis, but online parody accounts serve as a type of social media threat in the communication landscape as they provide inaccurate information, thereby creating confusion and putting stress on the stakeholders involved.

### **Defining Satire**

From early literature, satire was used by authors like Jonathan Swift (*Gulliver’s Travels*) and Aldous Huxley (*Brave New World*) to critique human vices and issues such as racism (LeBoeuf, 2007). Satire is defined by LeBoeuf (2007) as “a very powerful artistic form used to critique specific human behaviors” that may take any recorded form or speech, with three main attributes: the **critique** of behavioural conduct such as human follies and vices using **irony**, coupled with **implicit** methods or statements. Its aim is to ridicule and condemn negative behaviour by taking them out of context, making them sound farcical and exaggerated (LeBoeuf, 2007). Satire is also defined as using “humor as constructive criticism” (Crittenden et al., 2011, p.175) and occasionally, to incite social reform (Elliott, n.d.). For this study, we define satire as a tool for criticizing the actions of organizations or individuals using irony, humor, exaggeration and implicit methods/statements.

### **Satirical news sites and their impact on organizations’ and individuals’ reputations**

Many dedicated satirical news sites have materialized at the turn of the millennium, perhaps spurred on by netizen activism and the easy creation of websites. *The Onion*, arguably America’s most popular satirical news site (Keighley, 2003), was started by two university students and launched online in 1996. As a sign of its success, it was bought by broadcast organization Univision Communications (Folkenflik, 2016).

While past studies have examined social media crises faced by organizations (Veil

et al., 2015; Wan et al., 2015), the impact that satirical news sites have on organizations' and individuals' reputations have been scant. Past studies indicated that social media crises have resulted in reputational damage, as it has disrupted the self-promotional efforts that organizations might have undertaken (Wan et al., 2015; Ott & Theunissen, 2015; Veil et al., 2015). In the case of satirical news sites, readers and organizations may be fooled and subsequently share these 'news' online (Kim, 2015), thereby perpetuating ridicule directed at the target. Moreover, it was found that satirical articles are usually inspired by an event's memorability, reinforcing the notion that satirical news articles may have an impact on an organization's reputation with its longevity online and possibly, in consumers' minds as well (Ho, Pang, Auyong, & Lau, 2014).

Satirical news sites also fall under three categories of crises expounded by Hilse and Hoewner (1998): reinforcing crises, which involves communication of opinions via alternative channels; absurd crises, which involves rumour circulation about an organization; and affecting crises, where the organization is subjected to critical scrutiny of stakeholders.

### **Organizational response**

The Contingency Theory suggests that there is no one-size-fits-all ideal crisis management model that can explain all conflicts (Cancel et al., 1997). The theory states that different crisis strategies should be applied according to the situation at hand. This theory is based on two principles: first, a range of factors influence the position of an organization when dealing with different types of

audiences and second, the fluid position of an organization that changes over time (Cancel et al., 1997). The Contingency Theory has a continuum of two extreme factors: pure advocacy to pure accommodation – a stance for organizations to respond to the public at a given time. As conflict evolves, the organizations move along the continuum and respond accordingly (Cameron et al., 2008). Pure advocacy is characterized as being assertive and arguing for one's own case, while pure accommodation is characterized as giving in as a response to the public (Cancel et al. 1997).

There are three variables that affect an organization's position on the continuum of response, and they should be considered before taking any response. When considering each variable, the organization or individual may move along the continuum to select an action most appropriate to the situation. Therefore, each variable might result in a different action taken, and all variables have to be considered before deciding on an action.

1) *Predisposing variables* are elements that exist within the organization itself and hence influence the organization's position on the continuum even before it decides on how to respond to a satirical news article. Some examples of predisposing variables include an organization's size and current reputation, its corporate culture and the country's culture it is situated in.

2) *Situational variables* are elements of a particular situation an organization is in when it is in the midst of responding to a satirical article. These elements are supported situational variables (Cancel, Mitrook, & Cameron, 1999) and they include the public's traits, the exigency of the situation, and potential costs and/or

3) benefits gained by the organization when selecting an action.

4) *Proscriptive variables* are moral, legal and regulatory elements that may prohibit or diminish the organization's movement, or selection of an action on the continuum (Cameron, Cropp, & Reber, 2001; Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010).

The question remains: How can organizations counter such threats?

Given the increasing popularity of satirical news articles online, coupled with the spread of misinformation via social media and the resulting damage for organizations and individuals, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What are some of the factors that lead to satirical news articles being created on social media?

RQ2: How has online satirical news articles been turned into a form of criticism of individuals and organizations?

RQ3: How have online satirical news articles impacted individuals' and/or organization's reputations?

## **Methodology**

Five case studies were examined for this empirical paper (see Table 1 for full description of the cases). Yin (1984) defines case studies as a type of research that "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context" and is used "when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p.23). As satirical news websites are a "relatively new phenomenon" that may occur in a variety of contexts, a case study approach was employed for this study. The selection criteria include: (1) These cases were from various countries to enhance the strength and diversity of the findings; (2) The issues in the cases were native to the country of origin; (3) Each of the case study involves either a famous individual or an organization that majority of the population in the specific country would be familiar with to ensure its relevance. The selection was similar to the criteria used in Pang et al (2018). See Table 1 for the data sources.

**Table 1:** Keywords used for online media monitoring

Case Study	Description	Monitoring Platform Keywords	Period of Analysis
<i>New Nation</i> (Singapore)	Member of Parliament (MP) and Senior Minister of State Josephine Teo's comment "You don't need much space to have sex" went viral online after she responded to a question on housing issues. Teo was criticized for not understanding housing, family, and financial issues faced by young couples.	<b>Google Trends:</b> 'Josephine Teo space' <b>Brand24:</b> 'Josephine Teo', 'Sex in small spaces' <b>Keyhole:</b> 'Josephine Teo', 'Sex in small spaces'	<b>Google Trends:</b> 12 Oct-2 Nov 2016 <b>Brand24:</b> 12 Oct-2 Nov 2016 <b>Keyhole:</b> 11 Oct-24 Oct 2016
<i>The Onion</i> (United States)	In response to a leaked video of Donald Trump bragging about groping women, Trump's wife Melania, condemned his "offensive" words but stood by him and said: "This does not represent the man that I know".	<b>Google Trends:</b> 'Melania Trump' <b>Brand24:</b> 'Melania Trump', 'Allegations' <b>Keyhole:</b> 'Melania Trump defends'	<b>Google Trends:</b> 14 Oct-2 Nov 2016 <b>Brand24:</b> 14 Oct-2 Nov 2016 <b>Keyhole:</b> 15 Oct-23 Oct 2016
<i>The Shovel</i> (Australia)	Telstra, an Australian Internet service provider, had experienced major outages frequently throughout the year. Their fourth outage in less than four months caused many customers to turn to social media to complain.	<b>Google Trends:</b> 'Telstra outage' <b>Brand24:</b> 'Telstra outage' <b>Keyhole:</b> 'Telstra outage'	<b>Google Trends:</b> 29 May-18 Jun 2016 <b>Brand24:</b> 29 May-18 Jun 2016 <b>Keyhole:</b> 15 Oct-24 Oct 2016
<i>Der Postillon</i> (Germany)	German satirical site <i>Der Postillon</i> published an article stating that Alternative for Germany (AfD), an anti-immigrant right-wing party, was in fact a fake opposition party founded by chancellor Angela Merkel of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), the government's leading party.	<b>Google Trends:</b> 'AfD Angela Merkel' <b>Brand24:</b> 'AfD Angela Merkel' <b>Keyhole:</b> 'Angela Merkel'	<b>Google Trends:</b> 28 Apr-18 May 2016 <b>Brand24:</b> 28 Apr-18 May 2016 <b>Keyhole:</b> 5 Oct-26 Oct 2016
<i>NewsThump</i> (United Kingdom)	The Great British Bake Off (known as GBBO) which originated from BBC, was bought over by Channel 4. Of the show's two hosts and two judges, only one judge decided to move with the show to Channel 4, devastating loyal viewers (Blake, 2016).	<b>Google Trends:</b> 'Great British Bake Off Channel 4' <b>Brand24:</b> 'Great British Bake Off', 'GBBO', 'Bake off Channel 4' <b>Keyhole:</b> 'Great British Bake Off', 'GBBO'	<b>Google Trends:</b> 14 Sept-3 Oct 2016 <b>Brand24:</b> 14 Sept-3 Oct 2016 <b>Keyhole:</b> 29 Sept-27 Oct 2016

## Data Collection

*Dataset 1:* To understand the effects of satirical news on organizations and individuals, online statistical tools were used to obtain information on the interest in each case over the crisis timeframe and beyond. Relevant keywords pertaining to each case study were entered into each of the online statistical tools to collect data. These keywords were specific to each case study, for example, “Josephine Teo space” – the individual involved as well as a keyword that relates to the case. To ensure reliability and validity of the results, each of the tools were filtered by region and dates. Additionally, a variety of online statistical tools were used in this study to compare and confirm the results for each case study. They were:

1. *Google Trends* was used to analyse specific trends of topics and keywords on the web. These trends were filtered by region and dates and presented as graphs. Each case study was examined over a period of three months, beginning from the publication of the satirical article.
2. *Brand24*, a social media monitoring tool, was used to measure the frequency of mentions for keywords related to the case studies on multiple social media platforms.
3. *Keyhole*, a social media keyword and hashtag tracking platform, was used to analyse topic sentiments around keywords. Sentiments were identified as positive, negative or neutral. For each case study, sentiments were examined over a period of three days (duration permitted by a free trial).

*Dataset 2:* In addition to quantitative data obtained from social media monitoring tools, journal and web articles from e-research databases and the Google search engine were used to supplement findings. The public’s responses to satirical articles, if any, were also examined.

## Data Analysis

Data collected from the five satirical sites and online statistical tools were analysed. Analysis in the form of volume of mentions, as well sentiment and contextual analysis, was undertaken to answer the three research questions.

First, the five satirical news sites were examined individually. In order to fully understand the implicit meaning and aim of each satirical article, the context of each case study was also taken into careful consideration. Relevant keywords pertaining to each case study were then entered into the three online statistical tools to generate further information for each RQ (refer to Table 1 for keywords used).

For RQ 1, common or existing themes and factors were identified. Line graphs generated from Google Trends and Brand24 depicting the volume of keyword mentions from social media platforms were also used to observe the absence or presence of peaks, and these would indicate interest and prominence, or a lack of one, pertaining to the issue on the web (Google Trends) and social media (Brand24).

To answer RQ 2, the five articles were once again individually examined, this time with a focus on understanding why each satirical article was written and how



this was conveyed via the tone used. The purpose (e.g. to critique, explain or ridicule) for each satirical article was inferred after examining the article's angle, its tone, and the incident that preceded the publication of the satirical news article.

As for RQ 3, the volume of positive or negative sentiments collected were used to assess an organization's or individual's reputational damage. Online sentiments gave an idea of how an individual's reputation generally fared after a crisis or paracrisis. Keywords relevant to each case study were entered into Keyhole. A pie chart analysing sentiments and a word cloud related to the keywords were generated by Keyhole. This gave us an

idea of online users' sentiments in relation to keywords from the case studies. Subsequently, sentiment pie charts were used as a gauge of how much damage an organization or individual's reputation had sustained, depending on the percentage of positive or negative sentiments it had garnered.

## **Findings**

### **RQ1: What are some of the factors that lead to satirical articles being created in social media?**

The five case studies revealed the following factors that led to the creation of satirical news articles: prominence of an individual or subject, committing a folly, the need to criticize, controversy, and conflict (see Table 2).

**Table 2:** Factors leading to creation of satirical news

Satirical news case studies	Main factors identified leading to creation of satirical news
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Public figures                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Melania Trump</li> <li>○ Angela Merkel</li> <li>○ Josephine Teo</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Prominent issues/entities                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Telstra outage affecting many across Australia</li> <li>○ GBBO, popular TV show amongst the British</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Prominence of individual or issue
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Made the mistake of making controversial comments                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Melania Trump</li> <li>○ Josephine Teo</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Made mistakes (e.g. service/product delivery)                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Outage that affected many Telstra users</li> <li>○ Selling the rights of popular television programme GBBO to another less favoured channel</li> <li>○ Angela Merkel suffering a loss in the elections</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Committing a folly
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Criticized for making controversial comments through sarcasm and exaggeration                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Melania Trump</li> <li>○ Josephine Teo</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Criticized for poor product service                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Telstra</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Need to criticize
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Involved in controversial topics                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Melania Trump</li> <li>○ Josephine Teo</li> <li>○ Purchase of GBBO by Channel 4</li> <li>○ Merkel losing elections in her own district</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Elicited heated debates and divided views                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Melania Trump</li> <li>○ Josephine Teo</li> <li>○ Purchase of GBBO by Channel 4</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	Controversy and conflict

***Prominence of the individual or issue***

First, *prominence* of the individual or issue was a consistent factor across all five case studies. For instance, Melania Trump, Angela Merkel and Josephine Teo were all considered prominent figures in their respective countries by virtue of their statuses, and hence, what they said or did usually tended to ignite plenty of interest by the media and by satirical news sites. As for Telstra and The Great British Bake-

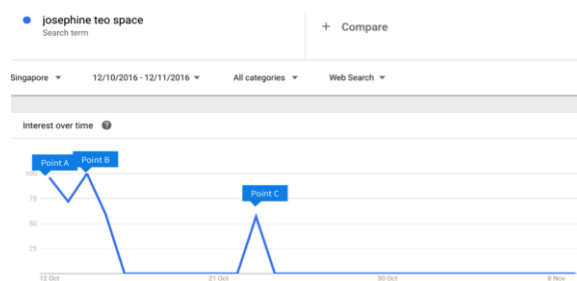
Off (GBBO), they were an established company and a popular television show respectively. Hence, they could hardly be considered as entities lacking in prominence.

Data obtained showed peaks recorded in search trends for Teo and Trump when the incidents occurred. This suggested the public's interest towards these individuals were likely to have increased as a result of

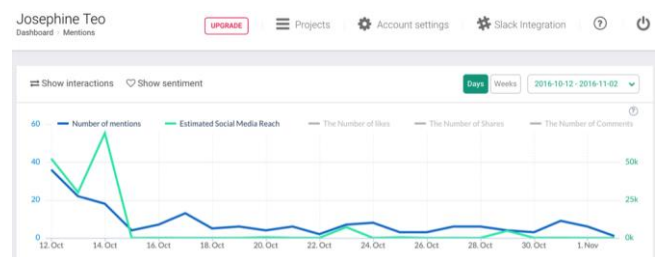
the comments they had made (see Tables 3 and 4).

**Table 3:** Search trends for ‘Josephine Teo’

3.1 Google search trends

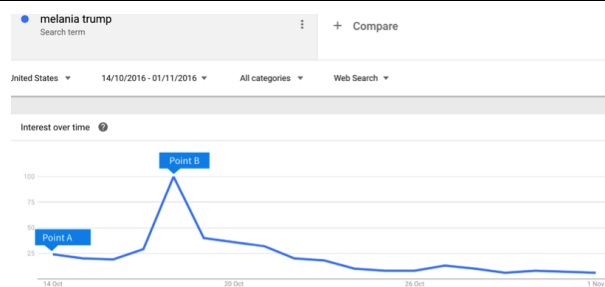


3.2 Social media search trends



**Table 4:** Search trends for ‘Melania Trump’

4.1 Google search trends



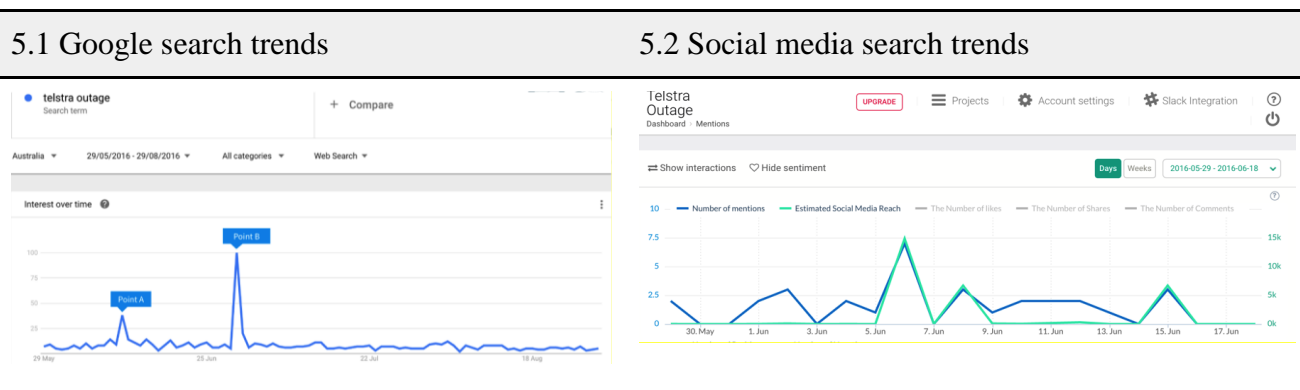
4.2 Internet and social media search trends



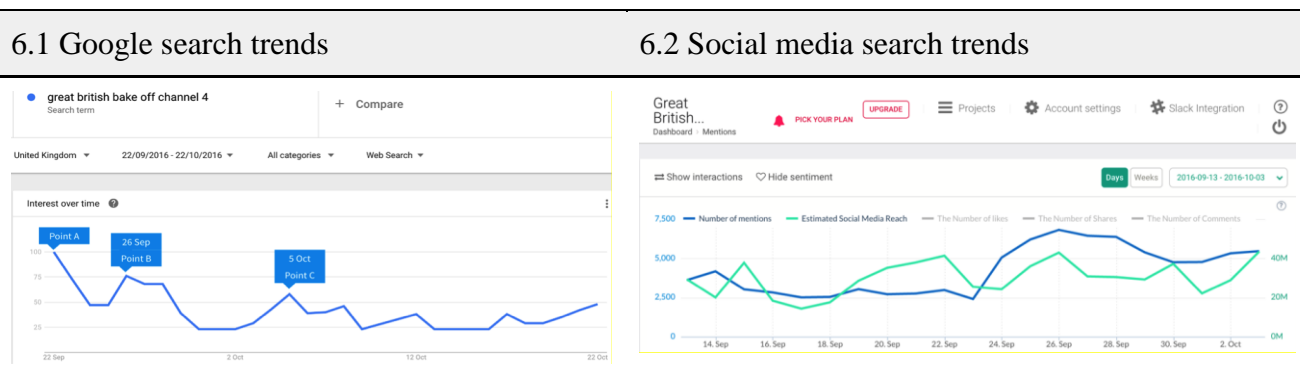
This was the same for two other case studies involving network provider Telstra and television show GBBO. Both were prominent cases. The outage at Telstra affected many Australians, while the sale of the popular British television programme GBBO was expensive and controversial (see Tables 5 and 6).

There were two spikes for the Telstra outage on the Google Trends graph (see Table 5). There was a spike at Point A on 11 June 2016, which indicated that it was a prominent and relevant issue then to the Australians. Indeed, it was widely reported (Koerber, 2016) and also resulted in a trending Twitter hashtag (#telstraoutage).

**Table 5:** Search trends for ‘Telstra outage’



**Table 6:** Search trends for ‘Great British Bake-Off’



For GBBO, search trends reached a high at point A in the Google Trends graph (see Table 6.1) as news of key stars’ intention to quit the show broke after the Channel 4 deal (Joyce, 2016; Watson, 2016). It was also the day when *NewsThump* published its satirical article. The satirical article was triggered by the relevance and newsworthiness of BBC’s loss of GBBO, and the departure of its two popular hosts and a judge.

After Channel 4’s deal on 22 September 2016, reactions from social media users (Ryder, 2016) regarding the sale of the programme likely played a part in increasing social media reach (green line) in the Brand24 graph (see Table 6.2).

The prominence of the topics the two organizations were involved in led to them being deemed newsworthy and relevant for satirizing.

**Committing a folly**

Second, organizations or individuals who had committed a *folly*, or perceived follies, were likely to be called out on it by the public or even entities. Such mistakes – deliberate or otherwise – may range from mere words, behaviours or actions by a person or organization that were subsequently deemed unacceptable or inappropriate.

For instance, Teo and Trump had made comments in their respective situations that earned the ire of the public – the former for not understanding the situation

of newlyweds (Thet, 2016a) and the latter for blaming others for her husband's actions (Wagstaff, 2016).

Meanwhile, the Telstra outage, while not deliberate, was perceived as something for which the company should be responsible. Telstra's frustrated customers had already experienced several outages before the outage in June 2016 (Koerber, 2016) and gave the impression that the company was not doing much to rectify the situation, which only fuelled the crisis more.

Separately, the decision to sell the rights of the popular television programme GBBO to Channel 4 instead of the BBC enraged loyal fans across Britain, who thought the show's producers were making a major mistake with the move (Sandwell, 2016).

However, it must be noted that the case study on Merkel was a little different as she had not committed a mistake per se, but experienced more of a shocking failure as a politician, which was losing the election in her own district (Kirschbaum & Shalal, 2016). The article simply offered a humorous, sarcastic explanation for why the German Chancellor had failed to win an election. It showed that even for a public figure who had not committed a mistake in the strictest sense of the word, she could still become fodder for satirical news sites.

### ***The need to criticize***

Third, the need to criticize was also found to be a predisposing factor for most of the satirical articles studied. This factor is closely related to the earlier mentioned predisposing factor of *committing a folly*. One method of criticizing individuals or organizations was to satirize them. For

instance, all of the satirical articles studied were written with an aim to critique a person's behaviour or words, or an organization's actions, especially if they were perceived to have done something that warranted a critique, such as a mistake.

Evidently, criticism can be executed through sarcasm and exaggeration, which brings about irony and humour. In four out of the five satirical articles, each satirical article exaggerated the situation greatly with an aim to critique an organization's or individual's words or actions.

Take the words of Trump and Teo, for instance. Melania Trump's words, which were spoken with the aim of defending her husband, were used by *The Onion* to criticize her for ignoring the facts regarding her husband's actions. In local satirical news site *New Nation's* article, Teo's comment was deliberately taken out of context and combined with the Mass Rapid Transit train woes Singaporeans faced to depict how ridiculous her comment was.

Apart from local satirical news sites such as *The Onion* and *New Nation*, which published satirical articles about them respectively, even online users indirectly criticized the two women for making absurd comments through satirical and humorous user-generated content (Thet, 2016b; Wagstaff, 2016). In Britain, GBBO's fans spoke out on the foolishness of the show's negotiators (Allegretti, 2016) and a slew of satirical articles mirroring the sentiments of the fans were published by British satirical site *NewsThump*.

Telstra was also ridiculed online for its poor product service when satirical news

site *The Shovel*, through humour and exaggeration in the article, essentially criticized the company for offering free data to its customers in March (Brancatisano, 2016), when it was unable to even prevent another network outage, which occurred in June later that year. Moreover, an Australian news corporation also entered the fray with an article on some factors users should consider before switching from Telstra to another service provider (McLeay, 2016).

A reader, when well aware of an article's status as a satire, would be able to read between the lines and understand that these satirical articles were chiding individuals or organizations, and also implying how these companies and individuals could have reacted or handled a situation better. Only one satirical article – by German satirical site *Der Postillon* – took a slightly different route. Overall, it attempted to provide exaggerated explanations for Merkel's poor showing in the local polls in her own district. This could still be interpreted as a subtle method of critiquing Merkel's political career.

### ***Controversy and conflict***

Finally, two other factors that were identified were *controversy* and *conflict*. An incident or occurrence that involved controversy (Trump, Teo, the GBBO purchase, Merkel) and/or conflict (Trump) were also predisposing factors that were likely to cause an organization or individual to be satirized.

This is due to the fact that issues involving controversy and conflict tend to spark disagreements and heated public discussions. Typically, controversy and

conflict often elicit strong reactions from the public (likely negative ones), who may be divided into different camps, depending on the issue in question.

Such controversial or conflict-themed issues are often considered stories worth reporting by the mainstream media (Itule & Anderson, 2008, p. 16), and they may range from relatively trivial topics (e.g. the GBBO purchase by Channel 4) to important ones (e.g. Merkel's election loss). These stories are also fodder for satirical news sites too, as seen in the five case studies examined.

Overall, observations suggested that predisposing factors for satirical news articles mirrored some news criteria for reporters: prominence of individual or subject, controversy, and conflict (Itule & Anderson, 2008, p. 15). Moreover, it was noticed that the satirical articles studied did not merely involve one factor at any one time, but at times, involved two or more of them: for instance, the satirical article on Trump involved both a prominent figure and a controversial issue.

### **RQ2: How has online satirical news articles been turned into a form of criticism of individuals and organizations?**

Unlike a legitimate news site that prides itself on providing accurate information, the prominent use of exaggeration, irony and humour is a basic tool used by satirical news to accomplish three main goals, which were observed in the case studies: critique, explain and/or ridicule an organization's or individual's follies, behaviour or actions. Through satirical news, the follies and mistakes of organizations and individuals are accentuated

using sarcasm and exaggeration. Hence, ‘fake news’ is created through a deliberate distortion of facts.

For instance, in the US, *The Onion*’s satirical article on Melania Trump was just one of the many satirical contents that appeared online and on television shows (Rosen, 2016; Russell, 2016). The spoofs highlighted and ridiculed Melania Trump’s weak defence of her husband and even inspired a hashtag (#BillyBushMadeMeDoIt) for users to join in criticizing Donald Trump (Feldman, 2016). As a result, these spoofs became a form of criticism for the Trumps. Similarly, *New Nation* mocked Josephine Teo for her words and criticized her for not understanding housing and financial issues faced by new couples.

*The Shovel* critiqued Telstra’s poor service and product quality due to the multiple outages experienced by Australians within a month. The Australian satirical news site also ridiculed Telstra by using a tone of sarcasm in its article to imply that it was only capable of offering free, constant Internet and telecommunications outages.

*NewsThump* critiqued Channel 4’s purchase decision of the GBBO television show and scoffed at Channel 4 for splurging on the bid without securing the show’s star hosts and judges. The satirical news site generated an article that talked about the worth of the television show since the bid – worth less than 5 pounds, which paled in comparison to the 75 million pounds they had paid.

Another satirical news site, *Der Postillon* chose to give an explanation for Angela Merkel’s election loss, instead of criticizing

or ridiculing Merkel. Explanations here often refer to mock explanations using humour and absurdity, which may or may not align with the perceived sentiments of people on the ground.

Through this, satirical news sites highlight the follies and mistakes of organizations and individuals. These sites create an “us versus them” divide among online users and the targets of satire, who are often well-known individuals or entities (e.g. governments and large companies), and put them up for criticism. The aims of the satirical articles were to provide criticism through exaggeration, sarcasm and humour. It is also suggested that satirical news could play a part in intensifying the discussion that often follows when a prominent individual or organization commits a folly, and increase public scrutiny and criticism towards the target.

### **RQ 3: How have online satirical news articles impacted individuals’ and/or organization’s reputations?**

The results showed that the extent of reputational damage sustained was generally unclear. Sentiments were used to gauge an organization’s or individual’s reputational damage, as it gave the best indicator of how an organization or individual’s reputation generally fared amongst the public. Keyhole captured three types of sentiment: negative, positive and neutral sentiments.

The sentiments captured across all case studies varied in terms of negativity. Melania Trump garnered the most negative sentiments at 68.3% (see Figure 1). This could be due to the controversy her husband, then presidential candidate Donald Trump, was embroiled in. Thus,









versus them” divide among online users and the targets of satire, who are often well-known individuals or entities (e.g. governments and large organizations) and puts them up for criticism.

### ***Satirical news generates social media hype***

Satirical news articles may generate social media hype. Social media hype takes place when a key event occurs and interest is stirred and spreads to other mediums (Pang, 2013). Similar to social media hype, an event occurs and when interest spikes online, it manifests in other mediums such as satirical news sites, which are often created with the general aim to criticize, initiate discussions and intensify the dialogue amongst people. Across all five case studies, graphs from Google Trends and Brand24 showed a peak in web trends and social media mentions of the organization or individual on the day the satirical article was published, or a few days after. Hence, satirical news may escalate a crisis or paracrisis further, which would result in social media hype. This was illustrated best in the *New Nation* case study: Teo’s comment was reported by the media, which resulted in discussion and spoofs online, before seizing the mainstream media’s attention again (Chin, 2016a).

### ***Satirical news engenders enduring image***

Satirical news also leads to an enduring image. Ho et al. (2014) pointed out that the initial memorability of an event would spawn spoofs in various mediums (e.g. illustrations and satirical news articles) and contribute to an enduring image. This was similar to what was observed from the five case studies; results suggested that the satirizing of an event would fuel a crisis or

paracrisis and make it more memorable than it already was. As these discussions and images are shared and reinforced, they increase in prominence and result in intensifying the crisis or paracrisis (Pang et al., 2014). Hence, even the mainstream media take notice. Moreover, the image is likely to be easily recalled even if the event was over, thanks to its reproduction in various mediums (Ho et al., 2014).

Exacerbating the situation are social media platforms, which facilitate the transmission of fake news (Chin, 2016b), especially with the increase in mobile news consumption (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel & Shearer, 2016). Many readers may also confuse fake news sites and satirical news sites with legitimate news sites (BBC Trending, 2016). This would be to the disadvantage of the target (e.g. an organization), as its reputation would be undermined if the reader believed the satirical article was real and shared it.

Finally, a satirical article alone does not elicit major reputational damage, but taken together over a period of time, a ‘database’ of satirical articles could accumulate. This is potent enough to build negative sentiments and do substantial damage (BBC Trending, 2016). Moreover, these articles are easily shared on social media and tend to remain even after a crisis, particularly for non-traditional mediums (Ho et. al, 2014). This is aggravated by the fact that more news organizations are taking to sharing news content from their readers (BBC Trending, 2016). Furthermore, journalists typically do not have the time to fact-check news articles, or are not trained to do so (BBC Trending, 2016). The possibility of a satirical article being passed on as real is very high, which

does not bode well for targets of satirical news.

As such, there is a general need for organizations and individuals to constantly monitor the social media and online landscape and pay attention to online paracrises.

## Conclusion

This study identified several factors that led to the creation of satirical news articles: the prominence of an individual or subject, committing a folly, the need to criticize, controversy and conflict. It was also found that exaggeration, irony and humour were used by satirical news as basic tools to accomplish three main goals: critique, explain and/or ridicule an organization's or individual's follies, behaviour or actions. At its minimum, the presence of satirical articles online, which are written to criticize and bring about discussions, likely played a part in exacerbating a paracrisis or a crisis online.

Although the study's findings illustrate limited damage to organizations and individuals, satirical news sites do have the potential to undermine the reputations of organizations and individuals. While its effect is not immediate, it may affect entities and individuals in the long run,

when satirical articles targeting them accumulate over time.

## *Future Recommendations*

Some recommendations are proposed for organizations and individuals. First, organizations and individuals are encouraged to have a strong social media presence to dispel rumours online swiftly. With a strong social media presence, organizations could be easily contacted for immediate clarification, and they would also be able to monitor the online social media landscape for any paracrises or crises (Coombs & Holladay, 2012).

The authors have developed a guide for organizational response. The continuum of organizational response (see Table 7 and Figure 6), which is adapted and modified from the Contingency Theory (Pang, Jin, & Cameron, 2010), is proposed by this study's authors as a response strategy for organizations or individuals who find themselves the targets of satire.

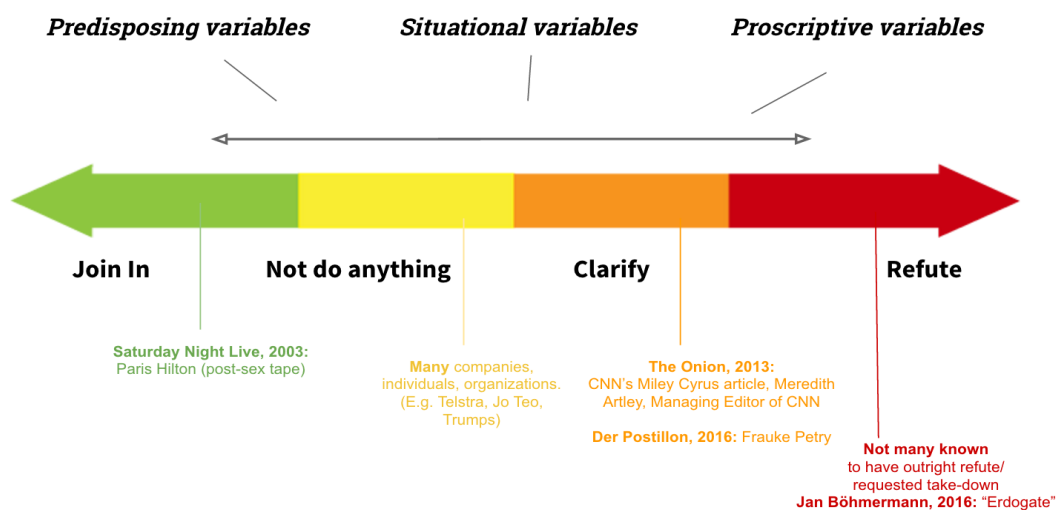
Through this continuum, organizations may select one of four types of actions to take: *Join in*, *Not do anything*, *Clarify*, or *Refute* (see Figure 6). Organizations may select a particular action if the situation ticks at least any of the two criteria under a strategy (see Table 7).

**Table 7:** Criteria for Continuum of Organizational Response for Satirical News

Factors	Join In	Not Do Anything	Clarify	Refute
<p><b>Predisposing Variables</b> Culture, values, reputation, size of the organization, corporate culture, business exposure, public relations to dominant coalition enlightenment, dominant coalition enlightenment, and individual characteristics of key individuals (e.g. CEO)</p> <p><b>Situational Variables</b> Urgency of the situation, potential cost &amp; benefits, characteristics of other publics and potential or obvious threats</p> <p><b>Proscriptive Variables</b> Moral conviction, moral neutrality in the face of contending publics, legal constraints, regulatory restraints, senior management prohibition of response strategy and jurisdictional concerns</p>	Affiliative Humour	Benign humour	Does confusion ensue? (Online/mainstream media)	Concerns the ethics of the individual / company or company values
	Virality of satire article	Doesn't help to do anything; doing something will exacerbate the situation	Does it affect tangible aspects of reputation? (e.g. political voting)	Causes turmoil/chaos
	Minimal to acceptable extent of reputational damage		Virality of the confusion	Concerns the company's dealings with the law
	Potential benefits of joining in		Affects livelihood of people	

**The continuum of organizational response**

**Figure 6:** The Continuum of Organizational Response



*Join In.* Organizations are encouraged to join in and share satirical articles about themselves by using affiliative humour and accompanying it with a quip on social media. Affiliative humour has potential

benefits, such as strengthening ties between individuals by being “self-accepting” (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray, & Weir, 2003). The image of an organization is strengthened when it shows

that it can poke fun at itself, thus increasing its likeability among consumers (Vaillant, 1977; Ziv, 1984). This is highly encouraged if the satirical article goes viral, and reputational damage caused by the satirical article is minimal to acceptable.

*Not do anything.* Many organizations and individuals adopt this strategy when satirized. The satirical article mainly expresses benign humour, where there is little to no confusion or harm done, and interest in the article will soon be reduced. Thus, it would not make sense to respond to the satirical article, as doing or saying something might aggravate the situation.

*Clarify.* If a satirical article causes widespread or persistent confusion on online or mainstream media, organizations should consider quelling rumours. Moreover, if tangible aspects of a reputation (e.g. political voting) are affected by a satirical article, the satirized target should step up to clarify the situation. The virality of confusion is also an important factor, as it might indicate the seriousness of the situation which could possibly affect livelihoods of people.

*Refute.* This action is highly discouraged. A majority of the situations do not require this, as there are laws that protect satire and satirical news sites. However, if the

satirical article published concerns the ethics of an individual or organization, an organization's dealings with the law, or causes turmoil or chaos in public, organizations and individuals should refute the satirical article.

This study, however, has several limitations. First, the study was unable to engage in accurate online media monitoring due to financial constraints, which affected the accuracy of the findings. There was also an inconsistency in the time range across all cases and on different platforms. The time range during which keywords were observed differed on all three platforms used due to the limitations imposed on free trial accounts. Finally, only a limited picture of social media sentiments was obtained as most of the sentiments were based on tweets, which left out many other social media platforms important to the study.

As the study's suggested continuum response has not been tested in actual situations, it may not be as robust as other crisis response strategies, which have been fine-tuned and modified over time. However, if organizations and individuals do find themselves the targets of satirical news sites, the continuum may prove useful in guiding and shaping an appropriate and strategic response.

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