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Culture and incongruity in *The Office* (UK)

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ABSTRACT

The creators of a TV sitcom like *The Office* (UK) communicate with their audience via the characters. The viewers must therefore watch the scenes of *The Office* both as *situated character behaviour*, and as the *behavioural residue* of the creators. Understanding behaviour and behavioural residue requires shared knowledge at the personal, cultural or universal level. By analysing the tone-setting first five scenes of the sitcom, this paper demonstrates how the creators show their characters deviating mainly from *culturally* shared norms concerning the management of English offices to produce incongruous stimuli which their audience can recognise. The effort needed to detect the creators' intent can be enjoyed when the interactants are in a playful, para-telic meta-motivational state.
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1. Introduction

One of the most successful comedies on British TV in the last 20 years is *The Office* (Holmes, 2015), a sitcom written by Ricky Gervais and Stephen Merchant in the form of a fake documentary about the staff of the regional office of a paper merchant, Wernham Hogg in Slough, England. The sitcom was produced by the BBC and broadcast on British television between 2001 and 2003. The show's main character is the manager of the office, David Brent, who is supported by his assistant Gareth. Further prominent employees are salesman Tim and receptionist Dawn. The characters are not only seen interacting in the sitcom; they also comment on their lives in the form of so-called *talking heads*. While facing a member of the "camera crew," who are supposedly filming the documentary (the suggestion is that there is an interviewer off-screen), they give their own perspective of the events in the sitcom and of their own roles in them.

This format makes considerable demands of the parties involved in producing and consuming the show. The *viewers* who watch *The Office* need to be able to make sense of both the fictional world of the sitcom and of the characters' comments on it, as well as of the humorous intent of the show's creators underlying the scenes and the talking heads. They have to do this without any explicit clues as to what exactly is meant to be funny in the (inter-)action shown. The show's *creators* or *collective senders* (Dynel, 2011b)[1] face perhaps even bigger challenges. Naturally, producing a sitcom involves communicating with an audience (Brock, 2004, 2009, 2015; Dynel, 2011b), but instead of engaging in synchronous communication involving people who can all influence the talk and who can inter-actively try to come to negotiated (in the sense of similar and compatible) meanings, the collective senders of sitcoms like *The Office* are confined to a one-way communication channel. Moreover, there is no synchronicity between the creation of the show and its reception, and the producers must anticipate the viewers' response without any observable "uptake" (Clark, 1996). Personal relationships between the collective sender and the viewers

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[1] Dynel uses the term "collective sender" for all the people involved in creating a TV show. I have used the plural "collective senders" in those cases where the use of a singular might be counter-intuitive.

which could provide clues as to how things might be meant by the one and inferred by the other, are also absent.[2] On top of this, the producers of a sitcom do not personally tell their own story, but like all creators of drama, have to communicate with their audiences through showing the (inter)action of characters in a fictional world (Short, 1981, 1994).

There are a few ways in which the collective senders can try to influence the viewers' reception of a show. They can have a live, audibly responding audience, use so-called laugh tracks, or show laughing signals from characters to signal what elements of scenes are meant to be humorous (Messerli, 2016). However, in order to keep the documentary format intact, the producers of *The Office* need to maintain the fictional world as a self-contained reality and laugh tracks and live audiences would spoil the character of the show. In view of this lack of overt clues, how are TV viewers able to make sense of the scenes they see in this sitcom and tell what is meant humorously by the creators, and how can the collective senders anticipate the responses of their audiences with such precision that they can create highly acclaimed comedies like *The Office*?

An important condition for success is that the collective sender and the viewers are willing to engage in such a challenging form of interaction in the first place. They need to see the exercise as eventually rewarding, even though enjoying a sitcom hardly fulfils any directly survival-related needs. In order to be able to be entertained by such apparently trivial challenges rather than be annoyed by them, people typically need to be in a playful or *para-telic meta-motivational state* (Apter, 1982; Coulson, 1991). In such a playful state of mind, people do not try to fulfil essential needs, as when they are in a telic state, but feel free to focus instead on the enjoyment of activities for their own sake. Since viewers typically watch sitcoms voluntarily in their leisure time and primarily want to be amused by the collective sender, a para-telic meta-motivational state is easy to bring about and in such a state both the collective sender and the viewers can enjoy meeting the challenges of communicating through the medium of a sitcom (or, for that matter, any other kind of drama) as a form of entertainment.[3]

Having accepted the challenge set by the collective sender, the viewers then need to infer how the makers want the scenes of the sitcom to be understood. How this is done and what role especially cultural knowledge plays in the communication between the collective sender and the TV audience is the topic of this paper. In section 2, we will look at *mental models* as the way people make sense of situations and at the way such mental models can be deployed to create humour. In section 3, we investigate the way people understand others by re-constructing these others' mental models through observing their behaviour or behavioural residue. In section 4, we will look at the first five scenes of the first episode of series one of *The Office* to investigate how the collective senders present their mental models to their audience in the form of the scenes of the sitcom and how the audience can make sense of the sitcom scenes as mental models manipulated by the collective senders with a humorous intent. Special attention will be paid to the role of culture in the construction and re-construction of mental models. Section 5 is a short conclusion.

2. Mental models, humorous intent and incongruity

When people make sense of situations, they construct mental models of them (Johnson-Laird, 1983; van Dijk, 2008, 2009, 2014). Public versions of these mental models can be exchanged and co-ordinated with other people through discourse to enable co-operation. de Jongste (2016) defines humorous discourse as involving the presentation by the speaker of a deliberately manipulated *public mental model* of a situation. This means that when they produce humorous discourse, speakers do not express what they truly believe about this situation – their *private mental model* of it – but produce a manipulated model to their audience. The recipients are challenged to detect the manipulation and identify the manipulated mental model as a product of the speaker's a priori humorous intent (Haugh, 2008) (compare the notion of *encryption* in Flamson and Barrett, 2008; Flamson and Bryant, 2013). This can be done by re-constructing the speaker's real view of the situation, their private mental model, and by relating this private mental model to their public mental model and so discovering what has been manipulated. For example, when the Monty Python team shows a scene from the Ministry of Silly Walks, this is their public mental model. Their private mental model of a ministry -what we assume they know about ministries – has been manipulated. The manipulation, which typically involves a diminishment of some sort (Apter, 1982), is intended to make the scene humorous, and the audience is invited to discover the manipulation and to define it as a product of the a priori humorous intent of the Monty Python team. This can be followed by an aesthetic assessment of the manipulation.

Most scholars agree that a central element in humorous stimuli is *incongruity* (see for a discussion Martin, 2007), but there are some voices expressing disagreement (Hurley et al., 2011; Latta, 1998; Morreall, 2009). This often centres round the notion that incongruity is too vague a concept to have a great explanatory value. There has also been controversy over the necessity for incongruity to be resolved or not, and whether there is one stage involved in the recognition of humorous incongruity or two. These issues were addressed by Forabosco (1992, 2008), who tried to integrate the various perspectives by stating that "a stimulus is incongruous when it diverts from the cognitive model of reference" (2008:48) and that it depends on the nature of the diversion whether the incongruity needs to be resolved or merely recognised. In terms of mental models this means that

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[2] Viewers can, of course, exchange their views with other viewers, and with reviewers by means of forums such as digitalspy.co.uk or the forums which some newspapers provide underneath their reviews of TV shows.

[3] Apter points out that people's desire to engage in para-telic activities can lead to professional providers of such activities, such as artists and professional athletes. To them the job of producing successful, high-quality entertainment requires a goal-oriented, telic mind-set to deal with such matters as organisation and execution. The *creation* of such entertainment, however, requires a playful, para-telic mind-set.