

**The Invisible Journalist: Understanding the Role
of the Documentary Filmmaker as Portrayed in
*The Office***

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ABSTRACT: This study aims to shed light on the enigmatic ‘mockumentary’ filmmaker of *The Office* by using specific examples from the show’s first six seasons to understand how the filmmaker is impacted by and impacts concepts of journalism and the invasion of privacy. Similarly, the filmmaker in the American version of *The Office* will not only be compared and contrasted to the role of the filmmaker in the British version, but also will be compared to the anthropologic ethnographer an “outsider” attempting to capture life as faithfully as possible in a community to which he/she does not belong.

The American interpretation of *The Office* branched out of Ricky Gervais’s British original of the same name with the pilot episode hitting the airwaves on NBC on March 24, 2005,¹ to largely mixed reviews from critics, but a strong showing among viewers.² The show’s basic premise is that of a faux documentary providing an inside look at the day-to-day life of the employees of a mid-level paper company. The primary focus centers on the socially inept branch manager, his even more inept right-hand-man, and the budding romance of the young and earnest paper salesman and the mild-mannered receptionist who happens to be inconveniently engaged to one of the branch’s warehouse workers.

What was the Slough branch of Wernham Hogg in the U.K. became the Scranton, Pennsylvania, branch of Dunder Mifflin Paper Co. in the U.S. Salty and foul-mouthed branch manager David Brent (Ricky Gervais) became the largely delusional but good-natured Michael Scott (Steve Carrell). The excessively loyal assistant to the regional manager went from Gareth Keenan (Mackenzie Crook) to Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson), and the three-way romantic subplot went from Tim Canterbury (Martin Freeman), Dawn Tinsley (Lucy Davis) and her fiancé Lee (Joel Beckett) to Jim Haplert (John Krasinski), Pam Beesly (Jenna Fischer) and her fiancé Roy (David Denman).

Early criticism of the show, especially during the first season, focused on the fact that the American version was pretty much a shot-for-shot remake of the U.K. original, with only

comedic timing and pop culture references being altered for American sensibilities.³ In fact, the pilot episode of both shows share almost identical plots.

After being renewed for a second season in 2005, the American version of *The Office* began to develop a direction and tone all its own, due in no small part to character development that further helped to forge a unique identity for the show. That being said, one key character not only made the transition across the Atlantic, but also developed a distinct niche in the American version. That character is the ever-present but never seen documentary filmmaker.

The faux documentary filmmaker –or rather, the filmmaking team—of *The Office* never appears on camera, never has any spoken lines, and for the most part doesn't interact with the events occurring around them. Their job, like that of any documentary filmmaker, is to capture life at Dunder Mifflin as faithfully as possible without interfering with the workplace's unique dynamic.

Specific details about the filmmaking team cannot be found, as they intentionally relegate themselves to a world behind the camera. However, clues about their general identities can be found in several episodes of *The Office*, helping to fill in the blanks with regard to things like age, gender, and overall personality. For instance, it is almost certain that there is more than one person associated with the filmmaking team, and likely more than one person behind the cameras.

In the Season Four episode “Did I Stutter,”⁴ Michael Scott angrily tells all the office employees except salesman Stanley Hudson (Leslie David Baker) to leave the office so that the two can privately discuss Stanley's open disrespect for Michael. The viewer sees employees shuffling out of the front entrance and shutting the door. However, the door soon opens again

and the camera stealthily enters, with the cameraman remaining crouched around the corner and the camera filming the scene between Michael and Stanley through the windows in Michael's office. Simultaneously, while this first camera is shooting the scene from the front of the office, the scene soon cuts to a shot angled from the employee kitchen at the rear of the office. Based on logistics alone, this sequence could not have been shot had there not been at least two cameramen present, as there is no visible break in the dialogue between Michael and Stanley, which would have been inevitable had the cameraman by the front of the office relocated himself to the kitchen to get the second shot.

This fact is further corroborated in the Season Five episode "Baby Shower,"⁵ as an eager Phyllis Vance (Phyllis Smith) relates to the camera her excitement over being the newly appointed head of the Party Planning Committee.⁶ During a talking head interview with her, Phyllis says, "I do enjoy being the head of the Party Planning Committee. I'm no longer under Angela's thumb and her little grape head is under mine." However, as Phyllis finishes saying this, Michael walks by and knocks on the conference room window, shouting, "Hey! What are you doing? Don't talk to them. Make the party," referring to the camera as "them."

With regard to age, it can be inferred that the camera team is comprised of relatively young, probably male filmmakers. While there is no concrete evidence for this either, the show itself offers the best support for this supposition. Season Four episode "Branch Wars,"⁷ features Michael, Dwight, and Jim driving to Utica, New York, to stop Utica branch manager --and Jim's ex-girlfriend-- Karen Filippelli (Rashida Jones) from stealing away Stanley with an offer of more money. Dressed in costume with warehouse uniforms and fake mustaches, Michael and Dwight infiltrate the Utica office while Jim plays lookout in Michael's PT Cruiser. The camera stays behind in the car with Jim. While running surveillance in the parking lot, Jim spots Karen

coming back from lunch and, in a panic, ducks down behind the steering wheel and turns back to force the camera to do the same. However, the camera pokes up again to film Karen and, in so doing, gives Jim's hiding place up, prompting



Jim to turn to an off-screen filmmaker to whisper, "Come on, man!" in distress (see above photo). The tone with which Jim addresses the camera is exceedingly informal, leading one to conclude that not only would Jim not speak this way to a person significantly older than him, but also he would similarly not speak this way to a woman.

One clue that may offer insight with regard to the personality of the filmmaker is his/their penchant for ironic, comical or generally lighthearted scenarios. The filmmaker's use of extreme zooms and close ups will be explored later on in this piece. However, the filmmaker's taste for comedy can be found throughout nearly every episode. One in particular highlights this fact, and may also provide further support for the conjecture that he/they are relatively young, probably early 30s and comparable in age to both Jim and Pam.

In the Season Two episode "Email Surveillance,"⁸ Pam begins to suspect that Dwight and senior accountant Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey) are having a secret romance, but she lacks the



proof to know for sure. While at the vending machines in the staff lounge, Pam notices that Angela buys two Baby Ruth candy bars and, while Angela isn't looking, jokingly points that fact out to the camera (see photo at left). Pam

then, in a talking head interview, urges the camera crew to let her know if they see anything that might help her uncover the truth about Dwight and Angela. Later in this episode, the cameraman hastily approaches Pam at reception and, constrained within the parameters of the mockumentary and unable to speak to her, can only get Pam's attention by staring at her. She eventually looks up, says "What?" as if to ask the camera what it wants, and is then redirected by the cameraman toward Dwight eating a Baby Ruth bar at his desk. An excited Pam whispers, "Oh! Yes! Thank you!" before the camera zooms in tightly on Dwight again.

In spite of the fact that personal information about the filmmaker(s) is hard to come by, several hints at the filmmaker's personality—as well as some of the actual questions they ask Dunder Mifflin staff—can be found in the actual episodes. Rhetorical or restated questions, though not excessively common in the series, crop up regularly enough for analysis to be made and a more fleshed out understanding of the camera crew to be gained.

In the Season Two episode "Halloween,"⁹ vice president of northeastern sales, Jan Levenson (Melora Hardin) informs Michael that he must fire one member of his staff as part of company-wide downsizing. Eager to be friends with all his employees, Michael is reluctant to make any move that might jeopardize his hopes of being liked by everyone. After dragging out the process as much as possible, Michael finally commits to following through with firing head of quality assurance, Creed Bratton (Creed Bratton). Determined to keep his job, Creed becomes very agitated, yelling at Michael and telling him that he needs to "undo it!" After an arduous back-and-forth, the scene cuts to a talking head interview with Michael in which he tells the camera, "Yeah, I went hunting once. Shot the deer in the leg. Had to kill it with a shovel. Took about an hour. Why do you ask?" Likely amused with Michael's severe reluctance to follow

through on an unpleasant necessity, the filmmaker probably posed this hunting-related question to Michael to poke fun at his inability to ‘pull the trigger.’¹⁰

Similarly, in the Season Two episode “Office Olympics,”¹¹ when Dwight and Michael are out of the office on “business,” the rest of the office engages in an impromptu Olympiad—all except for Angela. Frowning upon the day’s turn to frivolity, she staunchly abstains from the games her officemates engage in. Perhaps in response to a question that was asked with more sarcasm than she cared for, Angela later said in a talking head interview: “I *do* play games. I sing, and I dangle things in front of my cats. I play lots of games, just not at work.”

Another rhetorical question, comically lobbed at Angela’s expense, is seen in the Season Five episode “Weight Loss.”¹² Although Angela is engaged to salesman Andy Bernard (Ed Helms), she is having an ongoing affair with her ex, Dwight. The pair frequently escapes the office to have sexual rendezvous in the paper warehouse downstairs, with the camera often following them down there. In this episode, after Angela rejects four of Andy’s suggested wedding venues—criticizing them for either being tacky, dangerous, haunted, or having sharks—the scene then cuts to Angela and Dwight escaping into the warehouse once more, with a boom box-toting Dwight giving Angela a playful spank as he shouts, “Let’s do this thing!” From here, the scene cuts again to a talking head interview with Angela, who appears to be responding to the question, ‘how do you sleep at night?’ “I have a nice comforter, and several cozy pillows. I usually read a chapter of a book, and it’s lights out by 8:30. *That’s* how I sleep at night!”

One other example of a restated question—and also, an example of a little instigating on the part of the camera crew—occurs at the very end of the Season Two episode “Sexual Harassment.”¹³ After having had a special visit from corporate on account of his less-than-appropriate work place behavior, Michael ends a day of sexual harassment sensitivity training by

telling the camera, “Times have changed a little, and even though we’re still a family here at Dunder Mifflin, families grow and at some point, the daddy can’t take a bath with the kids anymore. I am upper management and it would be inappropriate for me to take a bath with Pam, as much as I might want to.” Michael’s monologue quickly jumps to Pam asking, “He said what?!” to the camera, presumably after a member of the crew related Michael’s poorly phrased comments to her.

Another noteworthy facet of *The Office* –especially with regard to piecing together elements of the filmmaker’s personality—has been the utilization of extreme zooms and close-cropped framing to point out particularly comedic or ironic situations. Analysis of several examples of this comedic zoom/crop practice offers up clues as to the personal, comedic sensibilities of the filmmaking team.

The previously cited example (see pg. 5) from the episode “Email Surveillance” was just one case in point. Countless others appear throughout the series and not geared toward one character in particular.

In the Season One episode “Health Care,” a procrastinating Michael delegates the task of choosing a new office health care plan to a regimental Dwight. After Dwight abuses his newfound power, Jim appeals to Michael to intervene. As Michael attempts to rid himself of Jim, he tells him that he doesn’t have time to help because he’s having “an unbelievably busy day,” upon which the camera rapidly zooms in on Michael’s empty inbox tray.

The camera uses a similar move in the Season Five episode “Golden Ticket.”¹⁴ Earlier in the episode, dressed as Willy Wonka, an overly excited Michael declares to the office his idea to offer a 10% discount to clients who find “golden tickets” in their paper shipments. After all five tickets wind up in a single shipment to the office’s biggest customer, Blue Cross of

Pennsylvania, chief financial officer David Wallace (Andy Buckley) calls to chastise Michael for allowing this promotion to take place, citing the financial blow that a 50% discount to their biggest money-making account will incur. Desperate to redirect the blame and fearing his own termination, Michael tells the CFO that Dwight was really responsible for the golden ticket idea. Presumably responding to a question posed to him by the camera crew, Michael heatedly declares, “*My* golden ticket idea? Ok, why would anyone think that this is *my* golden ticket idea? There’s a one-in-thirteen chance that this could be anybody’s golden ticket idea,” during which the camera pans from Michael in a purple velvet sport coat and bow tie, over to the gray top hat on his desk, and back to Michael.



In the Season Three episode “Women’s Appreciation,”¹⁵ a distraught Phyllis comes into the office to share the disturbing fact that a sexual predator had just exposed himself to her in the parking lot. Dwight, now heading a “task force” to find the predator, issues an office-wide memo to the women of Dunder Mifflin ordering them to wear “sleeves down to the wrist, button-up collars, and muted colors.” Frustrated, Pam and Karen begin to complain, with Karen calling the memo “ridiculous” and with Pam pointing out that “no one dresses like that,” to which the camera immediately pans to and zooms in on Angela wearing a black knit sweater over a high-collared lace blouse (see photo at left).

Additionally, in the Season Two episode “Basketball,” Michael –attempting to assemble the perfect office basketball team to battle the boys of the warehouse—picks Stanley to join him, assuming that, as a black man, Stanley would be a natural pro at basketball. Mexican-American

Oscar then volunteers to play, to which Michael responds that he'd prefer to save his talents "for baseball season...or if we box." Overweight accountant Kevin Malone (Brian Baumgartner) receives a similar shun from Michael after also expressing interest in joining the team. The scene soon cuts to a montage of Oscar and Kevin landing perfect shots when they throw trash away in the garbage can, immediately followed by Stanley missing the shot as he attempts to throw a piece of paper away in the trash can directly behind him.¹⁶

In the Season Five episode "Frame Toby,"¹⁷ as Michael and Dwight plot to get Toby fired for having drugs in his desk (drugs which later turned out to be a Caprese salad in a plastic bag), an anonymous call is placed to the Scranton police about a "possible narcotics situation" at the office. When two officers come to investigate, the camera quickly pans to and zooms in on a visibly distressed Creed who jumps up from his desk to put his hands up, but after seeing the officers walk past him, tries to cover it up by running his hands through his hair.

With regard to comedic framing, perhaps one of the best examples involved Dwight's argument with Michael papier-mâché head during the previously cited Season Two episode "Halloween." Dressed as a Sith Lord, Dwight angrily confronts the faux Michael after the real Michael leads Dwight to believe the head is giving him orders to fire Dwight. The camera then proceeds to crop the frame so that Dwight's face is partially obscured by the hood of his robe (see photo at right), thus lending a comedic light to a clearly disgruntled Dwight.



Given the nature of a ‘mockumentary,’ the employees of Dunder Mifflin are, for the most part, aware of the camera’s presence. The one-on-one “talking head” interviews with staff are perhaps the most obvious example of this, as they appear in every episode of *The Office* and serve as a means through which elaborative explanations or opinions can be offered, usually in response to an act or event that the camera has already captured. Additionally, awareness of the camera can be further analyzed as falling into three sub-categories: positive, neutral, and negative.

Michael Scott, who uses his awareness of the camera’s presence to express his need to “perform” and seek approval, perhaps best exemplifies positive awareness of the camera. Michael’s now iconic “That’s what she said,” sexually charged rebuttal to poorly worded phrases is almost always followed by Michael proudly looking to camera to bask in his self-perceived comedic prowess. In fact, Michael looking to camera upon delivery of a joke he believes to be funny is almost always a given.

Michael additionally uses his awareness of the camera to show off his self-perceived worldliness. For example, in the Season Three episode “The Return,”¹⁸ Michael and the Party Planning Committee brainstorm on how to throw accountant Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nuñez) a ‘Welcome Back’ party.¹⁹ After telling Oscar that it is not his gayness that defines him but his “Mexican-ness,” Michael decides that Oscar needs a party in celebration of his “Mexicanity,” complete with firecrackers, a Chihuahua, and frozen chimichangas. Frustrated, Oscar says, “Why don’t you just have me riding in on a donkey?” Wishing to show off his bilingual skills, Michael then says to the camera, “Ah, yes! A *burro*. Of course! If Oscar wants a donkey, let’s get him one.”

Dwight also has been known to make use of the camera for his own benefit, typically with the aim of showing off his own self-perceived manliness. For example, in the Season Two episode, “The Fight,”²⁰ Dwight knowingly shows off his skill as a purple belt in Goju Ryu karate, repeatedly punching a dummy in the face while keeping his satisfied smile aimed directly at the camera. Additionally, with respect to his ongoing love affair with Angela, Dwight frequently shows acceptance and even pride at being caught on camera with her, particularly in the previously cited episode “Weight Loss.” Where Angela will typically shy away from the camera as she leaves the warehouse, Dwight often appears triumphant, nodding, smiling, or engaging in other such self-confident body language when he sees that the cameras are on him.

Neutral and negative awareness of the camera might perhaps be the most telling examples of how employees really feel about the camera. These moments—arising when compromising situations occur and the character becomes aware of the camera either during or immediately after—present themselves repeatedly throughout the series, and feature nearly every cast member dealing with and reacting to what they believe to be an invasion of privacy.

The key difference between neutral and negative is measured by the character’s reaction. Neutral reaction to the camera involves actively avoiding the camera, but is frequently characterized by a casual, joking tone and is most common, but not exclusive, to situations involving Jim and Pam.

For example, in the episode “Weight Loss” Jim goes to visit Pam during her summer design program at the Pratt Institute in New York City, with the cameras following close behind him. Excited to see Pam, but eager to be rid of the cameras, Jim turns to the filmmaker and says, “Oh, that’s so rude of me. Have you seen Pam’s new art? It’s right there.” The camera then turns to film a bare-walled hallway. Realizing nothing is there, it turns back to Jim in time to see that

he has just shut the door to Pam’s dorm, after which an audible sigh of disappointment can be heard coming somewhere from behind the camera. Though Jim’s trick was aimed at the camera crew, he could theoretically have pulled a similar prank on any regular person, so long as they presented themselves as an obstacle to his private time with Pam.

A similar move is used by Human Resources representative –and Michael’s girlfriend— Holly Flax (Amy Ryan) in the following Season Five episode “Crime Aid.”²¹ In an attempt to dodge the cameras for a sexual escapade in the stairwell with Michael, Holly exclaims –within earshot of the crew- that she forgot her keys in the office and must go back and get them. She and Michael go back into the

building, with the camera crew still in the parking lot and too far away to get to the door in time. A happy Holly then locks the door behind her, giving



the camera crew a mischievous smile through the glass doors (see photo above). Inside the stairwell –but with hers and Michael’s microphones still on—Holly confesses, “I didn’t forget my keys. I just didn’t want to make out with you in front of the cameras. Do you think they can hear us?” In a move of technological foolishness, Michael says, “Not if we turn these dials all the way down. Now they can’t hear us at all,” as he proceeds to raise and not lower the volume on his wireless microphone. The viewer’s imagination is then left to run wild amid kissing noises and whispered laughter from Michael and Holly.

One situation, in the Season Six episode “Niagara,”²² shows a two-sided example of neutral awareness, and it highlights the typical playful avoidance of the cameras in the name of love, while also having the characters accept the cameras during a presumably private moment.

On their wedding day, a frazzled Pam tearfully confesses to Jim all the things that are overwhelming her, including ripping her wedding veil on a snag in the wall, finding out that one of her bridesmaids slept with Dwight, and having had to drive dance happy Andy to the hospital in the middle of the night after he tore his scrotum trying to do the splits. “This is supposed to be our wedding day,” she says to him. “Why did we invite all these people?” The camera then zooms in on Jim, presumably having an idea. The scene then cuts to Jim and Pam running away from the church, with the cameras unable to do anything and the wedding guests unaware that the bride and groom have just eloped. Later in the episode, it is revealed that Jim and Pam were



actually married going under Niagara Falls in a private, impromptu ceremony featuring the two of them, their tour boat captain, and –ironically- the camera crew as their witnesses (see photo at left). Jim and Pam’s decision

to abandon their original wedding in favor of a more intimate one, while still having the camera crew present for the actual ceremony, is an example of the characters coming to terms –and going to specific lengths to control the where and the how- with the involvement of the camera in their personal lives.

Negative awareness, in contrast, is typified by the character either going to great lengths to remove themselves from the camera’s attention, or visibly becoming distressed or angered at the camera having seen something they did not want it to.

Two characters who have been especially prone to negative awareness throughout the series have been Michael and his former boss/former lover, Jan. In the Season Two episode “The

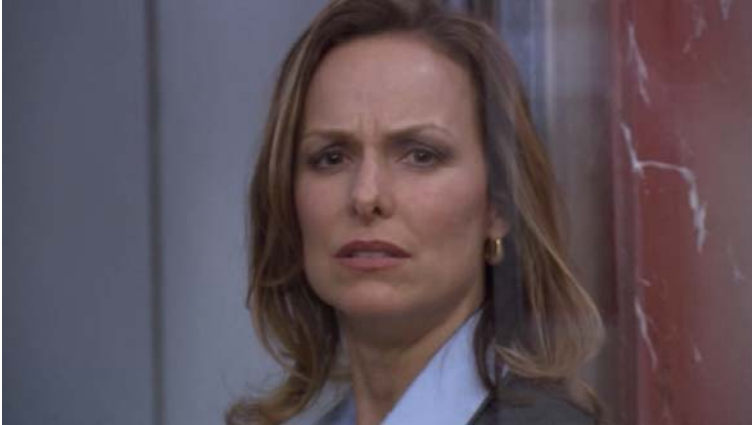
Client,”²³ Michael and a recently divorced Jan share an accidental, celebratory kiss (and, it is later revealed, a late-night hotel room make out) after securing a high profile sale with Lackawanna County. An ecstatic Michael believes he now has a new girlfriend. Jan, on the other hand, is chastising herself for having had a romantic indiscretion with someone she believes to be beneath her, and is frantically running damage control. After gushing to the camera about his new romance, Michael receives a call from Jan to make it clear to him that she wants no romantic future with him. Clearly not pleased with the way his conversation with Jan is going –and even more displeased with the fact that the camera is filming everything—Michael



non-verbally asks the camera crew to leave his office. Ignoring his request, the camera stays on him, prompting Michael to seek refuge under his desk (see picture at left). In an attempt to chronicle every aspect of

this interchange –or perhaps, in an attempt to irritate Michael a little more—the camera moves around the desk and proceeds to film as he continues his conversation with Jan. This, apparently, frustrates Michael all the more, as he angrily looks up at the camera and sternly exclaims, “Excuse me!”²⁴

Similarly, in the Season 2 episode “Valentine’s Day,”²⁵ Michael and the other regional branch managers converge on New York City for a meeting with David Wallace. While, joking around with the other managers, Michael accidentally lets slip that he “hooked up” with Jan. Forced to admit that he made it all up in an attempt to save Jan from embarrassment in front of the new CFO, Michael gets ready to leave the New York meeting before Jan stops him at the



elevator. She proceeds to thank him for coming to her rescue, wishes him a happy Valentine’s Day and –looking around to make sure no one is watching—gives Michael a kiss. When Michael looks over to the camera crew

–who had been watching the entire exchange from behind a glass door—Jan looks over as well, with a clearly horrified look spreading across her face (see picture above).

Embarrassment with regard to romantic situations seems to be one of the most sources of negative awareness, and can be frequently found in various interactions between Jim and Pam, particularly during the early episodes of the series wherein she is still engaged to Roy and Jim continues to harbor secret feelings for her.

During the previously mentioned Season Two episode “The Fight,” as Dwight and Michael prepare to square off in a battle of brute strength at Dwight’s dojo, Jim and Pam enjoy some playful jests before a tickling match between the two of them –witnessed by fellow employee Meredith Palmer (Kate Flannery)—causes Pam to feel embarrassed and feign feelings of anger with Jim for letting their fun go too far. Later in the episode, with tensions clearly evident between the two, Jim attempts to make up with Pam by composing an email that started:

“Hey Pam,

If that was weird earlier...”

Unfortunately, Jim looks over his shoulder to see that the camera has been watching him write his email. Visibly flustered and embarrassed, Jim immediately deletes the email and pretends to busy himself with work.²⁶

Some examples of negative awareness that do not have to do with romance are those involving hurt feelings, most typically seen in situations involving Dwight and Michael. In the Season One episode “Basketball,”²⁷ Michael, in an attempt to look tough in front warehouse worker Darryl (Craig Robinson), agrees to a losers-comes-in-on-Saturday basketball game with the warehouse staff. Seeing Michael taunt Darryl with chicken noises, Dwight decides to jump in to do the same, offering up a high five to Michael in solidarity. Instead, Michael just tells him “Don’t screw this up,” and walks away into his office. Embarrassed, Dwight glances around to see that the camera is on him. He immediately averts his eyes.

Aside from just chronicling the day-to-day lives of Dunder Mifflin employees, the camera also manages to serve a double role, being an almost symbolic reminder of political correctness and social judgment. This role can be seen when one of the characters –almost exclusively Michael, but with some exceptions coming from the notoriously crude traveling salesman Todd Packer (David Koechner)—expresses racist, sexist, or other intolerant opinions, and then, due to the presence of the camera, backpedals to correct himself.

Referring back to the Season Two episode “The Fight,” Michael tries to bait Jim into punching him in the stomach so that he can show off his strength. Jim, not wanting to encourage Michael’s foolish behavior, tells him he can’t punch him because he just got a manicure. Michael then yells out “Queer!” then sees that the camera on him, quickly adding, “Oh, Queer Eye. That’s a good show, an important show.”

Michael’s insensitivity with regard to homosexuality appears again in the previously cited episode “Gay Witch Hunt,”²⁸ Michael inadvertently outs Oscar, much to the dismay of Jan and HR rep, Toby Flenderson (Paul Lieberstein). After making numerous offensive comments about homosexuality, Michael is forced to hold an impromptu meeting in the conference room to

discuss the issues of the day. After Phyllis, who attended high school with Michael, reveals that everyone at their school thought he was gay, Michael bursts into laughter, saying “Yeah, right!” Upon seeing the camera pan to Oscar’s perplexed expression, Michael immediately self corrects and says with a straight face, “And I take that as a compliment.”

Additionally, in the Season One episode “Hot Girl,”²⁹ Michael has Ryan the temp (B.J. Novak) help him clean out his car as he plans to give the attractive purse saleslady, Katy (Amy Adams) a ride home. Michael instructs Ryan, after having him weed through countless Filet o’ Fish sandwich boxes, to just throw away all the empty bottles he finds. Ryan asks Michael if he wants him to recycle all his empty bottles. Michael then looks to camera and says “Yes, throw them away in the recycle bin.”³⁰

Another facet of negative awareness features subtly reminding the camera crew that they are “outsiders” who are not always entirely welcome in the world of Dunder Mifflin. In the Season Four episode “Fun Run,” Pam and Jim have secretly started to have a romance, but are reluctant to tell their co-workers –or the cameras—about it. Determined to get hard evidence, the cameras follow Pam as leaves work for the day, eventually getting her on film as she later picks up Jim down the street and gives him a kiss. Unaware that the camera already knows the truth, Pam says in a talking head interview, “I told you I’m not dating anyone. And even if I was, I don’t think it’s anyone’s business. I mean, when I do fall in love, when it’s for real, the last person I’m going to talk about it to is a camera crew or my co-workers.”

Moreover, in the Season Two episode “Performance Review,”³¹ a frazzled Jan struggles to deal with the fact that her romantic indiscretion with Michael is now common knowledge to the entire Scranton branch. Having come to Scranton for the performance reviews, Jan attempts to stay focused on work-related topics –a task made all the more difficult by Michael’s continual

requests for them to talk about their relationship. Frustrated and in need of time to clear her head, Jan excuses herself for a cigarette break in the hallway, with the cameras following her close behind. There, she says to the crew, “Look, I know it’s your job. I know you have to ask, but I promise you –I’m not going to discuss it with him, and I’m certainly not going to discuss it with you. Do you have a light?”

The impact of negative awareness as a whole highlights the fact that, oftentimes, the Dunder Mifflin staff interprets the presence of the camera crew through a lens that plays up some of the more negative –and most frequently seen—stereotypes of the journalist in general. Negative awareness of the camera cast the documentary filmmakers as being intrusive, as invading people’s privacy, and as being willing to do anything for a story. On several occasions in *The Office*, the viewer clearly sees the camera going out of its way to effectively “get the story,” and even manifesting the traits of a news-hungry journalist that are now part and parcel of pop culture: chasing down a source, peering through cracks in doors, broaching comfortable boundaries of personal privacy, chronicling all aspects of life even at its most unpleasant and inconvenient. The positive, neutral and negative awareness of the camera, discussed at greater length earlier in this piece, is the greatest piece of evidence in support of the documentary filmmaker’s perception, by and large, of being a true journalist.

Pulling back from the scope of just the American version of *The Office*, one is able to view the impact and role of its documentary filmmakers in better context, particularly when compared against its British counterpart, other mockumentaries, and non-fictional documentaries.

In as much as both the American and the British ‘mockumentary’ filmmakers remain off-screen, have no dialogue, and rarely interact with their outside environment, the American

filmmaker has deviated in distinct ways from its British counterpart. The American filmmaker goes to greater lengths to point out comedic or ironic situations, using the extreme zoom with much greater frequency than the British filmmaker. However, there are instances in which both camera crews step beyond the boundaries of the removed documenter, directly interacting the office staff.³²

The British version of *The Office* only saw two six-episode seasons on the air, in spite of high ratings and faring fairly well at various award ceremonies, including the British Comedy



and Golden Globe Awards. Given the fact that the American version of *The Office* is currently in its seventh season on NBC with an eighth season in the works, excessive comparisons between the two shows could only go so far. However, in comparing the pilot episodes alone, the differences between the American and British camerawork in the two shows' early phases are already clearly evident.

The first episode in each series, “Pilot”³³ in the U.S. version and “Downsizing”³⁴ in the U.K. version, features almost indistinguishable formatting and plot progression. Jokes appear word for word in both shows, and even the characters look to be very nearly identical (see photo with UK cast to the left, US cast to the right)—a fact that earned the U.S. version some harsh criticism after it first premiered. While both shows eventually branched out and developed distinct tones of their own over their respective trajectories, subtle differences were already evident in each of the premier shows, in spite of their

overwhelming similarities. Usage and frequency of comedic and ironic zooms, reaction shots, talking head interviews, and plot prioritization are some of the most distinct differences evident between the two pilots –differences that ultimately help to flesh out the personality and sensibility of the American documentary filmmaker as compared to his/their British counterpart.

The U.K. crew's only utilization of a comedic zoom/lingering shot came about when Slough branch manager David Brent enthusiastically gives the new temp, Ricky Howard (Oliver Chris) a tour of the office. Walking him toward the accounting department, turning to Ricky saying, "He's mental, that one," pointing to accountant Keith Bishop (Ewan Macintosh). The camera lingers on Keith's bemused face as David explains, "Not literally, of course. That wouldn't work." The British documentary filmmaker's only other use of zooms in the pilot episode occur while filming one person or scene, with no discernible connection or attention to comedic timing, and typically involve the camera zooming in and out on one fixed subject.

Additionally, virtually no reaction shots appear in the U.K. pilot, and talking head interviews are restricted to David, Gareth and Tim and are mostly used to explain day-to-day life at Wernham Hogg-Slough. Moreover, the romantic subplot between Tim and Dawn does not earn much camera time during the pilot, as interaction between the two occurs in the background of the more attention-grabbing hijinx between Tim and Gareth.

Though adhering strictly to the outline set by the U.K. pilot that premiered four years earlier, the U.S. pilot episode deviates in several noticeable ways. Comedic and ironic zooms are already being littered throughout the episode, including a zoom in on a laughing Pam after a very frustrated Dwight discovers that Jim has trapped his stapler in jell-o, and a zoom in on Jim after an awkward conversation with Roy.

Reaction shots are also frequent in the American pilot, shedding light on what may very well be the filmmaker's habit of using characters in front of the camera to express the feelings



and opinions of those behind the camera. Reaction shots found in the pilot episode include Jan looking frustrated after finding out that Michael threw away the agenda she had faxed him that morning, Jan

frustrated again after overhearing Todd Packer making lewd jokes about her, and Ryan lowering and shaking his head after being forced to take part in Michael's ill-conceived faux-firing of Pam as a practical joke. One line from the U.K. version,

retooled to be equally comedic and equally offensive in a distinctly American sense, was Michael's confirmation to his staff that there would be no

downsizing at the Scranton branch. David gave the same promise to his staff, yet when it came to be Michael's turn to deliver his line, he opted to warp his voice into pseudo-Ebonics, telling his employees that he wouldn't let corporate eliminate any of their jobs because "you ain't gonna be messin' with my chillun!" The camera then immediately cuts to a dumbfounded Stanley, then back to a flabbergasted Michael, then back to Stanley (see photos at above).

Moreover, the romantic subplot between Jim and Pam, in the American pilot, is brought more to the forefront. The two get more screen time together, in addition to the tension between Jim and Roy being more pronounced. Also, in a talking head interview with Pam (something that

the U.K.'s Dawn doesn't get), she gets the opportunity to blush and giggle as she girlishly revels in the fact that Jim shared her favorite yogurt flavor with the camera crew.

The absence of a true "personality" for the off-camera filmmaker in a mockumentary can also be seen in writer/director Christopher Guest's works. His movies, most notable *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Best in Show* (2000), and *A Mighty Wind* (2003) are all shot in a mockumentary format that, like both the British and American versions of *The Office*, features talking head interviews and a blurring of the line between public and private life.

However, the key difference between Guest's films and the American version of *The Office* is their lack of the pronounced presence of the filmmaker in enhancing the comedic elements on camera, particularly with the use of comedic zooms, pans, rhetorical or restated questions, or reaction shots.

Using *Best in Show* as an example, very little information about the filmmaker can be garnered from the movie itself. There are no extreme zooms or pans –any panning or zooming that does take place is done so in a very methodical, somewhat slow manner. In contrast, *The Office* features extreme zooms and pans that are not only used to convey the filmmaker's comedic sensibilities, but to give the viewer a sense of action unfolding before their eyes, and the camera needing to use extreme zooms and pans to catch up with it.

Additionally, comedic or ironic situations are not highlighted via camera use, but instead, are presented to the viewer solely by way of the on-screen characters. *Best in Show* is a mockumentary about the participants in the Mayflower Dog Show being held in Philadelphia. The film is shot before, during, and after the show and focuses in on five dogs and their respective overzealous, slightly obsessive owners. It is the various eccentricities of these owners that garner the most comedic moments in the film. With respect to these moments, the most the

camera does to enhance them is to offer up an occasional lingering shot so as to, perhaps, play up the timing of the moment. For example, husband and wife duo Gerry (Eugene Levy) and Cookie (Catherine O’Hara) Fleck are the proud owners of a terrier named Winky, and the film partially chronicles their road trip from Florida to Pennsylvania to participate in the show, their dog’s performance, and life after the show. A running gag throughout the film involves various supporting male characters randomly approaching Cookie and reminiscing about her presumably loose sexual past, which includes sex on a rollercoaster and in a Kentucky restaurant. Her husband, Gerry, appears to take it all in stride, but is noticeably uncomfortable when these situations arise. In their first sit-down interview with the cameras, Gerry shares that Cookie once had “dozens of boyfriends,” prompting Cookie to correct him and said that the number was probably in the “hundreds.” Confessing that he “did not know that,” Gerry then tells the camera that he was once “quite the Casanova” himself. The scene then cuts to a lingering shot of an old photo of Gerry during his days at Ponce de Leon Junior High (see image at left), looking very far from a Casanova.



Another instance of a comedic lingering shot is centered on French poodle owner Sherri Ann Cabot (Jennifer Coolidge) and her dog handler Christy Cummings (Jane Lynch). The pair recounts for the camera the dual role they share in caring for the poodle, Rhapsody in White. Christy says that, much like in her own upbringing, there was the parent who doled out discipline and the one who gave unconditional love, “which is what my mother did,” Christy tells the camera. “She was there for the unconditional love, and it worked for my family until my mom

committed suicide in '81." Christy's revelation about her mother is followed by a four-second-long lingering shot of Christy, Sherri Ann, and Rhapsody in White sitting together in silence.

Moments like these, in which the camera lingers on a particular image or scene for comedic effect, are the only real instances in which the presence of the filmmaking crew is felt. Yet aside from occasional camera movement, the documentary filmmaker has very little impact in the film itself.

The opposite extreme of this would not only be a non-fictional documentary, but a documentary in which the filmmaker is prominently featured on film, with Morgan Spurlock and Michael Moore being two filmmakers who best exemplify this trend. Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004) featured him using himself as a guinea pig of sorts, testing the limits of what a fast-food-only diet would do to the human body. Aside from film, Spurlock also hosted the television series *30 Days*, which ran from 2005 until 2008 and featured Spurlock prominently in front of the camera as he, once again, used himself as the test subject in a series of social experiments that involved such things as living in a wheel chair, on an Indian reservation, or surviving on minimum wage for 30 days. Moore's work, including films like *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Sicko* (2007), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), involved him assuming the role of the quintessential hard-hitting reporter—chasing people in the streets, cornering people for interviews.

Both men produced work that was clearly injected with their own opinions and personalities. Nevertheless, there remain some key differences between their work and the mockumentaries of Christopher Guest and the U.S. and U.K. versions of *The Office*. Aside from the obvious facts—namely that Spurlock and Moore produced non-fiction documentaries and Guest's films and the two *Office* shows are comedic fictionalizations—one of the key differences

is the way in which the films' and shows' respective stories are told. In their documentaries, Spurlock and Moore pick specific social or political issues, and conduct actual reporting based on those specific topics, presenting works geared toward bringing the attentions of a wider audience down toward a distinct point. The Guest and *Office* mockumentaries, in turn, feature filmmakers who immerse themselves in specific subcultures in order to present stories being told from the inside out.

In this sense, by the very nature of their work, the documentary crew of *The Office*, as well as those of the various Christopher Guest mockumentaries, has much in common with anthropology's ethnographer. Both are functioning under the task of faithfully chronicling the multi-faceted customs of a community they do not belong to, as opposed to engaging in active reporting in front of the camera a la Spurlock and Moore. Both the Guest mockumentaries and the two *Office* shows are charged with the duty to remain, according to sociologist Gary Alan Fine, honest, precise, observant, unobtrusive, candid, chaste, and fair.³⁵ Also, the fact that members of the Dunder Mifflin staff often remind *The Office* camera crew of their "outsider" status serves to underscore this concept. The reason behind why a documentary is being made about life at Dunder Mifflin is never revealed within the framework of the show, so conjecture with regard to the true aims of the filmmaker can only go so far. Nevertheless, the evidence in support of the filmmaker's journalistic nature lends itself equally to the support of the filmmaker's ethnographic nature.

Moreover, while both Spurlock and Moore do deal with negative awareness of the camera, it is being produced under different circumstances. In the confines of *The Office*, the filmmaker not only contends with the public image of the journalist as story-hungry and willing to do anything to get "the truth," but also with the image of the ethnographer as the prying

outsider trying to leave the world they've come into as untouched as possible. Spurlock and Moore, on the other hand, push social boundaries in ways dealing more with challenging the status quo, testing people's comfort levels, and—in perhaps the most basic sense possible—going after people's interpretations of noise levels and personal space.

Craight Hight, in his book *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, satire, and a call to play*, maintains that the 'mockumentary' is “a key discourse within contemporary culture, a 'call to play' that centres [sic] on the appropriation of nonfiction codes and conventions.”³⁶ In fact, both American and British incarnations of *The Office* have been lauded for their ability to both poke fun of and intelligently criticize popular culture's more nonsensical social mores. Both shows broach the issues of race, sexual orientation, gender, and religion and, each in its own right, calls attention to generational and social shifts in the general public's mentality.

Yet unlike the British version of *The Office*, Christopher Guest's mockumentary films, or the non-fiction documentaries of Morgan Spurlock and Michael Moore, the filmmaking crew in the American version of *The Office* manages to broach a middle ground, being neither “in your face” nor excessively invisible.

CONCLUSION:

On April 28, 2011, Michael Scott, turned to the camera crew that had been following him for the past seven years of his life and handed over his wireless microphone before boarding a plane en route to Boulder, Colorado. The Season Seven episode “Goodbye Michael”³⁷ marked Steve Carrell's final episode as Dunder Mifflin Scranton's regional manager and, for many fans of *The Office*, marked the end of an era. The episode garnered 8.42 million viewers—a season high.³⁸

Just before heading toward the gate, Michael turns to the crew and says, “Well, I guess this is it. Hey, will you guys let me know if this ever airs?” before adding as he hands over his microphone, “This is going to feel so good getting this thing off my chest.”

Steve Carrell’s farewell is perhaps the best example of the overall feeling Dunder Mifflin have toward the camera crew on *The Office*. Their interaction is, at times, mildly contentious and somewhat uncomfortable, yet for the most part, the cameras have become another character in the lives of these Scranton employees –one which many have come to accept and, maybe on a good day, even like.

¹ “About The Office.” Accessed online February 22, 2011.

http://www.nbc.com/The_Office/about/

² Timms, Dominic, “US Version of The Office scores ratings victory,” *The Guardian*, March 29, 2005. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/mar/29/broadcasting>

³ Wollaston, Sam, “You just can’t get the staff,” *The Guardian*, June 15, 2005.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2005/jun/15/tvandradio.comment>

⁴ *The Office*, “Did I Stutter,” Season Four, Episode 12. First broadcast on May 1, 2008 by NBC. Written by Brent Forrester and Justin Spitzer, directed by Randall Einhorn.

⁵ *The Office*, “Baby Shower,” Season Five, Episode 3. First broadcast on October 16, 2008 by NBC. Written by Aaron Shure, directed by Greg Daniels.

⁶ In the Season Four episode “Goodbye Toby,” Phyllis discovered that newly engaged Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey) was having an affair with Dwight, and used this information to essentially blackmail take Angela’s role as the head of the Party Planning Committee, although in the Season Five episode “Moroccan Christmas,” Phyllis relates to the camera her belief that her actions don’t constitute blackmail, as she believes blackmail to involve “a formal letter.”

⁷ *The Office*, “Branch Wars,” Season Four, Episode 6. First broadcast on November 1, 2007 by NBC. Written by Mindy Kaling, directed by Joss Whedon.

⁸ *The Office*, “Email Surveillance,” Season Two, Episode 9. First broadcast on November 22, 2005 by NBC. Written by Jennifer Celotta, directed by Paul Feig.

⁹ *The Office*, “Halloween,” Season Two, Episode 5. First broadcast on October 18, 2005 by NBC. Written by Greg Daniels, directed by Paul Feig.

¹⁰ Later in this episode, Creed craftily talks his way out of getting fired, convincing Michael that he ought to fire supplier relations representative Devon White (Devon Abner) instead. Michael takes Creed’s advice and, adding insult to injury, tells Devon he’s partially firing him so that he, Michael, might not “look light an idiot.” Afterward, Devon rips up the Chili’s gift certificate Michael offered him as an olive branch, and declaring to the office that everyone except Jim, Pam, Phyllis, Stanley, Meredith, Oscar, Kevin and ‘the temp’ (i.e. Michael, Creed, Dwight, and Angela) can “go to hell.”

¹¹ *The Office*, “Office Olympics,” Season Two, Episode 3. First broadcast on October 4, 2005 by NBC. Written by Michael Schur, directed by Paul Feig.

¹² *The Office*, “Weight Loss,” Season Five, Episode 1. First broadcast on September 25, 2008 by NBC. Written by Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnitsky, directed by Paul Feig.

¹³ *The Office*, “Sexual Harassment,” Season Two, Episode 2. First broadcast on September 27, 2005 by NBC. Written by B.J. Novak, directed by Ken Kwapis.

¹⁴ *The Office*, “Golden Ticket,” Season Five, Episode 17. First broadcast on March 12, 2009 by NBC. Written by Mindy Kaling, directed by Randall Einhorn.

¹⁵ *The Office*, “Women’s Appreciation,” Season Three, Episode 21. First broadcast on May 3, 2007. Written by Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnitsky, directed by Tucker Gates.

¹⁶ More examples of the use of comedic zooms can be seen in the Season One episode, “Hot Girl,” where the camera focuses in on an overly-caffeinated Michael, zooming in on his hands as he emphatically gesticulates that coffee is a “great incentivizer” that “speeds people up.” Moreover, in the Season Two episode, “Office Olympics,” Kevin and Oscar explain to gym the origin of the name “Hate Ball” for their desktop paper football game, saying that they named it so on account of how much Angela hates it. The camera then quickly focuses on a very unimpressed Angela.

¹⁷ *The Office*, “Frame Toby,” Season Five, Episode 8. First broadcast on November 20, 2008. Written by Mindy Kaling, directed by Jason Reitman.

¹⁸ *The Office*, “*The Return*,” Season Three, Episode 13. First broadcast on January 18, 2007. Written by Lee Eisenberg, Michael Schur and Gene Stupnitsky, directed by Greg Daniels.

¹⁹ Previously, in the Season Three episode, “Gay Witch Hunt,” it was revealed that Oscar is gay. In an attempt to show his solidarity, Michael then tries to kiss Oscar to show Angela that “it’s not contagious.” A mortified corporate then awards Oscar three months paid vacation and a company car if he agreed not to sue Michael for sexual harassment, smugly telling the camera, “Kids, sometimes it pays to be gay.” In “*The Return*,” Oscar has just come back to work after his three months off.

²⁰ *The Office*, “The Fight,” Season Two, Episode 6. First broadcast on November 1, 2005 by NBC. Written by Lee Eisenberg and Gene Stupnitsky, directed by Ken Kwapis.

²¹ *The Office*, “*Crime Aid*,” Season Five, Episode 4. First broadcast on October 23, 2008 by NBC. Written by Charlie Grandy, directed by Jennifer Celotta.

²² *The Office*, “Niagara,” Season Six, Episode 5. First broadcast on October 8, 2009 by NBC. Written by Mindy Kaling and Greg Daniels, directed by Paul Feig.

²³ *The Office*, “The Client,” Season Two, Episode 7. First broadcast on November 8, 2005 by NBC. Written by Paul Liebertstein, directed by Greg Daniels.

²⁴ A similar situation occurred in the Season 1 episode, “The Dundies,” in which Michael receives a phone call from Jan to inform him that corporate will not be paying for that year’s employee appreciation awards ceremony. Not wanting the camera to continue filming his conversation, Michael directs the camera toward something out of his office, and once they step out, he shuts the door behind himself and draws all the blinds. The camera crew is then forced to film him from between a crack in his blinds.

²⁵ *The Office*, “Valentine’s Day,” Season Two, Episode 16. First broadcast on February 9, 2006. Written by Michael Schur, directed by Greg Daniels.

²⁶ More examples of negative awareness can be seen in the Season One episode, “Hot Girl,” in which a purse saleswoman, Katy (Amy Adams) visits the office and becomes the object of

attention of many male employees, also prompting Michael to refer to her as “the new and improved Pam, Pam 6.0.” The film crew catches Pam putting on make-up at her desk however, once she realizes she is being filmed, she immediately stops and partially obscures her face. There is also the Season Five episode, “Weight Loss” in which, as part of a new employee-hazing prank, Dwight convinces Holly that Kevin (Brian Baumgartner) is mentally challenged, which he is not. Following an angry outburst in which she scolds Angela for calling him stupid, Holly finds out the truth and is visibly embarrassed. She frequently looks to camera, and eventually runs out of the frame.

²⁷ *The Office*, “Basketball,” Season One, Episode 5. First broadcast on April 19, 2005 by NBC. Written by Greg Daniels, directed by Greg Daniels.

²⁸ *The Office*, “Gay Witch Hunt,” Season Three, Episode 1. First broadcast on May 1, 2008. Written by Greg Daniels, directed by Ken Kwapis.

²⁹ *The Office*, “Hot Girl,” Season One, Episode 6. First broadcast on April 26, 2005 by NBC. Written by Mindy Kaling, directed by Amy Heckerling.

³⁰ More examples of camera as a reminder of social correctness can be seen in the following episodes: Season Five’s “Frame Toby,” after Dwight denounces brownies as “cubes of sugar and fat,” Michael tells his staff that he’s taking two brownies out of the conference room so that he can parcel them out throughout the day, and then looks to camera and says that eating them that way is “much healthier.” Also, in the Season Two episode, “Office Olympics,” after asking if she updated the addresses on his magazine subscriptions to his new condo address, Michael repeatedly glances to camera as he explains to Pam that she needs to change the address on his subscription to “Fine Arts Aficionado Monthly” too because he doesn’t “just read ‘Cracked.’”

³¹ *The Office*, “Performance Review,” Season Two, Episode 8. First broadcast on November 15, 2005 on NBC. Written by Larry Wilmore, directed by Paul Feig.

³² As far as the U.K. version is concerned, perhaps the best example is the Christmas Special – which aired after the series finale—when the camera crew revisits the staff of Wernham Hogg three years (in the series) after the end of filming. With Dawn and Lee living in the U.S., the documentary producers offer to fly the two back to England for the staff Christmas Party, wherein Dawn and Tim are reunited, and Dawn officially ends her engagement with Lee.

³³ *The Office*, “Pilot,” Season One, Episode 1. First broadcast on March 24, 2005 by NBC. Written by Greg Daniels, Ricky Gervais, and Stephen Merchant, directed by Ken Kwapis.

³⁴ *The Office*, “Downsizing,” Season One, Episode 1. First broadcast on July 9, 2001 by the BBC. Written and directed by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant.

³⁵ Fine, Gary Alan. “Ten lies of ethnography,” *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* (1993), Edition 22, Issue 3, p. 267-289.

³⁶ Hight, Craig, *Television Mockumentary: Reflexivity, Satire and a Call to Play*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2011.

³⁷ *The Office*, “Goodbye Michael,” Season Seven, Episode 22. First aired on April 28, 2011 by NBC. Written by Paul Feig, directed by Greg Daniels.

³⁸ Gorman, Bill. “Thursday Final Ratings: ‘Idol,’ ‘Grey’s,’ ‘Big Bang,’ ‘CSI’ Adjusted Up; ‘Community’ Down + ‘The Office,’ ‘Parks & Rec’ Finals,” *TV by the Numbers*, accessed via <http://tvbythenumbers.zap2it.com/2011/04/29/thursday-final-ratings-idol-greys-big-bang-csi-adjusted-up-community-down-the-office-parks-rec-finals/90975>. April 29, 2011.