

## ***The Office: Humorous Fake Realism Created Through Mockumentary Conventions***

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### **Abstract**

Popular NBC comedy series *The Office* has captured young adult audiences for many years, loved by fans across the country. Over the course of its nine season run, the show created a strong comedic identity that resonated with many other Americans experiencing similar situations in their own lives. Viewers follow the workplace shenanigans of Michael Scott, regional manager of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company's Scranton, Pennsylvania branch, and his humorous interactions with his coworkers. *The Office* successfully creates engaging humor while connecting to the audience through the use of relatable characters, situations, and cultural connections. This critical analysis examines how the show uses mockumentary conventions to convey fake realism and relatable situations and characters that allows the audience to derive humor.

### **1. Introduction and Body of Paper**

*The Office* remains an easily identifiable and well-loved American television comedy. The show premiered in 2005 and ran until 2013 on NBC, and capitalizes on the idea of a “TV-as-catharsis approach to the monotony of office work”<sup>5</sup>. Created as an adaptation of the popular British television show of the same name that ran from 2001-2003, the show presents typical American workplace situations in comedic fashion, using the mockumentary filming style to make the show appear as if it is a documentary.

Though it opened its first season to mixed reviews, *The Office* eventually became a critical success, becoming one of NBC's highest rated television series. *The Office* has been nominated for a plethora of awards, including 42 Emmy Awards and 9 Golden Globes. The show won a handful of the 42 Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Comedy Series for season two, Outstanding Writing for a Comedy Series, Outstanding Directing for a Comedy Series, and Outstanding Single-Camera Picture Editing for a Comedy Series<sup>1</sup>. Steve Carrell won the sole acting award the show received -- the 2006 Golden Globe Award for Best Actor in a Television Comedy or Musical<sup>1</sup>. The series also garnered two Screen Actors Guild Awards for Outstanding Performance by an Ensemble in a Comedy Series, along with a Peabody Award in 2006.

With the evolution of streaming came even greater popularity for the show. According to Nielson ratings, *The Office* was the most streamed show on Netflix in 2019, accounting for 45.8 billion minutes watched on the streaming service<sup>8</sup>. Though the series ended its run in 2013, the addition of the show to Netflix has allowed for new viewers to watch and rewatch the show, allowing a cult-like viewer following to develop<sup>7</sup>. The show has become an important part of popular culture -- people can even buy Dunder Mifflin and show-themed t-shirts at superstores like Target and Walmart. *The Office* has become not just a popular TV show, but a recognizable icon in society and culture.

## 1.1 Thesis

As a workplace situational comedy, *The Office* uses each episode to highlight various happenings within the American office workspace, specifically in regards to the fictitious Dunder Mifflin paper company. However, the show is shot with a single-camera in a fake documentary style, or mockumentary. This unique style allows the viewer to pretend that what they are watching is real, so “sufficiently close to reality that its message has resonance in the real world”<sup>22</sup>. The show breaks the fourth wall and addresses the viewer of the “documentary,” creating comedic situations that viewers can relate to. The humor of *The Office* derives from a sense of fake realism that the mockumentary style creates, combined with the use of relatable characters and situations that somewhat match viewer demographics.

## 1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this analysis is to examine how *The Office* utilizes the mockumentary style to create a sense of fake realism while following the daily antics at the Dunder Mifflin Scranton branch, a concept that allows the viewer to enjoy cringe-worthy, relatable humor in each episode while also remaining somewhat distant from true reality.

## 2. Description of *The Office*

The hit comedy *The Office* premiered on NBC in 2005 and aired for nine seasons. The show was an adaptation of a British television show of the same name and hoped to bring the popular show to a new American audience. The show faced much doubt at first as audiences questioned whether or not the show would succeed in the American climate, but eventually became a large television success in the U.S<sup>1</sup>. The mockumentary follows the workplace situational shenanigans of a mid-size paper company.

Steve Carrell stars as Michael Scott, regional manager of the Dunder Mifflin Paper Company branch in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Though he holds the boss title, he doesn’t always act like a leader. Hardly any work gets completed under Michael’s watch as he leads unnecessary conference meetings and engages in non-work related activities each day.

Making up his core team includes Dwight Schrute (Rainn Wilson), the right hand man of Michael Scott. As the top salesman at Dunder Mifflin, Dwight goes to the extremes to please his boss. Jim Halpert (John Krasinski) also leads the sales team, a successful salesman who manages to complete his work despite spending most of his time slacking off by pranking Dwight or talking to Dunder Mifflin receptionist and love interest Pam Beesley (Jenna Fischer). Pam spends her days monotonously answering the phone and assisting Michael with his interesting tasks, as well as helping Jim plan elaborate tricks to fool Dwight.

An ensemble cast rounds out the coworkers at the office. The group includes temporary worker Ryan Howard (B.J. Novak); sales workers Phyllis Lappen (Phyllis Smith) and Stanley Hudson (Leslie David Baker); and accountants Oscar Martinez (Oscar Nunez), Angela Martin (Angela Kinsey), and Kevin Malone (Brian Baumgartner). Other characters include human resources representative Toby Flenderson (Paul Lieberstein) and quality control workers Meredith Palmer (Kate Flannery) and Creed Bratton (Creed Bratton). Each minor character plays an important role in the functions of the office and storylines of each episode, creating a dynamic yet dysfunctional work environment.

## 2.1 Production Information

The American adaptation of *The Office* was developed by Greg Daniels, who spent much of his early career writing for *The Simpsons*<sup>1</sup>. Daniels served as showrunner for the first four seasons of the show before leaving to focus on his new mockumentary show, *Parks and Recreation*. Paul Lieberstein, who plays Toby Flenderson, became showrunner following Daniels’ departure for the next three seasons. Daniels later returned to direct the final season. Many cast members made up the production and writing crew, including Mindy Kaling (Kelly Kapoor) and B.J. Novak (Ryan Howard). The show also featured a slew of directors, including Randall Einhorn, who directed the most episodes at fifteen.

Co-produced by Reiville Productions, Deedle Dee Productions, and Universal Television, the show is shot like a mockumentary, filmed with a single camera without a laugh track or studio audience in order to make the show seem like a documentary<sup>1</sup>. The show’s premise revolves around the idea that a documentary crew is continually filming and

following the life of Dunder Mifflin and its employees. Each episode follows the crazy antics that happen around the office, as well as the friendships and relationships between coworkers that evolve throughout the series. While the pilot directly follows the plotline of the U.K. version of the series, most episodes divert from the premise of the show from overseas. Most of the series takes place at the show's namesake setting -- the office -- but also features episodes showing the Dunder Mifflin corporate offices in New York, New York, as well as Michael's condo and other situational settings.

### 3. Selected Episode for Analysis

In order to examine the conventions *The Office* uses to create humor, this analysis focuses on one particular episode as an exemplar: season two, episode 12 titled "The Injury." Aired on NBC on January 12, 2006, the episode garnered 10.3 million viewers, ranking as the third most-viewed episode of the series<sup>4</sup>. "The Injury" follows the hyperbolic antics of Michael as he comes into work with an "injury" of sorts -- he burned his foot by stepping on his George Foreman grill, the grill he uses to cook bacon on in the morning. The episode follows as Michael demands special treatment from his coworkers and neglects to understand the definition of a true disability or injury.

Looking at the face value of the episode, it seems rather strange and ridiculous -- who would ever burn their foot on a small grill and then proceed to demand extra care at his or her place of work? Frankly, the storyline seems too out-of-this-world. But perhaps that made the episode such a success -- the sheer stupidity of it that somehow seemed real and relatable to audiences. Writer Mindy Kaling describes the episode as "full-on loopy," with Michael's crazy, "stupid" antics taking the spotlight<sup>5</sup>.

Yet the episode also tackles real issues, as Kaling said in an interview, and that it couldn't just be "crazy" and is "really about injuries and people with disabilities"<sup>6</sup>. This provides needed balance to the episode, as it presents social issues through humorous and ridiculous conventions. Audiences can relate to overcoming injury and disability, as well as perhaps experiencing workplace antics from time to time. "The Injury" immediately became a fan-favorite episode that received acclaim as one of the series' best episodes.

### 4. Description of the Episode

"The Injury" opens with Pam receiving a call at the office from Michael, who stressfully begs for help and claims he badly injured himself. Everyone listens as Michael explains his injury -- he stepped on his George Foreman grill when getting out of bed, his grill which he sets out each morning so he can cook bacon and wake up to the "fresh smell of crackling bacon." Dwight volunteers to pick up Michael and drive him to work, much to Michael's dismay, and he rushes out to the parking lot. Suddenly, everyone in the office hears a loud crash and rushes to look out the window; they see Dwight crash his car into the light pole leaving the parking lot, and he gets out of the car to throw up. Despite the accident, Dwight hops back in his car and drives off.

Following the first scene, we see Michael enter the office, clad with crutches, a blanket, and a DIY bubble wrap cast. He addresses the office workers, telling them that he does not want any special treatment, and only wants a normal office work day. Yet they all make fun of him -- Jim pops Michael's homemade cast and Pam makes fun of his "cooked" foot.

Though Michael says he doesn't want extra care, it becomes obvious in the following scene that he wants the attention. He lays back in his office chair, with Dwight holding a handheld fan over his foot while Michael asks Pam for messages. Pam reminds Michael that he said he did not want people to make a big fuss over his injury, and Michael says he just wants everyone to treat him as if he has undergone "some sort of serious, physical trauma." We also begin to see Dwight acting strangely -- he starts talking in incomplete sentences, confusing Pam and Michael. The strange antics of Dwight continue in the next brief scene, as we see Dwight at his desk typing his name over and over again on a blank Microsoft Word document.

Next, we cut to Michael, who lays under several blankets on a couch he moved into the conference room. Ryan lays out a spread of food for Michael that Michael ordered.

The following scene shows Pam trying to figure out how to use her new iPod that she recently received. Dwight helps her out, recommending a Russian music website with \$.01 downloadable songs. Despite his friendliness, he confusingly refers to Pam by the name of "pan" as he leaves the conversation.

Back in the conference room, Michael becomes even fussier. He irritably calls Pam, asking her if she can rub Country Crock butter on his foot. When she refuses, he uses one of his crutches to rattle the conference room blinds while shouting for Ryan, yet Ryan refuses to help.

We revert back to the situation with Dwight and Pam, with Dwight supplying Pam with a case for the iPod and demonstrating how indestructible it is. Then, we cut to an interview with Jim, who mentions that perhaps Pam and Dwight are friends now. A quick interview with Pam follows, who at first says that Dwight isn't her friend, but then comes to the shocking realization that he is "kind of" her friend.

Back in the conference room, Michael sits on the couch, complaining to his mother on the phone about how no one in the office will help take care of him. Meanwhile, Dwight continues to act strangely. In a short scene, he walks to Angela -- his secret lover -- in the break room, slapping her bottom as she gets a snack.

Next we see Ryan and Toby in the kitchen area, having a casual conversation. Yet, they are interrupted by Michael, who bursts in and crutches into the bathroom. A loud crash comes from the men's restroom after they continue to converse. Michael yells that he fell off the toilet and needs Ryan to help him. However, Ryan looks extremely unwilling to help, so Toby tells Michael that Ryan cannot help because he is "dead," not fooling Michael at all. Michael tries to fix his situation, only to fall and hurt himself again.

Back at the receptionist desk, Jim and Pam discuss how Dwight has been acting overly friendly all day. Dwight never acts friendly, so they begin to question why he seems so out of sorts. Suddenly, Michael bursts into the main office area, asking if anyone truly knows what it is like to be disabled. He claims that he is the only one in the office who has a "legitimate disability," yet everyone disagrees. Stanley even says that Michael's bubble wrapped foot looks like Mailboxes, Etc. Furious, Michael calls for a conference room meeting in 20 minutes.

As Jim, Pam, and the rest of the office files into the conference room for the meeting, they notice several pictures taped to the wall -- Forrest Gump, FDR, and many others. Michael then begins his presentation on disabilities, pointing out the "disabled icons" on the wall and bringing in a guest speaker, property manager Billy Merchant, who is confined to a wheelchair. Michael makes several offensive comments about Billy and the difficulties of being handicapped, which drives Billy to leave the meeting. As he proceeds to leave for the elevator, Billy explains to Jim that he thinks Dwight has a concussion; Dwight acted weird in the meeting, not realizing that he raised his hand at times.

After the meeting, Michael sits at his desk, with Ryan serving him pudding cups. Michael eats the pudding and then bursts out of his office, exclaiming that he feels better. Ryan explains in an interview why Michael feels this way; he says that he ground up four extra-strength aspirin and put them in Michael's pudding.

However, in the next scene, Dwight's weird behavior turns serious. He passes out at his desk, and Jim decides that he needs to be taken to the hospital. Dwight asks for Michael to take him, but Michael says he cannot because he is still injured. Jim offers to drive, and Michael ends up coming along with them, even though he would rather not go. Pam says goodbye to Dwight as he leaves the office, knowing that Dwight won't be as friendly once he gets his concussion treated.

The three then hop into a van and drive to the hospital, yet it is an interesting ride. Dwight finds a liquor bottle underneath his seat, and Michael tries to take it away from him. The two argue, and Jim tries to calm them down by spraying them with a spray bottle full of water.

Next, the three arrive at the hospital and sit in the waiting room as Michael fills out Dwight's medical questionnaire. Then we see a doctor inspecting Dwight in the following scene, with Michael also in the room. Michael proceeds to ask the doctor whether a head injury or a foot injury is more serious, hoping to justify the gravity of his burned foot. The doctor says a head injury is more serious, yet Michael disagrees and proceeds to fill in the doctor about his own injury. The doctor tells Dwight that he will need to have a CAT scan.

The sequence continues as a nurse pushes Dwight in a wheelchair to the CAT scan room with Michael crutching alongside. The nurse stops, saying that the camera crew cannot go in the room, as well as no metal of any kind. Michael decides to go into the room with Dwight, leaving behind his microphone and crutches.

Back at the office, Pam receives a call from Jim at the hospital, who tells her that Dwight has to undergo a CAT scan but will be okay. Pam sees Angela snooping in on her conversation, so Pam goes over to the accounting area to address Oscar about the situation; in reality, though, she does this to let Angela know that Dwight will be fine.

Finally, the show ends with a scene shot through the window of the CAT scan room. The nurse instructs Dwight, who lies in the machine, to inhale on her count. As she starts counting down, however, Michael decides to stick his burnt foot in the machine. The episode ends with the nurse yelling at Michael to stop, catching him as he tries to make his injury seem legitimate.

## 5. Questions for Analysis

In order to analyze *The Office* and “The Injury,” I chose some key questions to consider regarding the structure; story, characters, and genre; demographics; and context.

1. Structure
  - a. How do the scenes build on one another?
  - b. Are there connectives between the scenes and between acts?
  - c. When the show comes to an end, is there closure or is the plot left open until next time?
2. Story, Characters, and Genre
  - a. What shared substances may lead the audience to identify with the program’s characters? Can viewers recognize their own fallibility in the character?
  - b. What cultural values are represented? What ordinary personal issues are recognizable?
  - c. What meanings are created by the program?
  - d. What are the conventions that make up that genre?
  - e. What are audience expectations of that particular genre?
3. Demographics
  - a. Whom does the program “hail?”
  - b. To what demographic group is the subject of the program likely to appeal?
  - c. Are the characters and the actors who portray them young adults, children, middle aged, or seniors? Are the characters supposed to be single? Members of families? Lower, middle, or upper class?
  - d. What are their domestic arrangements? Are the domestic arrangements traditional or nontraditional? What are their domestic surroundings like?
  - e. How does product placement play a role in the show?
4. Context
  - a. What societal and cultural values are represented in the television images and discourse?
  - b. What ordinary personal issues and attributes are recognizable?
  - c. What do you think is the expected reaction from the audience?

## 6. Analysis and Interpretation

### 6.1 Structure

The episode features a variety of scenes cut together like a documentary, including various interviews with Dunder Mifflin employees. Hard cuts separate scenes from each other, and interview audio often plays over other scenes to explain certain situations, such as when Ryan explains putting aspirin in Michael’s pudding while showing him grinding up pills in the mixing them in the pudding cup. Like most comedies, *The Office* cuts to show other characters’ reactions to certain jokes or comedic situations; in this episode, the camera cuts often to show employees’ reactions to Michael’s dramatic requests and amplification of his injury.

The opener sets up the comedic atmosphere for the rest of the episode by introducing Michael’s ridiculous injury and the drama he creates because of it. It also shows Dwight crashing his car into the light pole on the way to pick Michael up, setting up the plotline seen later on that Dwight has the real injury, not Michael.

The episode ends as Michael tries to put his foot into the CAT scan machine, much to the dismay of the hospital nurse. Overall, the episode does not drive any key plotlines forward, but rather acts as a funny, situational episode. The ending clearly shows that Michael hasn’t learned his lesson and still believes his burned foot to be a grave injury that all around him should treat seriously. This remains in line with the characterization of Michael up to this point in the series as an often misguided, melodramatic boss that craves attention from others. Additionally, the episodic, mockumentary structure of the show keeps viewers wondering what will happen next in the documentation of the fictitious Dunder Mifflin paper company.

## 6.2 Story, Characters, and Genre

The stories and characters presented on *The Office* represent relatable characteristics and situations that viewers can connect with. In “The Injury” the audience connects closely with the office workers, excluding Dwight and Michael, who joke around about Michael’s supposed injury and react unsurely to Michael’s disability presentation. Characters like Jim and Pam represent the realistic American worker -- bored while dealing with the office happenings.

In each episode, *The Office* references cultural values and issues that viewers may understand. For example, in the episode in question, the show tackles disability in a comedic way, demonstrating the difference between ignorant views on the subject and serious representations of disability and injury. The dichotomy between Michael’s foot injury and Billy Merchant’s disability that requires a wheelchair comically shows the absurdity of Michael’s disability claim. Additionally, the show continually tackles concepts regarding the mundane yet challenging office environment, with Michael holding his unnecessary conference meeting and asking for ludicrous demands of his employees. The viewer can recognize these values and issues and relate their own lives to them.

The episode also presents meaning through ironic situations. Michael creates irony as he remains reluctant to recognize the gravity of Dwight’s concussion, yet spends the entire day demanding his employees to treat him with his burned foot as if he is disabled. In turn, the audience can gain meaning from the episode, meaning that criticizes Michael’s shenanigans and distinguishes sincere disability from dramatized injury.

The show fits into the unique comedic mockumentary genre/style, breaking the fourth wall. Jim demonstrates this the best, known for his signature look at the camera during awkward and funny moments on the show. Interviews through the mockumentary conventions also allow the viewer to connect and better understand the motivations and thoughts of characters on the show. The audience expects this closer interaction with the characters, as documentaries aim to present a more intimate connection with the audience.

Additionally, mockumentary conventions instruct viewers to not take the situations presented too seriously -- mockumentaries are meant to come across as comedic<sup>3</sup>. By employing this style to film a situational workplace comedy, the creators of the office successfully produced a show that presents realistic situations that the viewer should laugh at rather than deeply analyze.

## 6.3 Demographics

*The Office* aims to target the 18-49 year old age demographic, as is apparent by the characters and situations presented in each episode. Michael, Dwight, Pam, Jim, and the rest of the employees fit in that young to middle aged adult bracket, so viewers can connect with them and the situations they face. The show “hails” the average American worker, the ones who sit in cubicles and attend conference meetings five days a week. These viewers can relate to the humor and situations presented in each episode. The success and humor of the show largely depends on “participant discussions tended primarily to evaluate its ‘realness’”<sup>2</sup>.

Product placement also plays a role in connecting the viewer to the realistic nature of the show. Recognizable brands appear in many episodes, everything from Chili’s to Levi’s jeans. The premise of “The Injury” revolves around Michael burning his foot on a George Foreman Grill, a small, at-home grill typically advertised on television. It makes sense that Michael would own one of these as-seen-on-TV grills, making his injury even more ridiculous. Additionally, Stanley references the old mailing company, Mailboxes, Etc. when commenting on Michael’s bubble-wrap cast, connecting the viewer to the show by using a real-life reference. Then in the conference room, Michael displays pictures of “disabled icons” like Forrest Gump and FDR. Though the viewer must know these references to understand the joke in regards to disabilities, it serves as yet another example of how *The Office* uses real life examples to make the mockumentary seem even more real and relatable to the audience.

## 6.4 Context

As a workplace situational comedy, *The Office* makes comments on a variety of socially recognizable issues and concepts. The show uses comedy to make witty jokes about the American workplace, as well as other topics like diversity and stress relief, among others. As a mockumentary, many topics and characters seem extremely realistic,

“The Injury,” focuses on having disabilities or serious injuries as Michael ridiculously claims to be disabled after burning his foot on the grill. As Michael compares his disability to that of the wheelchair-ridden property manager Billy Merchant in the conference meeting, the rest of the employees do not know how to react. The awkwardness of

the situation creates a realistic situation that the viewer finds funny and absurd. It is almost as if the viewer sits in the conference room with the rest of the office employees, unsure of how to react like everyone else.

The episode presents absurd situations and jokes that producers expect the audience to laugh at. The audience should laugh at Michael's ridiculous bubble wrap cast and comparison to people with actual disabilities. Producers and writers want viewers to find Michael's reluctance to acknowledge Dwight's serious concussion situationally ironic. The awkwardness, irony, and absurdity should make viewers laugh and connect with the Dunder Mifflin employees who have no idea how to handle the situation correctly, as do most episodes of the series.

## 7. Conclusion

*The Office* successfully employs the unique mockumentary setup to highlight normal, relatable characters and situations in comedic ways to create ridiculous, relatable humor in the eyes of the viewer. In doing so, the show remains memorable, making it such a huge popular culture sensation and well-liked television series. The series portrays a fake yet realistic American workplace, something that viewers within the targeted 18-49 year old demographic can relate to. This allows the audience to laugh at the absurd humor presented in the show, since many may have had similar experiences or could see similar situations happen in their own places of work. Though realistic, the mockumentary setup of *The Office* lets the viewer relate to the often cringe-worthy situations while also realizing its manufactured realism.

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