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Paper 3: Culture Research analytical methods showcase hegemonic messages *The Office*

*I swore to myself that if I ever got to walk around a room as manager, people would laugh as they saw me coming, and they'd applaud as I walked away.* – Michael Scott, *The Office*

“You either love it or you hate it.” That is the general consensus about the television show on the NBC network, *The Office*. There doesn't seem to be a happy medium, which stems from the premise of the show and the way in which it is executed. Not everyone is amused by the show's brand of unique humor that gives a portrait of a typical 9-to-5 job for Americans. The humor in the show is used to explore hegemonic relationships and stereotypes that exist in our culture, which is a sensitive subject for many. For this reason, *The Office* will be analyzed using cultural studies theories related to media: textual analysis, audience-response research, and political economy studies.

*The Office* is a remake of a British show of the same name. The show is a “mockumentary” look into the humorous and often poignant day-to-day happenings of “office life.” The premise of the show is that a camera crew follows the working lives of employees of fictitious paper supply company in Scranton, Pennsylvania, Dunder Mifflin. As USA Today's Del Jones notes, “[The show's Creator, Greg Daniels] says some of the material for *The Office* comes right out of the annual sensitivity training that Daniel's company, NBC, a division of General Electric] mandates. The training often refers to outrageous things bosses have done in the past, which becomes script grist with minor tweaking” (Jones).

The show mainly focuses on delusional branch manager, Michael Scott. Michael believes that he is not only an excellent manager but also hilarious and “cool.” He also unknowingly believes his employees feel the same way. An episode of *The Office* generally focuses on the mundane day-to-day happenings in a typical office, finding humor in it as well as bringing to light certain issues and stereotypes that exist in the workplace and in our society as a whole.

Michael is the main vehicle used to explore these issues, and his words and actions often leave the viewing audience laughing and cringing at the same time. Members of the viewing audience think to themselves, “there really aren't Michael Scott's in real life, are there?” As a matter of fact, it would be surprising if one couldn't find similar personalities in many parts of corporate America. The creators of *The Office* clearly mean Michael Scott to represent the repressed hegemonic social issues in our society.

Because of *The Office*'s strong emphasis on societal representation, cultural research can be used to analyze it. “Cultural research focuses on the investigation of daily experience,

especially on issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality, and on the unequal arrangements of power and status in contemporary society. Such research highlights the nature of cultural differences, emphasizing how some social groups have been marginalized and ignored throughout history.” (Campbell 537).

This kind of approach to media research was developed by the Frankfurt school. In his essay, “The Frankfurt School and British Cultural Studies: The Missed Articulation,” Douglas Kellner writes, “During the 1930s, the Frankfurt school developed a critical and transdisciplinary approach to cultural and communications studies, combining critique of political economy of the media, analysis of texts, and audience reception studies of the social and ideological effects of mass culture and communications.” Using this approach to analyze media such as *The Office*, allows for the exploration of deeper meaning and subtexts contained within that media. As an audience, we are left with a greater understanding of what we are watching, aware of its effects on not only us but also, our culture.

The first media measurement method explored will be textual analysis, which is, according to Campbell, “the close reading and interpretation of the meaning of culture, including the study of books, movies, and TV Programs. Textual analysis looks at rituals, narratives, and meanings. Often, these seemingly minor elements of popular culture provide insight into broader meanings within our society” (539). While a textual analysis of *The Office* emphasizes how hegemonic messages about gender, race, homophobia, and sexuality exist in our society, it also highlights the oppression that society places on those views.

Michael’s character exists as a representation of taboo topics in our society such as: gender superiority, homophobia, and racism. His character is oblivious to the fact that he displays any of these viewpoints, which shows how our society as a whole has a tendency to operate. Though Michael is seen as outrageous to many by the comments that he makes, he is only voicing the stereotypes that still exist in our culture. When watching an episode of *The Office*, many people are uncomfortable because of the types of things that he says and the situations he creates. Though these hegemonic depictions are often represented in extreme cases, it is still an accurate barometer of the stereotypes that continue to exist in our culture today.

In the book, “Television and the Crisis of Democracy,” Kellner explains, “The hegemony approach analyzes television as part of a process of economic, political, social, and cultural struggle. According to this approach, different classes, sectors of capital, and social groups compete for social dominance and attempt to impose their visions, interests, and agendas on society as a whole” (16). Hegemony is a consistent theme used in *The Office*, such as Michael’s negative view of his employees that work in the loading dock versus his employees that work in the actual office. This view supports a hegemonic class system.

Another example of this would be the episode, “Diversity Day,” in which Michael has the good intentions to try to educate his staff about diversity through the use of stereotypes, but of course, in typical *Office* fashion, Michael executes his attempt poorly. Each employee is given a card to place on their head which gives them an ethnicity to represent such as “Chinese” or “Jamaican.” He then pairs the employees up so they can make stereotypical comments to each

other in regard to the ethnicity cards on their head. That way, the employee can figure out which ethnicity they are representing.

An excerpt of dialogue used between two employees in this episode to find out their ethnicity showcases the stereotypes that exist. In the exercise, employee Angela is wearing a card that says, “Jamaican” on her forehead and other employee Kevin is trying to give her clues to figure out her ethnicity:

[Kevin](#): You wanna go to the beach?

[Angela](#): Sure.

[Kevin](#): You wanna get high?

[Angela](#): No.

[Kevin](#): I think you do, mon.

An additional example of how Michael is a representation of our society occurs when he tries to be politically correct but comes off as incredibly offensive. Michael asks one of his employees, Oscar, about his ethnic background. Oscar says that his parents were Mexican. To that, Michael replies, “Um, let me ask you, is there a term besides 'Mexican' that you prefer? Something less offensive?” Our society is continuously plagued by these stereotypic undertones that exist. Like Michael, society tries to cover up these undertones with good intentions, but it is obvious that these stereotypes still exist. Racial stereotypes are often used to increase the social standing of one group over another and this failed attempt at diversity education showcases how prevalent racial stereotypes are in our society.

Another episode of *The Office* entitled “Gay Witch Hunt” showcases additional hegemonic messages. In the episode, Michael learns, to his surprise, that one of his employees is gay. He subsequently decides he now must find out who else on his staff is gay so he will not offend anyone in his office with inappropriate remarks about homosexuals. In actuality, by trying to call out these homosexuals, Michael has casted them as different than the others. Similar to race, this shows homosexuality as being at the bottom of the hegemonic hierarchy.

Keller notes the hegemonic forces that are created in media in his essay, “Cultural Studies, Multiculturalism, and Media Culture,” “Media spectacles demonstrate who has power and who is powerless, who is allowed to exercise force and violence and who is not.” This power struggle is further evident in the portrayal of men and women on *The Office*. Men are seen as the aggressive salesmen who are in control over the office. Women are seen as passive and in more of a supporting role. For example, one of the main female characters, Pam, is a receptionist that literally supports the salesmen and another, Kelly, is seen as boy-crazy and obsessed with marriage. Even further, though Michael’s boss for the first couple of seasons of the show, Jan, was female and in a superiority position, she was ultimately weak. Initially, she was portrayed as a strong character who stood up to Michael when he was out of line and did well at her job. But ultimately, to the disbelief of everyone, she seduced Michael, unable to control herself. Jan ultimately lost her job because of it. Similar to the portrayal of race and homosexuals, this portrayal shows that men place higher on the hegemonic hierarchy than women.

The second media method in which *The Office* will be analyzed is through audience-response research, which is “cultural research that focuses on how people use and interpret cultural content” (Campbell 539). With all of the hegemonic textual analysis in the writing of *The Office*, there are different ways that the audience can interpret the messages.

*The Office* has an audience of about 8 million viewers and supreme positioning on NBC’s primetime lineup on Thursday nights. Much of the show’s success is due to its dedicated fan base. There are various blogs about *The Office*, merchandise from computer games to Dwight bobbleheads, and even social networking/show immersive Web sites that the show has set up like [dundermifflininfinit.com](http://dundermifflininfinit.com) that allow viewers to essentially be an employee of Dunder Mifflin. Audiences know the characters and because they are based off of “real” situations and “real” people, feel a sense of connection to them.

The show is most popular with young adults, which could be explained by a younger generation more willing to recognize these cultural attitudes and find the humor in them. As Workforce Management’s John Hollon notes, “If you ever watch *The Office*, you probably recognize people and situations that you may have encountered in your own working life. Although it is a parody of mundane office existence, it’s easy to see in it a barely warped reflection of our workplace lives” (34).

By showing Michael looking foolish when he acts ignorant or makes inappropriate comments, audiences are able to come to their own conclusions and see the stereotypes and hegemonic relationships that exist in our society. As Silverblatt notes, “A media presentation can serve as a barometer of current attitudes toward historical events ... [and can] reflect cultural attitudes toward particular groups, such as women, Muslims, or businesspeople.” (69 and 97). This barometer of sorts provides insight into our overall culture and gives the audience material for reflection.

The third and final method in which this form of media will be analyzed is through political economy studies, which Campbell describes as “the focus on the production of popular culture and the forces behind it” (540). This type of method is best understood by combing the two previous methods: textual analysis and audience-response research. Campbell gives an example of how they all work together, “A major media corporation may, for commercial reasons, create a film and market it relentlessly through a number of venues (political economy), but the film’s meaning or popularity makes sense only within the historical and narrative contexts of the culture (textual analysis), and it may be interpreted by various audiences in ways both anticipated and unexpected (audience studies)” (540).

Though it is a social commentary, *The Office* is viewed by our society just as any other television comedy. The hegemonic messages prevalent in the show are masked by the comedic jokes and various marketing platforms used to promote the show: the Web site, merchandise, etc. In an attempt to relay their message to an audience, the writers of the show know what will resonate with audiences, which in this case is not only the comedy but also the “true to life” situations that *The Office* depicts.

Though these stereotypes and hegemonic messages persist throughout *The Office*, the impact that the show is attempting to have on society is a positive one. During Michael's seemingly continuous tirade of culturally inappropriate comments, the other employees respond by rolling their eyes, mocking him, or just simply dismissing him. For this reason, the show is presented as a satire and purposely makes fun of the ignorance behind the hegemonic messages. Viewers are thus made aware of their own personal actions and how they play into societal stereotypes. Analyzing *The Office* through the three cultural research methods outlined above gives not only a better understanding of the series, but also society as a whole.

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