Analysis of The Office: Mockumentary filming, Irony, and Gender Roles

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The Office is a hit NBC television show that began in 2005 and ended in 2013 with nine successful seasons and multiple dedicated fans. The general plot of the show is based in small town Scranton, Pennsylvania with a paper company called “Dunder Mifflin.” The show is set up in a “mock documentary” (or mockumentary) style of filming following the everyday life of white-collar, cubicle setting, office employees. Michael Scott is the extroverted need-to-be-liked boss who causes most of the insane office misfortunes along with legalistic subordinate Dwight Schrute. Then we have Jim, the handsome and hardworking nice boy with a witty sense of humor, and Pam the quieter receptionist who is developed throughout the seasons into a strong female lead. Furthermore, The Office is a pioneer show for the post-millennial decade through its strategic use of irony, mockumentary style of filming, and reinforced gender roles.

Eric Detweiler (2012) goes in depth of the use of irony and satire throughout the show and how it connects viewers to the plot and characters. He argues that the main character used to connect viewers to the show is Jim Halpert. Detweiler (2012) states: “The Office breaks the fourth wall entirely, providing Jim as a sympathetic ironic guide for viewers,” (p.729). For instance, when Michael makes an insensitive comment, Jim is the bystander that looks at the camera to notify his awareness of the ironic situation letting us in on the joke, and moreover empowering us (Detweiler, 2012). One attribute that makes this sitcom different from previous 90’s sitcoms is the lack of laugh tracks and audible punch-lines. However, Jim’s ironic camera glances, in a lot of ways, serves as its own laugh track for the audience, where the awkward silence is our inaudible cue (Detweiler, 2012). Detweiler consistently refers back to David Foster Wallace’s book “E Unibus Pluram: Television and US Fiction” which describes 80s and 90s television and the use of irony to relate to an audience (Detweiler, 2012). Detweiler often compared and expanded upon Wallace’s thoughts to the post millennial show The Office to
extend his argument: irony is what keeps sitcoms going (Detweiler, 2012). To conclude his article, Detweiler argues that what sets *The Office* apart from other ironic sitcoms is the integration of compassion displayed throughout the characters, especially Jim and Pam (Detweiller, 2012). In other words, viewers are originally attracted to the witty irony in the show, but they stay because of the compassion which causes viewers to become emotionally attached to the plot and characters.

Christopher Kocela (2009) compares *The Office* to reality show structures and goes in depth to this mockumentary style of filming. Kocela claims that in society today we have a hard time recognizing and defining the lines between public and private, workplace and home (Kocela, 2009). The author frequently connects the office to reality shows such as *The Apprentice* and *Survivor* while also pointing out that *The Office* is a parody of reality shows in general (Kocela, 2009). Kocela then analyzes the show and its lack of a laugh tracks and how it affects our viewing experience (Kocela, 2009). Similar to the previous article, he argues that the increased uncomfortable silences actually serve as the punch line for many of the jokes made, and in doing so, this makes the viewer itself the laugh track, enhances the connectedness to the show (Kocela, 2009). Kocela (2009) also points out Jim Halpert and his ability to sympathize with the audience during the audacities that take place in the show. Jim Halpert’s shrugs and glances into the camera serve multiple purposes to connect the audience to the show (Kocela, 2009). Likewise, the unique camera work serves the same purpose and takes it a step further: “Jim looks to the camera and shrugs instead of objecting to the behavior he finds offensive in the workplace: the implication is that the camera now absolves people of the responsibility of having to confront—in the sense of actually doing anything about—the contradiction between their beliefs and their day-to-day practices,” (Kocela, 2009, p.167). In other words, not only does
Jim’s shrug identify with us in the shenanigans of the show, it relieves us of our moral need to do something about the offensive jokes Michael and Dwight constantly make. To conclude his article, Kocela reaffirms the use of camerawork in *The Office* and how it connects us to the characters and moreover relates to our everyday lives.

Finally, authors Jessica Birthisel and Jason Martin (2013,) give insight into the accuracy of the gender roles displayed in *The Office* in their article, the authors conduct a “qualitative textual analysis of the show guided by hegemony theory,” (Birthisel & Martin, 2013, p.65,) to compare and contrast the real American workplace to *The Office* (fictional) American workplace. The article goes in depth to the variation of female roles within the show such as the corporate-intense Jan, and shy good-girl Pam (Birthisel & Martin, 2013). Although Jan is successful in her career her personal life consequently suffers: “…it is clear to audiences that Jan’s personal life suffers as a result of her no-nonsense masculine mode of leadership,” (Birthisel & Martin, 2013, p.69). Likewise, the show in general focuses pre-dominantly on the male characters and when the females come together it’s most often in the domestic form of the party planning committee (Birthisel & Martin, 2013, p.68). According to Birthisel and Martin (2013), *The Office* reinforces already known stereotypes: “The show brings these issues to light in many ways, including the creation of gender and class hierarchies constructed around stereotypes that dominate the Western white-collar workplace,” (p.75). Finally, the authors argue that this could be a problem because it reinforces sexist ideas in our already sexist culture. When Michael or Todd are extremely vulgar and offensive they are not punished, yet when Jan evokes her role as a non-stereotypical strong, assertive woman she is punished through job loss and an overall sad life (Birthisel & Martin, 2013, p.69). Furthermore, the researchers conclude their study with a reinforcement of patriarchal ideals in the workplace and further commentary that *The Office*
could use more female representation.

Furthermore, The Office is a pioneer show for the post-millennial decade through its strategic use of irony, mockumentary style of filming, and reinforced gender roles. It was one of the first successful mockumentary television series in modern day television, pioneering other great mockumentary shows such as the more recent Parks and Recreation. Although only three articles were shown in this paper, this show has multiple facets with the potential to be analyzed and discussed. The Office has shifted from typical 90s sitcoms with laugh tracks and predictable plots and progressed to a new style of comedy television, paving the way for future comedies to come.
References


Detweiler. (2012). ‘I was just doing a little joke there:’ Irony and the paradoxes of the sitcom the Office. *Journal of Popular Culture, 45*, 727-748.