“That’s What She Said”: Gender, Satire, and the American Workplace on the Sitcom *The Office*

Jessica Birthisel¹ and Jason A. Martin²

Abstract

Entertainment programming such as the television satire *The Office* relies upon audience members’ understanding of both Western gender norms and stereotypes as well as corporate codes of behavior and management within an office space. This qualitative analysis of *The Office* utilizes real-world workplace scholarship on gender as a framework to explore the ways in which the show addresses workplace gender issues, including male and female workplace hierarchies, corporate initiatives serving as an unintended catalyst for gendered tensions, and mixed-gender interactions in the form of informal office interaction and office romances. Though the show’s satire does effectively ridicule facets of patriarchal authority and hegemonic masculinity in the American workplace through its mockumentary production style and use of “excess as hyperbole,” the lack of repercussions for offending characters and stereotypical portrayals of women in the workplace undercut the *The Office*’s transgressive potential.

Keywords

Television studies, femininity, masculinity, gender and media, textual analysis

In the episode “Sexual Harassment” of the American television comedy *The Office*, Michael Scott, the regional manager of a paper supply company, attempts to teach his employees about sexual harassment by creating a hypothetical situation in which his

¹Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, MA, USA
²DePaul University, Chicago, IL, USA

Corresponding Author:
Jessica Birthisel, Instructor, Communication Studies Department, Bridgewater State University, Clement C. Maxwell Library, Room Lib215, 10 Shaw Road, Bridgewater, MA 02325, USA.
Email: Jessica.birthisel@bridgew.edu
heterosexual secretary, Pam, has a forced lesbian experience in front of her coworkers (Novak & Kwapis, 2005b). Pam declines the coupling but Michael is persistent. He presents Pam with a naked inflatable doll and urges her to kiss it while the camera captures her colleagues’ repulsed reactions.

From that brief context, the average adult viewer can understand the basis for the satirical humor within the American workplace environment that defines *The Office*. The show assembles as its comedic platform our society’s collective and nuanced understanding of workplace policies and political correctness, particularly as they relate to issues of gender and sexuality. *The Office* is intended to be fictional entertainment, not necessarily a mirror of real life; however, the program violates familiar workplace norms in the name of humor, relying on audiences’ familiarity with the realities of office culture to sell the joke.

*The Office*, a proven commercial success that has garnered many awards during its eight seasons (NBC to close down “The Office,” 2012), is worthy of scholarly inquiry into gender representation for several reasons. First, the show satirizes gender tensions occurring within Western white-collar workplaces attempting to diversify staff. Thus, an analysis of the show reveals useful insights into the very space where roughly 60% of Americans spend their workdays (The World Factbook, n.d.). And as Seymour (2009) points out, the production of gender in the workplace expands far beyond the cubicle; it is directly linked to the wider context of gender in other societal institutions including family, government, and the economy. Second, though *The Office* features a relatively diverse cast, it still manages to reinforce many gender stereotypes that plague Western corporate culture. As media scholars have demonstrated, television shapes viewers’ perceptions of real-world social issues such as gender (e.g., Butsch, 2003; Dow, 1996; Montemurro, 2003; Press, 1991; Signorelli, 1986; Walsh, Fursich, & Jefferson, 2008). Finally, despite its problematic gender and class representations, *The Office*’s satirical presentation uses what Fiske (2011) calls “excess as hyperbole,” allowing exaggerated characters to simultaneously reflect and critique dominant workplace gender ideologies. Though this technique has backfired on other satirical sitcoms, *The Office*’s unique mode of production, which does not include a laugh track but instead features “mockumentary” techniques, reduces the likelihood of misinterpretation of satire and enhances the show’s transgressive potential.

In order to analyze gender representations on *The Office*, we conducted a qualitative textual analysis of the show guided by hegemony theory. Hegemony is defined as a “process by which the subordinate are led to consent to the system that subordinates them” (Fiske, 2011, p. 40) in historically specific contexts. As previous scholars (Durham & Kellner, 2006) explain, a project focused on hegemony theory requires a “sociocultural analysis of particular contexts and forces, requiring dissection of how a variety of social institutions [including the media] . . . facilitate broader social and political ends” (p. xvi).

Our analysis explored several questions that reflect this theory. When do issues and tensions surrounding gender and sexuality surface on *The Office*? How do these gender issues relate to the current sociocultural context of gender in the Western corporate
workplace? Finally, considering the show’s unique “mockumentary” brand of satire, how might these representations of gender ultimately reinforce or challenge the patriarchal status quo of corporate life in America? In order to understand the realism The Office uses as the basis for its satire, we first consider what gender issues are receiving attention within the walls of real American offices.

**Real-World Offices and The [Fictional] Office**

A review of organizational scholarship highlights many gender issues facing contemporary American workplaces. First, male and female employees are perceived to have different, stereotypical strengths and weaknesses, and these stereotypes cause more professional damage to women than men (Barrett & Davidson, 2006; Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000; Reardon, 1995). Employees’ class affects perceptions as well. Working-class men are often coded as aggressive and hypersexual whereas upper-class men often get characterized as physically weak and feminine (Connell, 1995; Embrick, Walther, & Wickens, 2007; Katz, 2011). Beyond gender stereotypes, organizational scholars have studied inter- and intragender interactions in the workplace. Male and female employees often interact with the opposite gender in ways congruent with long-held gender stereotypes (Gutek & Dunwoody-Miller, 1986). Research suggests that corporate prevalence of male homosociability and locker-room culture ostracizes female employees and bolsters “old boy networks” that favor male employees (Gregory, 2009; Nixon, 2003). Finally, corporate micromanaging of employees’ personal lives through regulations, including nonfraternization policies, often backfire and result in employee resentment (Civil, 1998).

So how does The Office translate these workplace realities to television, and why does it matter? As Fiske and Hartley (2001) point out, television discourse helps viewers understand how a society works and “presents us daily with a constantly updated version of social relations and cultural perceptions” (p. 18). The more realistic a television program is, the more popular it is, and television “naturalizes” the way we understand the world and the status quo (Fiske, 2011). Thompson (2009) points out that realism is an important factor in how sitcom satires are perceived and whether or not their characters have “real-life analogues” (p. 44). This is especially pertinent when studying television, because as Press (1991) and others have shown, television’s presentation style leads viewers to believe the world is being showcased as it really is (p. 17). As Fiske (2011) writes, “Realism [in television] does not just reproduce reality, it makes sense of it” (p. 24).

Some have pointed out that for television programming, realism “gives the program credibility with the audience” (Thompson, 2009, p. 44). The Office, originally developed for the BBC in 2001, makes explicit effort to replicate the dreary reality of a corporate workplace by filming primarily in an antiseptic office building full of fluorescent lighting, nondescript cubicles, and buzzing fax machines (Booth, 2005). In addition, the show appropriates many realities of office life, including persistent employee disenchantment, middle-management frustration with corporate executives,
and bothersome human resources procedures, including sexual harassment refreshers, mandatory diversity training, and federal health disclosure acts. The show’s casting is also important in establishing a feeling of plausible reality. By featuring relatively unknown actors and dressing their average bodies in drab corporate styles, producers ratchet up the show’s believability (Booth, 2005).

Finally, *The Office* enhances its representational credibility through its “mockumentary” format, a style that invokes the transparency of reality shows. This faux-documentary style features direct interaction with the cameras and their operators, “B-roll” footage of mundane activities, and “talking heads” during which characters speak directly to the camera in intimate interviews (Moore, 2006). *The Office* also uses hand-held cameras operated by technical workers with “reality” television experience so that the shaky footage captures allegedly everyday happenings (Booth, 2005). In this way, *The Office* pillages popular conventions of workplace behavior and facets of contemporary documentary and “reality” genres to enrich its realistic humor.

Taken together, the set, casting, costumes, and production style of *The Office* create a visually accurate representation of a Western corporate setting and it is within this setting that issues of gender come to light and become ripe for satirizing.

**Sitcoms, Satire, and “Excess as Hyperbole”**

American sitcoms have had mixed success using satire to critique cultural practices. Though it dates back to ancient Greece, satire has evolved across time and media (Haggins, 2009). Today satire might be defined as humor that mocks human folly and vice and that challenges or ridicules part of a culture in order to critique it (Gray, Jones, & Thompson, 2009; Haggins, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Satire is not universally appealing, and one’s agreement with its critique depends greatly on one’s personal beliefs and background (Surlin & Tate, 1976; Thompson, 2009).

Satirical television has a history of misinterpretation, part of which can be explained by what Fiske (2011) refers to as “excess as hyperbole.” This textual device allows excessively exaggerated characters to represent both a “straight meaning” that represents dominant ideology at face value and a second oppositional meaning that undercuts the straight meaning (p. 91). The 1970s sitcom *All in the Family* is a good example of this device, as well as its potential for misinterpretation. The show’s creators intended for lead character and bigot Archie Bunker, notorious for his flagrant racism, to serve as an example of exaggerated “excess as hyperbole” that critiqued such attitudes (Haggins, 2009). Instead, they were disappointed to find out that, as revealed in Vidmar and Rokeach’s (1974) reception study, the show was “more likely reinforcing prejudice and racism than combating it” (p. 46). As recently as the 2000s, shows have struggled with the effective transmission of satire and “excess as hyperbole.” Comedian Dave Chappelle’s resistance to featuring a minstrel character on *Chappelle’s Show* stemmed from his fear that audiences would take its “straight meaning” and fail to interpret it as a satirical critique of society; Chappelle’s disagreement with producers on the issue led him to walk away from the show and his US$50 million paycheck (Haggins, 2009).
The target of *The Office*’s “excess as hyperbole” is Western corporate culture, but a closer reading is required to unpack how the show mixes satirical humor with representations of gender, and what values that mixture portrays. Two key questions guided our analysis. First, what is happening both on the surface and in the subtext when issues of gender or sexuality are discussed on *The Office*, and how does this relate to the findings of organizational scholarship? In addition, how might the show’s use of “excess as hyperbole” and mockumentary production techniques contribute to its critique of the gendered status quo within the Western white-collar workplace?

**Method**

We used the constant comparative technique to analyze all 28 episodes of the first two seasons of *The Office* on DVD. The constant comparative technique, rooted in grounded theory, can be summarized in four steps: assigning incidents (in our case, incidents related to gender) to categories; elaborating and refining those categories; searching for relationships among and between categories, and simplifying and integrating data into a theoretical structure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Wimmer & Dominick, 2006). Each author independently analyzed all episodes for incidents of gender satire following the four-step constant comparative technique. Then, as a pair, we compared our individual findings, identifying any new or overlapping themes and representations. We chose to limit our study to the show’s first two seasons because it was therein that the series developed the main characters and set the tone for workplace interactions. Our analysis identifies three primary modes through which gender explicitly enters the discourse of *The Office*: the establishment of gendered hierarchies among employees, mandatory corporate training initiatives, and informal employee interactions.

**Results and Discussion**

*Gendered Hierarchies in The Office*

The main characters of *The Office* are situated into masculine and feminine hierarchies within the company and those hierarchies provide valuable insights into how audiences are meant to understand the role of men and women in office culture. The female hierarchy is less developed than the men’s hierarchy and few plots revolve around women (a possible repercussion of so few women on *The Office*’s writing team.) This disparity reflects important cultural conceptions about women’s role in the workplace. When the women interact within the office, it is in the feminized and domestic space of the party planning committee. And when assessed as a group, they create a spectrum of feminine representations that pits professional success against romantic satisfaction.

By analyzing the White female characters Jan and Pam, the show’s two female lead characters, we see these extremes. At the high end of the professional achievement spectrum is thin and beautiful Jan, Michael’s boss from corporate headquarters
(referred to singularly on the show as “corporate”). At the low end of this spectrum is twenty-something secretary Pam, who is plainly pretty yet professionally powerless. Jan, though professionally successful and the only female corporate employee we meet, is recently divorced and perpetually haunted by a brief tryst with Michael. Lower-achieving women are more personally successful, as exemplified by Pam. She is the least powerful woman in the office yet she is greatly envied by the other women, not only for her marital engagement, but also for the covert attention she receives from handsome coworker Jim, a salesperson. Embodying real-world gender stereotypes outlined by Reardon (1995), Jan’s leadership style is constructed as brash, no-nonsense, and aggressive. As a result, she is not well liked and does not enjoy personal friendships with her coworkers. Conversely, meek, nonconfrontational, and sensitive Pam has a strong rapport with the majority of her colleagues.

These representations of feminine characters in the workplace fall directly in line with the conventionally held attitudes about women in power and the perceived personal sacrifices they must make for professional gain (Reardon, 1995). Though some warn against the cultural characterization of women as warmer, more maternal leaders (Due Billing & Alvesson, 2000), it is clear to audiences that Jan’s personal life suffers as a result of her no-nonsense masculine mode of leadership. Conversely, one might argue that Pam’s personal life flourishes because of her nonthreatening lack of career ambition and adherence to workplace stereotypes of women as warm and nurturing (Barrett & Davidson, 2006). Secondary female characters on The Office fall somewhere in this spectrum between Jan and Pam, but there is little class diversity among them. Though at least one nameless female warehouse worker occasionally appears, women’s work experience on The Office is constructed as solely white-collared.

In contrast, the hierarchy of masculinities on the show is much more varied, ranging from the blue-collar warehouse workers to the “suits” at corporate. Working through these types of masculinities, various figures and corresponding stereotypes emerge. The men of the warehouse are represented primarily by manager Darryl, a sarcastic and disenchanted African American, and Roy, the White, sexist, close-minded fiancé of Pam, neither of whom attempt to mask their contempt for Michael, the White, middle-aged regional manager who runs the office but whose primary concern is being friends with his subordinates. As many masculinity and workplace scholars could have predicted, the show’s working-class characters compensate for their lack of economic and workplace authority through aggressive hyper-heterosexuality, proclaiming who they are by who they are not and mocking middle- and upper-class men as feminine and weak (Connell, 1995; Embrick et al., 2007; Katz, 2011).

Moving upstairs in The Office (literally, with regard to the building’s structure but also in terms of the masculine hierarchy) a white-collar masculinity emerges, one marked more by intangible “coolness” than workplace authority or physical power. As opposed to Jan, Michael rarely flexes the authority he holds over subordinates. He explains that his goal is to be “a friend first, a boss second, and probably an entertainer third” (Daniels, Gervais, Merchant, & Kwapis, 2005). As a result, he blends into the office’s sea of mostly white-skinned, tie-wearing, middle-class men. Authority in this
space is determined by a contest of masculine affections, reflecting workplace theories of homosociability, defined by Gregory (2009) as formal and informal communication and socialization via male networking, bonding, and joking. Because The Office’s cameras spend the most time with the middle-class men, this homosociability is most strongly associated with them, but such behavior is also evident in the warehouse and at corporate. Michael’s buffoonish behavior (which extends Butsch’s 2003 observations of fictional working-class men as buffoons to the middle- and upper-class) and idolization of the other men (namely clever and handsome Jim, young and hip Ryan, and sexually audacious Todd Packer) undermine his workplace authority. Michael’s idolization of “cooler” men is only matched by the unflappable loyalty of his eccentric assistant Dwight, which weakly reinstates some social power to Michael. From the very first moments of the show’s first episode, this hierarchy of White masculinity emerges: Jim and Ryan are admired by Michael, who is admired by Dwight, who is admired by no one. We understand that Michael’s position as “boss” grants him just enough patriarchal authority to require other, more popular characters to fake amusement at his outdated pop culture references, bad impressions, and tasteless jokes. These bromances also manifest themselves professionally and Michael often calls upon Jim and Dwight, but never female subordinates, to help with his managerial responsibilities, including hiring and firing. Secondary male characters fall into two categories: they either use their limited camera time to reinforce Michael’s insensitive brand of masculinity (as is the case with characters Kevin and Creed) or they avoid Michael and his buffoonishness (exemplified by characters like Oscar and Stanley).

The upper reaches of Dunder Mifflin are clearly depicted as an old boys network, making it more understandable how someone like Michael could thrive in the company. At corporate, a symbolic, masculine workplace locker room emerges, which Gregory (2009) describes as “a place and a value associated with male power and identity, masculinities, competition, solidarity, and adolescent behavior” (p. 326). When Michael arrives at corporate in the episode “Valentine’s Day,” he is greeted by a roomful of men in expensive suits, but their façade of professionalization quickly fades and the metaphorical lockers become visible (Schur & Daniels, 2006). Rather than a formal handshake, they high-five, fist bump, talk proudly about trips to strip clubs, and collectively deride Jan, referred to as “that bitch.”

Workplace scholars suggest that hegemonic masculinity in the upper echelons of management such as those portrayed on The Office provide a specific threat to gender equity. While warehouse workers might establish temporal power by flexing stereotypical masculinity, male CEOs are “the institutional power brokers in a capitalist economy, and their enormous wealth and power determine the functional and labor practices of industries and the economy” (Gregory, 2009, p. 326). This reality manifests in The Office in many ways, not the least of which is the way corporate puts regional branches in direct competition with one another in an attempt to avoid downsizing.

Troubling trends cut across the show’s masculine hierarchy. Namely, men subscribe to stereotypical notions of masculinity by degrading women and one another
with no real consequences. Sadly, in this way, the show reflects actual workplace realities. Bird (2003) found that possessing gender-stereotypical characteristics and beliefs enhanced men’s social relations with both men and women. Men who resisted stereotypically male characteristics did not fare as well in relations with other men, but were rewarded when interacting with women. On the show, the men who resisted some gender stereotypes, primarily Jim and occasionally Michael, suffer tension with other men while at the same time garner rewards from the opposite sex. One example is when Michael creates tension with his male corporate colleagues by defending Jan, yet is rewarded with a kiss from her; another example is the tension Jim experiences with Roy based on his affection and sensitivity toward Pam. In these moments, the male characters might be described as “feminized” for choosing romantic love over respect from their male peers; however, it is also in these spaces that a character like Michael, who often registers as offensive and inappropriate, transforms into a sympathetic character. When he defends Jan out of love, Michael’s sweeter, lonelier side emerges, and he differentiates himself from a character such as the vulgar and one-dimensional Todd Packer. Women of the office, however, do not invoke such sympathies when they transcend gender stereotypes. When Jan flexes workplace authority more commonly reserved for men, she becomes “that bitch.” It is only through Michael’s romantic interest in Jan that her character is redeemed. Jan-as-loved-by-Michael is significantly more palatable than Jan as the ball-buster from corporate.

Simply by situating the men and women of the office into these hierarchies, the producers of The Office send powerful messages to audiences regarding how gender and class differences are perceived within the workplace. However, specific story lines, particularly those that feature mandatory corporate initiatives, set the stage for some of the show’s most dramatic gender tensions.

Corporate Initiatives Magnify Gender Tension

One recurring feature of The Office is when the staff is forced to participate in mandatory corporate initiatives and refreshers, many of which revolve around gender-related workplace issues. These story lines are rooted in reality; workplace scholars have argued that repressed sexuality can be a major corporate problem. In fact, Civil (1998) goes as far as to write that “sexual drives and fantasies shape corporate policy” and that “a repressed sexuality underlies many of the most difficult and entrenched corporate problems” (p. 50). Policies about gender and romance actually tend to draw inappropriate attention to gender and have proven unpopular among employees (Martin, 1992). This is certainly the case with such initiatives on The Office, despite their usually reasonable and noncontroversial nature. But this is not to be blamed on the initiatives themselves; instead, it is Michael’s resistance to the initiatives and their threat to his patriarchal authority that creates discomfort and, in turn, reinforces the need for the training.

Our archive produced three strong examples of this phenomenon. In the episode “Diversity Day,” Michael’s tasteless performance of a racialized comedy routine
results in corporate sending in diversity trainer Mr. Brown to address racial sensitivity in the workplace (Novak & Kwapis, 2005a). Unable to turn over control to Mr. Brown, Michael suggests that each staff member name a race they are attracted to sexually. Dwight, ever compliant, answers quickly with “Indian women,” creating discomfort for his Indian colleague Kelly. Later, in a racialized twist of a classic party game, Michael gives all of the staff members an index card with a race written on it, to be blindly placed on their foreheads. Coworkers must use stereotypical and derogatory language when talking to one another in order for everyone to figure out the race on their cards. Pam, trying to get Dwight to guess “Asian,” says: “If I have to do this, based on stereotypes that are totally untrue and I do not agree with, you would maybe not be a very good driver.” Dwight grabs the card on his head in disgust and shouts, “Oh man, am I a woman?” Dunder Mifflin’s fictional corporate leaders surely intended for this training to eliminate racial tension within the office; however, because corporate’s intrusion was seen as a challenge to Michael’s work place authority and, in turn, his masculinity, it escalated the racial and gender inappropriateness.

In a later episode titled “Sexual Harassment” an incident at corporate results in a mandatory 5-minute sexual harassment refresher (Novak & Kwapis, 2005b). The staff seems open to the minimally invasive initiative, but again Michael protests this authoritative interference. The presentation opens up multiple opportunities for inappropriate sexual jokes, but Michael’s intervention (and inability to hand over the office’s reigns) again escalates the situation. Just as human resources representative Toby finishes the mandatory presentation, Michael brings in a female blow-up doll and forces Pam into the aforementioned lesbian experience with it. The sexual harassment refresher sets off a series of other consequences throughout the episode, including Dwight asking Toby for help finding the clitoris, the discovery that Darryl “banged” one of the stars of the sexual harassment training video, and the first of countless occurrences of what would become Michael’s sexually charged trademark line: “That’s what she said.” Once again, by opening up opportunities to discuss sensitive issues such as sexuality within the office setting, Dunder Mifflin’s corporate leaders drew even more attention to gender tensions, a documented real-world workplace repercussion of such initiatives (Martin, 1992).

A third example occurs in the episode “Boys and Girls,” which features a “Women in the Workplace” seminar led by Jan intended to vet female employees for corporate potential (Novak & Gordon, 2006). Jan is repeatedly disappointed when the seminar’s prompts lead the women to talk only about what she perceives to be trivial, material, romantic female aspirations. Pam comes closest to instilling hope in Jan when she shows interest in a career advancement opportunity. Unfortunately, by the episode’s end it becomes clear that Pam’s controlling fiancé Roy will not support her new career ambitions. In addition, female staff members manage to switch the focus of the seminar to Jan’s physical relationship with Michael and her “whorish” corporate attire. With the exception of Pam’s brief dream of advancement, the seminar is fruitless. Because of its threat to masculinity within the office, however, the seminar is quickly overshadowed by Michael’s reaction to it. Feeling removed from his throne of power,
he forms his own men’s seminar, where, in proper “locker room” fashion, all men of The Office loosen their ties and celebrate their common masculinity. Interestingly, Michael identifies the blue-collar warehouse as the ideal spot for this, as if working-class masculinity is the most authentic or universal masculinity; however, Michael’s fantasy of male unity is short lived. Class disparities surface when the warehouse workers air frustrations about benefits and their lack of a union. Michael, in a characteristic attempt to gain popularity, supports the men’s plan to unionize. Ultimately, Jan is the one who has to squash the men’s union dreams and, in turn, Michael’s solidarity with them. Jan’s aggressiveness is constructed as a failure of stereotypical femininity and Michael’s weakness is constructed as a failure of stereotypical masculinity, rendering his workplace authority impotent. In the end, the mandatory corporate seminar for women not only failed to create advancement opportunities for any of the women in the office, it actually heightened gender and class tensions within the office.

These failed corporate initiatives serve as worst-case scenarios that dramatize gender tensions in the workplace; however, gender enters the discourse of The Office in more subtle ways as well, specifically in the informal interactions created by the day-to-day proximity of the show’s characters.

Informal Mixed-Gender Interactions, Warranted and Otherwise

Organizational scholarship tends to focus on how gender affects formal, official workplace interactions such as hiring or firing procedures. Informal “water cooler” interactions between men and women have been less studied, but these are the very types of casual mixed-gender encounters that The Office mines for recognition and laughs and which highlight the dominance of hegemonic masculinity within the office environment. The characters’ inability to resist talking about gender and sexuality reflects real-world tendencies. Some scholars have argued that because sex is a particularly salient characteristic, stereotypical gender roles are hard to unlearn. Within the workplace, this is called “sex-role spillover” (Gutek & Dunwoody-Miller, 1986). The theory suggests that sex is the most salient social characteristic noticed about people and gender roles learned early in life remain powerful influences. Both men and women are usually most comfortable interacting with the opposite sex in ways congruent to gender roles even when it conflicts with social situations such as work behavior (Gutek & Dunwoody-Miller, 1986).

Some of this informal mixed-gender interaction on The Office is welcomed, specifically in the form of office romances, which make up a substantial portion of the show’s narrative tension. In this way, the show is representative of real-world office culture. Bordwin (1994) found that, despite the glut of codes and policies, a third of all romantic relationships in the United States began in the workplace. The Office anchors its plot on a burgeoning but blocked romance between its two most conventionally attractive characters Pam and Jim. In researching real-world office romances, Powell (2001) found that most couples in a workplace romance try to keep the relationship secret but fail, and we see this on The Office. Pam, engaged to Roy, unconvincingly
denies her attraction to Jim. For his part, Jim continually masks the intensity of his unrequited feelings for Pam, thus creating an undercurrent of eroticism in an otherwise colorless workplace. Two other less central romantic relationships occur on the show during these two seasons. Dwight and Angela are the two most neurotic characters in the office and their highly eccentric relationship develops away from their colleagues’ and the audience’s eyes. The romance between Michael and Jan provides an alternate reading of the institutionally prohibited boss/employee office romance. Despite their differences, all three primary romances reinforce a clear message: White, heteronormative romance is the ultimate source of pleasure within the otherwise dull Western office setting.

The Office’s focus on office romance does not imply, however, that all informal mixed-gender interactions between characters are welcome or warranted. When The Office turns its biting humor to sexual themes, Michael and Dwight, with their special blend of misogyny and ignorance, usually have the hardest time maintaining acceptable workplace behavior. Although blatant sexual harassment through invitations to sex acts or molestation never takes place on the show, many episodes are filled with contentious moments when sex is a topic, and exclusively at the initiation of male staff members; women are rarely shown instigating sexually uncomfortable situations, an imbalance that reinforces the patriarchal nature of the office. The secondary female character Meredith is a possible exception in the way that her off-the-cuff sexual anecdotes are constructed as odd or deviant, but her sexual identity fails to constitute major plot lines or seriously target her male coworkers. In the majority of its sexual commentary, The Office mocks convention with grandiose violations. Whether Michael directly encourages his employees to make out in closets during the company Christmas party, or Todd Packer walks into the same party with mistletoe hanging from the front of his belt as an invitation for oral sex, the program leaps well past the boundaries of acceptable corporate behavior. In this way, Fiske’s (2011) theory of “excess as hyperbole” unfolds. The flagrant behavior of characters such as Todd and Michael simultaneously represents and critiques hypersexual hegemonic masculinity.

The Office’s less flagrant flouting of convention on other topics of a sexual nature are potentially more harmful to goals of reforming workplace behavior because those transgressions serve to quietly reinforce patriarchal behavior. Women’s appearances, and never men’s, are attacked in a scattered but savage manner. Pam, constructed as the most conventionally attractive woman, receives the bulk of the comments. While homosexuals are not directly ridiculed, allusions that male heterosexuals might be gay suggest a failure of masculinity. The show reaches its sexually offensive peak on the rare occasion when Todd Packer arrives at the office, whether he’s calling Michael a queen or Jim a queer, pulling up in a car with a license plate that reads “WLHUNG” in reference to his penis size, or spewing nymphomaniac jokes.

As Montemurro (2003) observes, The Office is not unique in its trivialization of sexual harassment; in her study of workplace-based sitcoms in the late 1990s, she found that sexual harassment was often a source of humor and it was most often perpetrated by men in authority. When workplace sexual harassment was acknowledged,
it was trivialized, conveying “a message that gender harassment is funny and con-
doned in the televised workplace” (p. 444). Here, however, is where The Office’s
unique production format might complicate an instinct to jump to a similar conclusion. First, The Office is a satire, which aims to critique the very harassment it showcases via characters’ “excess as hyperbole.” Though this method failed in examples such as All in the Family, The Office’s mockumentary format serves as a moral middleman between the characters and the audience. More than just capturing the repulsed reac-
tions to Michael’s escapades, the camera also interviews characters on the side, docu-
menting and confirming their disapproval of what’s happening. In addition, the show
does not feature a laugh track, which sets it apart from All in the Family and the work-
place sitcoms Montemurro analyzed. Thus, audiences must decide when to laugh, and 
the cues from the mockumentary footage strongly suggest that Michael and other offensive characters are to be laughed at, not laughed with, a distinction previous sitcom satires failed to make (Thompson, 2009). In this way, The Office opens more 
possibilities for oppositional readings than its satire sitcom predecessors.

Conclusion

When compared to the issues outlined in organizational scholarship, our analysis finds 
that The Office has its finger firmly placed on the pulse of real-world workplace gen-
der issues. The show brings these issues to light in many ways, including the creation 
of gender and class hierarchies constructed around stereotypes that dominate the Western white-collar workplace. The Office exemplifies how corporate initiatives can backfire and actually increase the very social tension they sought to eliminate. Through its use of “excess as hyperbole,” the show satirizes and mocks the figures of patriarchal corporate authority with which most American workers interact each day. 

As we conclude our findings, we must return to hegemony theory, for our analysis
was motivated by an interest in how, within the sociocultural context of Western 
white-collar workplace realities, The Office might “facilitate broader social and politi-
cal ends” (Durham & Kellner, 2006, p. xvi). Ultimately, how might The Office’s rep-
resentations of gender reinforce or challenge the patriarchal status quo of American corporate life?

First, we conclude that on the surface, the gender hierarchies established within The Office reinforce Western patriarchal workplace authority and gender stereotypes. Men
rule at all levels of Dunder Mifflin, from corporate headquarters, to regional branches, to the operation of the warehouse, and sexist male attitudes dominate all classes. Not
only are women of The Office the subject of this harassment, but the show’s writers give
them very few opportunities to demonstrate positive qualities. Ultimately, the
female characters represent our culture’s most stereotypical caricatures of women, in
the workplace and otherwise: the shrew, the ball buster, the damsel in distress, the valley girl, the hot mess. Perhaps only middle-aged Phyllis, with her large-bodied confi-
dence, stable career, and thriving romantic life, serves as a healthy female role model, yet she gets the least camera time of all the women. If women on The Office dare to

Downloaded from jci.sagepub.com at ELON UNIV on February 22, 2013
defy established stereotypes or expectations, they are punished. When Jan is aggressive and asserts her authority or when Pam dreams of career advancement, the men in their midst discipline their behavior and put them “back in their place.” Jan might have the final say at the Scranton branch, but she is punished socially and romantically for this authority. In later seasons, she eventually has a nervous breakdown and is fired from the company, becoming financially dependent on Michael.

Men of The Office fare slightly better when they defy masculine stereotypes, as Bird’s (2003) study of real-world male employees predicts. When Jim is sensitive to Pam’s needs and passions or when Michael dares to defend Jan’s honor from within the corporate “locker room,” they earn romantic and sexual rewards from their love interests and likely gain favor with audiences. Male characters such as Roy or Todd Packer, who never yield their hegemonic masculine authority or treat women as equals, are likely to be interpreted as “the bad guys” who are not to be emulated. In this way, the show may be subtly throwing its support behind a less hegemonic and more flexible mode of masculinity than has been historically appreciated in the corporate workplace. These masculine sensitivities do, however, come with a cost. Though Jim, with his subtle humor, rejection of buffoonish masculinity, and respect for female coworkers, emerges as the office’s male idol, he is ultimately professionally neutered and sacrifices career promotion for the romantic and social success afforded to him in the regional office.

The show’s production style, with its use of “excess as hyperbole” and mockumentary footage, has transgressive potential. As outlined in numerous anecdotes above, a recurring narrative theme on The Office is Michael’s disproportionate and offensive response to corporate interference at the branch. Throughout these examples, the show’s production style reinforces Michael’s inappropriateness, whether the camera lingers over an awkward silence, captures office workers’ horrified gasps as they watch Michael make a fool of himself, or records a “talking head” wherein Michael’s coworkers confirm their disapproval of his behavior. Michael is “excess as hyperbole,” and by exaggeratedly representing the hypersexual patriarchal authority who cannot let go of control, he simultaneously critiques this ideology. Future reception studies would help confirm our suspicions, but we conclude that because Michael, Todd, Dwight, and other characters’ exaggerated “excess” is so flagrant, and because the mockumentary techniques continually hint at inappropriateness, it is highly unlikely that audiences would interpret their workplace behavior as acceptable. We believe that the show is successful in communicating its critique of the offensive antics of these characters.

In this way, it is tempting to conclude that The Office is counterhegemonic. Fiske (2011) describes hegemony as a “process whereby the subordinate are led to consent to the system that subordinates them” (p. 40). By turning bosses, corporate leaders, and other symbols of capitalist patriarchal authority into buffoons, The Office has at least the potential to inspire white-collar workers to question the consent they give to an unbalanced employment system. However, looking more closely, audiences of The Office quickly figure out that as foolish as many of its characters may be, they face no
repercussions for their actions. Despite their offensiveness, male characters like Michael or Todd Packer are never punished for their behavior, even though their offending acts are clearly documented on videotape (the mockumentary cameras are allegedly shooting a documentary about the office). By subtly approving of this behavior through a lack of consequences for perpetuators, *The Office* may create real-world consequences. As Montemurro (2003) concludes in her study of sexual harassment in sitcoms, by trivializing sexual harassment and letting it go unpunished, texts such as *The Office* “can be interpreted as sanctioning the sexualization of women, and the harassing of people on the basis of gender and/or sexuality” (p. 444).

As Fiske (2011) observed, the more realistic a television program is, the more popular it is, and television “naturalizes” the way we understand the world and the status quo. With the majority of Americans working in white-collar occupations, and with the show now in its ninth season and a long run in syndication, *The Office*, complete with its social commentary on gender issues within the workplace, clearly resonates with audiences. Though the show does effectively ridicule facets of patriarchal authority and hegemonic masculinity in the American workplace through its use of “excess as hyperbole,” it remains to be seen whether these representations serve merely as entertainment or if they have transgressive potential. A future audience reception study could help illuminate whether *The Office*’s satirical representation of masculine workplace authority might motivate workers to resist the patriarchal workplace status quo or whether the show merely provides fleeting catharsis for bored or powerless workers who lack the courage or authority to challenge the absurdities of the workplace power structures under which they toil each day. As for its representations of women and sexual minorities, *The Office*, like a great many other television shows, has significant room to improve.

**Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**References**


Author Biographies

Jessica Birthisel is a faculty member in the Bridgewater State University Communication Studies Department. Her teaching and research interests include gender, popular culture, visual communication, multimedia storytelling and journalism.

Jason A. Martin (PhD, Indiana University, Bloomington, 2011) is an assistant professor in the College of Communication at DePaul University. His teaching and research interests include political communication, media law and ethics, and journalism.