



The Dangers of Satire: Challenges and Risks Faced by Filipino Satire Bloggers

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Abstract: This study discusses the challenges and risks faced by Filipino satire bloggers. While there are only a few popular satire blogs written by Filipinos, they still manage to attract a sizeable amount of readers and even attract the attention of mainstream media. Interviews with three online satire bloggers and one newspaper satirist from October to December 2014 form the body of data examined for this study. Findings show that Filipino culture and politics raise challenges and risks for Filipino satire bloggers and their articles to be fully appreciated and understood by more readers. Challenges include the limited number of Filipino readers who appreciate satire; the creativity required to write effective satire articles; and the critical thinking needed from readers to appreciate satire. Risks include the danger of mistaking satire as hoax news; adverse reception and response from readers; and relevant Philippine laws that hinder freedom of expression online.

Key Words: satire; blogs; social change; challenges; risks

1. INTRODUCTION

Philippines has always been immersed in political and social controversies, mostly on allegations of graft and corruption. Traditional media plays a role in criticizing the government for its inability to solve social problems and the corruption in the government. Traditional media presented limited ways of giving voice to its audience. Media organizations served as the middleman by conducting public service programs connecting people to government agencies and at times, work to seek corrective actions from the government. They wield considerable power and influence in the process of attaining social change. Without this mediation, it

would be more difficult for people to subvert power structures.

The introduction of the internet allowed ordinary citizens not only to express their opinions, but also reach out to the power holders without the need to go through traditional media organizations. Online platforms can now be used to launch unique forms of resistance. Nevertheless, the internet as a medium for social change is not without criticism. Pessimists think that the internet actually worsened the digital divide. Scholars argue that the internet, which is also controlled by corporate entities, still acts as a mediator that replaced or added to the traditional media as intermediaries (DiMaggio et al., 2001). Moreover, traditional media organizations increasingly integrate social media in news



production. Likes and shares are becoming metrics of popular opinion and news programs create their own hashtags which can also be a marketing tool for popularize brands and products (in this case, news programs) (Nicholls, 2012). Scholars question the quality of interaction happening online. Does the internet improve the quality of discourse of social issues, or do they just multiply old information?

Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the internet offers more direct channels of communication without the interference of gatekeepers. Blogs and social media are just some of the ways where the personal becomes political (Hjorth & Arnold, 2011). Internet blurs the line separating the public and the private wherein private opinions are carried over to the public sphere for discussion. Castells (2007) calls this “mass self-communication” (p. 247). The result, according to Castells, is that these personal opinions can be answered by readers differently. Users can exchange affirming or contrasting views, regardless if these opinions are personal or not. These exchanges of comments and the manner in which blogs and social media change the way readers deal with political and social matters and how they consume information relating to these issues (Siapera, 2008).

Online writers can express political opinions or challenge political figures creatively. One of the creative ways is writing satire or the use of humor to comment on something (Heilmann et al., 2014). Furthermore, satire is also a “playful distortion of reality” (Feinberg, 1967, as cited in LaMarre et al., 2009, p. 215). Satire can be an effective means of commentary and to inform its readers of different social issues (Burton, 2010). Satire can be used to peacefully resist abuses by dominant powers (Sorensen, 2008), making it a likely tool for social change. When fully utilized, the irony and the sarcasm in satire contribute to a meaningful and educated discourse of social issues (Burton, 2010). Satire can also entertain through the use of humor. It can inform us of the gravity of a situation by exaggerating things, making serious commentary entertaining. Moreover, writers need not go through editorial processes and they can publish whenever

and whenever they want. The writers also have the potential to widen their readership as the internet dissolves spatial and temporal boundaries. Satire published online can be read by people anywhere. Despite the promises of the internet, risks and challenges still exist. These challenges and risks are what I intend to find out.

I adopt Cambridge Online Dictionary’s definition of “challenge” and “risk.” This is because I need to define well the terms and avoid confusion when I present the findings. Cambridge Online Dictionary defines “challenge” as “something needing great mental or physical effort in order to be done successfully.” Challenge, therefore, is an existing situation that one needs to overcome. Risk, meanwhile is defined in the same dictionary as “the possibility of something bad happening.” As form of threats, risks can endanger the freedom that they enjoy in writing online or even put a stop the publication of their works online.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This paper aims to find out (1) the risks and challenges the online satire writers face; and (2) how they perceive and interpret these risks and challenges. This research is important because as potential agents of social change, these writers also face new forms of challenges and risks. These are caused by existing political and cultural factors. Identifying these challenges is important not only for agents of social change because overcoming these risks and challenges are important for more effective implementation of social change efforts. Identifying these problems is the first step in solving these problems.

3. METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study aims to find the risks and challenges faced by satire bloggers. The study uses interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to analyze the data. IPA aims to uncover a person’s experiences of a certain phenomenon and how they interpret these experiences (Larkin and Thompson,



2012). The interview was chosen to be the method to ask the writers what the challenges and risks are in their craft. Furthermore, I wanted to know how they make sense of these challenges and risks.

Personal and email interviews were done with three satire bloggers and one tabloid editor-in-chief who also writes satire. Data gathering was done from last week of October 2014 to second week of November 2014. I used email interviews primarily because the two are based overseas. The other blogger wished to maintain anonymity.

The interviews were semi-structured. As a way of background, two of the three satire bloggers are professional journalists working for their respective news organizations but both are based overseas. One is a veteran Filipino journalist who has worked for different Asian newspapers and writes satire for different news organization (referred to as Roger). Another veteran journalist is based in the United States and is maintaining satire blog which has garnered more than 11 million views as of 2014 (referred to as Greg). The other one considers writing satire as a hobby and is maintaining his own satirical blog site (referred to as Andrew). The tabloid editor-in-chief has been making satirical comics strip in a newspaper since late 80s (referred to as Chris). I decided to hide the real identities of interviewees because they raised points that people might find as irresponsible and I do not want to link their statements to their personal identities. I am more compelled to write about and analyze their statements rather than keep these under the blanket just to disclose their identities.

4. FINDINGS

Both Filipino culture and politics present challenges and risks to satire bloggers and how satire can be fully appreciated as a means of criticism. If these challenges and risks cannot be overcome, then it will be difficult to employ satire as a means for social change.

The interviewees often say that Filipinos are not ready for satire. According to them, most cannot appreciate the humor and commentary embodied in

satire. In the Philippines, many prominent writers such as Dr. Jose Rizal produced satire but these are overshadowed by more prominent works. That is not to say that writers did not excel in writing satire. For example, Marcelo H. del Pilar and Graciano Lopez-Jaena were renowned for their mocking of the abusive Catholic clergy during the Spanish era. Contemporary forms of satire may be culturally incompatible in the Asian context due to it being Western. As a proof, all of the writers cited western influences on how they came to write satire. Some are inspired by *The Onion* and other Western satirists. Only one included Marcelo del Pilar but was cited with other Western satirists.

People may be more used to reading more transparent comedy or more direct news articles rather than satire which offers a contrast of real and unreal. This is a challenge for the writers because satire readers are already critical thinkers who are looking for creative or entertaining treatment of issues. The challenge is to expand the readership of these blogs, given that, according to one writer, satire is not for everyone because not everybody can appreciate the humor, sarcasm, and irony embedded in satire. There is always the possibility of people misunderstanding satire and the risk of writers assuming that their readers can detect that what they are reading is satire (LaMarre et al., 2009).

If reading satire needs creativity, so is writing it. The interviewees admit that writing satire involves certain degree of creativity to successfully inject humor in satire. Flat humor will make satire ineffective. According to Chris, satire needs to have elements that are obviously unreal for there to have humorous contrast or intertextuality. This ridicules powerful people or organizations, resulting to an entertaining yet biting form of commentary. However, some of the commentaries are not very direct. They subscribe to some form of intertextuality, or referral to and refunctioning of other forms of media or literature (Brooker, 2007), to portray the subject of commentary in ridiculous light. For example, a satirist may portray an inhumane leader as Voldemort from Harry Potter series. This is one way to inject the unreal to contrast with real



issues to induce humor. However, without clear understanding of both the issues and of popular media elements to be used, then satire may not achieve the intended effects.

Others use culture jamming to comment on issues. Culture jamming is the use of marketing strategies and materials and parodying these to criticize corporations and place the spotlight on their malpractices (Harold, 2008; Carducci, 2006). Satirists also use culture jamming to parody celebrities or politicians. One satirist (that I did not manage to interview) has a penchant for mimicking Kris Aquino, a famous television personality and sister to incumbent Philippine President Benigno Aquino III. The writer produces scripts wherein a fictional Kris talks about national issues and ends up defending his brother. By imitating Kris Aquino, the writer criticizes the marriage of show business and politics as embodied by the Aquino regime.

Politicians may also become risks to the interviewees. Andrew reported that many affected personalities issued their displeasure against him and his blog entries. Two of the people who personally issued scathing comments against the blog and its author were senators. While none of the politicians are invoking the libel clause of Republic Act 10175 (Cybercrime Law) penalizes online libel, it is thoroughly possible especially of certain politicians feel that the satirical articles written about them are "libellous." The Cybercrime Law came under fire for being so intrusive that can potentially divest Filipinos of constitutionally enshrined rights (Heffron, 2014).

For Andrew, the Cybercrime Act is a great deterrent to the promises of satire in starting social change. The said law imposes stiffer penalties for online libel than offline libel. The Revised Penal Code of the Philippines imposes imprisonment of six months and one day to six years. However, online libel can be punished with longer prison term of six years and one day to twelve years as R.A. 10175 raises by one degree the crimes committed electronically (Section 6). The extension of libel threatens writers' freedom of expression due to fear of punishment. This effectively limits them from

issuing inflammatory statements that may malign other people, especially those embroiled in issues. The online libel clause is seen as regressive as the Philippines enjoy one of the freest media environments in the world (Coronel, 2001). This according to Heffron (2014) is prone to abuse and can be used by a person to harass or to quell dissent.

During the time of former President Ferdinand Marcos, the authoritarian regime enforced censorship. Anything that was against the government and the Marcoses were banned. Any author attempting to publish articles critical to the Marcoses and their cronies can be sent to jail. During the final years of Marcos regime, Roger started to write satirical articles critical of the Marcoses and published them in national dailies. He admitted that the political situation during the time was dangerous to journalists like him because they can be arrested any time once the government got a wind of their activities. The only thing that kept him out of jail was, he said, the impending People Power that got the government very busy that they cannot keep up with everything that was being published in newspapers. The extension of libel to cyberspace reminds Andrew of this oppressive situation in the media during the Marcos era.

To make things worse, Andrew states that the Cybercrime Act also threatens their anonymity. According to Andrew, the State is accorded with much power and undue advantage to trace anybody who is committing any form of cybercrime. While Cybercrime Act is undeniably important in combatting internet-based crimes like hacking and phishing, Andrew feels that the libel clause threatens their freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Despite the assurances of the law that it will not intrude on the contents and identities of users involved in electronic communication (R.A. 10175, Section 12), Andrew feels that everyone's anonymity is endangered because everything seems to be under surveillance, and that there are ways to know the identity of a person without directly divulging names.

Readers also feel that sometimes, satirical news becomes a source of misinformation. This is

both a challenge and a risk: a challenge for the writers to write noticeably satirical articles, and a risk because satire can be misunderstood. The writers say that there is a need for a certain degree of creativity to effectively craft compelling pieces of satire. However, at times, things go wrong and instead of making the unreal parts of satire contrast with the facts, the writers sometimes make the unreal blend with the real, resulting to believable hoax news. In itself, writing hoax news is a style and in itself is not problematic as long as the readers practice critical thinking. However, not all would take the time to research what that they read and will proceed to take in everything that they read in the internet. Both Andrew and Greg posted hoax news reports that went viral in social media and were clarified over the television news. For example, Andrew wrote about a lawmaker trying to propose banning the sale of merchandise of a specific popular mobile game. According to the satirical news, the lawmaker was only seeing the popular mobile game and its merchandise everywhere, denying the market of other brands and products. The satirical news, complete with compelling quotes, came after the lawmaker's passing of the Anti-Planking Bill which penalizes those who are "planking" or lying stiffly like a plank in public places which can cause accidents. Due to both the actual and satirical news, the legislator came under fire for crafting laws that do not address more pressing issues.

Some articles written by Greg made rounds in mainstream and alternative media, contributing to misinformation. If simple forms of satire, with their profound irony, are prone to be misunderstood and misconstrued as fact (LaMarre et al., 2009), satirical news are more prone to be mistaken as fact. Satirical news articles are actually legitimate forms of satire which mimics how real news is written with the purpose of ridiculing a person, an organization, or culture (Burfoot & Baldwin, 2009). Satirical news articles mimic the emotion of reading a revelation which will turn out to be untrue. However, without critical thinking or without having an idea about the source of the material, the untrue can be taken in as true. This is always a risk faced not only by Filipino

satire writers, but also satirists of all forms even in the West (Burfoot & Baldwin, 2009). According to Roger, appreciation of satire is an "acquired taste" (Personal Communication, 2014) and is not for everyone, given that satire may not always be direct in its commentary and message.

5. CONCLUSION

Given the potential of satire to mislead, Roger and Chris agree that satire must include elements that are obviously imaginary. According to them, it is the responsibility of writers, not the readers, to employ techniques that will stay true to the ideals of satire to comment, educate, and entertain. They said that writers must not try to blend the unreal too much into real. Doing so will only result to deception of the readers and the focus will be diverted from the message of satire to deception. Andrew also agrees, saying that it is the responsibility of the writers to be ethical by writing articles that entertain and educate, not deceive.

Greg, however, has another perspective. He says that it is not his responsibility if people are deceived when they read his articles. For him, it is not only a form of publicity or entertainment, but also an experience for people to think critically and be analytic when reading. For him, being duped sometimes is a part of the experience and a possible way for people to be transformed to more critical.

Given the present risk and challenges faced by satire writers, satire may not yet be an effective tool for social change. Writers must still write responsibly and write genuine satirical articles that are geared towards resistance to abuses of different power figures or as a means to comment on issues. The interviewees still feel optimistic that satire will have a place in the consciousness of Filipinos as an effective and entertaining means for social change.

Future research may be directed to find out the motivations the satirists have in maintaining the blogs despite the challenges and risks associated with blogs. This research may also be confirmed through content analysis of blog entries.



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