



Mockumentary: The New Age Satire is Taking the World by Storm

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Abstract

Sitcoms and soap operas have managed to have a grip on the audience irrespective of age or generation, and comedy has almost always been the favourite genre. Comedy series like 'Yes, Prime Minister', 'I Love Lucy', and 'Mind Your Language' are some of the iconic shows that are unforgettable and have been able to regale the audience for more than four decades. However, a new form of comedy that has taken the world of series by storm, be it television or the web, is Mockumentary, a form of comedy that mixes fact and fiction. The word is a portmanteau, i.e., the new word originates by combining the words "mock" and "documentary" and is a type of fictional film or series that combines features of a comic show but is presented in the form of a documentary to satirize its subject. Though the term was coined in the 1960s and the form took its foothold in the 1980s, the early twenty-first century, which can be dubbed as the century of TV series and Web series, has been responsible for popularizing the format through several shows that started at the turn of the century. Some of them have been hugely successful and are running their seasons in the current decade, too. The paper aims to study this revolutionary form of comedy and satire to highlight the pragmatic shift in literary and mass media culture and its presentation. The two shows that will be taken up for study and reference include 'The Office' and 'Modern Family'.

Keywords- Mockumentary, documentary, satire, parody, irony, tropes.

Introduction

Mockumentaries have emerged as a unique storytelling genre, blending satire with documentary techniques to explore societal themes. By mimicking traditional documentary conventions like handheld camera work, interviews, and voiceovers, they craft an illusion

of realism that blurs the line between fiction and reality. This deliberate interplay challenges audiences to question the narrative's authenticity while reflecting on the subject matter's deeper truths. Mockumentaries use humour and irony to dissect societal norms, offering a fresh perspective that both entertains

and provokes thought. Their innovative approach makes them a powerful medium for commentary, balancing realism with creative storytelling.

'Mockumentary, in its constant 'breaking of the fourth wall' between the set and the camera, develops a distinct and deliberately reflexive set of aesthetics. It invites viewers to participate, with knowing pleasures, in the tiny, unremarkable and almost-missed moments where characters' 'public-facing' performances of self are punctured. It is through glances to the camera, rambling confessions, occasional interruptions by the 'film crew', and so on that the fictional world of the mockumentary is made solid.' (Allen, Kim & Tracey Jensen)

Characteristics of Mockumentaries

Narrative Structure: Mockumentaries often adopt a non-linear narrative structure, combining scripted scenes with improvisation to create a sense of spontaneity. This structure allows filmmakers to maintain a documentary-like feel while crafting a fictional storyline.

Mockumentary Tropes: Certain tropes are common in mockumentaries, such as the use of talking-head interviews, archival footage, and on-the-spot observational moments. These elements contribute to the illusion of reality, making it challenging for viewers to discern fact from fiction.

Satirical Commentary: Mockumentaries frequently serve as a vehicle for social and cultural critique. Through humour and satire, filmmakers can address sensitive topics and provoke thought while maintaining a certain level of distance from the issues at hand.

'Mockumentaries are often more appealing to audiences due to their satirical content and comedic tone. The goal of most mockumentary films is to trick the audience into believing that the

people and events depicted are (or were) real. Indeed, to capture the audience's trust, directors of mockumentaries apply many of the techniques and conventions of documentary films. Mockumentaries leave the audience questioning the truth of what they have experienced. Based on this deliberate manipulation, a mockumentary can appear to be both real and fake, both shocking and humorous, both projected and actual.' (Napolitano, Victoria)

Evolution of Mockumentaries

The roots of mockumentaries can be traced back to early radio broadcasts and theatrical productions. However, the genre truly came into its own with the advent of film and television. Notable early examples include "This Is Spinal Tap" (1984) and "Zelig" (1983). In the 21st century, mockumentaries achieved mainstream success with projects like "The Office" (UK) and "Trailer Park Boys." The popularity of these works paved the way for more ambitious projects, blurring the lines between reality and fiction.

Impact of Mockumentaries

Mockumentaries often serve as a mirror reflecting society's idiosyncrasies and absurdities. By exaggerating and distorting reality, these works shed light on underlying social issues in a palatable and entertaining manner. The success of mockumentaries has influenced traditional documentary filmmaking, with some directors incorporating fictional elements to enhance storytelling. This shift challenges the traditional boundaries of documentary ethics and authenticity.

Both *The Office* and *Modern Family* are iconic TV series that masterfully employ the mockumentary format to deliver unique comedic perspectives on everyday life. While *The Office* offers a satirical glimpse into workplace dynamics through awkward humour and relatable characters, *Modern Family* explores family relationships with a blend of heart and

hilarity. Both shows leverage the format's hallmark elements, such as direct-to-camera interviews and candid filming, to create intimacy and realism. Their distinct approaches to storytelling and humour have redefined the sitcom genre, using the mockumentary style to connect with audiences and reflect the quirks of modern life.

"The Office," both in its UK and US iterations, stands as a seminal example of the mockumentary genre, using a fictional documentary format to satirize the workplace and, by extension, contemporary society. This critical commentary will explore key aspects of "The Office," including its innovative narrative structure, its use of humour, and its lasting impact on both the mockumentary genre and television as a whole.

One of the defining features of "The Office" is its unique narrative structure. The series unfolds as if it were a real documentary, with characters frequently breaking the fourth wall to address the camera directly. This technique not only provides insight into characters' inner thoughts and feelings but also blurs the line between fiction and reality. The documentary format allows for a level of intimacy and immediacy that traditional sitcoms often lack, creating a sense of authenticity that resonates with audiences.

"The Office" achieves a remarkable balance between character-driven comedy and a realistic portrayal of office life. The characters are not just caricatures; they are individuals with flaws, insecurities, and complex relationships. Ruby Freeman in her analysis of mockumentaries writes,

'What makes *The Office* so great is its characters, and the mockumentary format brings characterisation to the fore. Each character becomes almost like a caricature, and we can identify our own colleagues and peers in the stereotypes that the show presents. This generates the comedy that drives the appeal as we

watch extremely idiosyncratic individuals undertaking the most mundane, universal activities.' (Freeman, Ruby)

By presenting the mundane and sometimes absurd aspects of office culture, the series connects with viewers on a relatable level. The mockumentary format adds an extra layer of authenticity, reinforcing the notion that these characters are real people navigating the challenges of the workplace.

Humour is at the core of "The Office," and its mockumentary style enhances the comedic impact. The series thrives on cringe humour, capturing awkward moments and social faux pas that resonate with the universal experiences of the audience. By satirizing the idiosyncrasies of office dynamics, the show offers a keen commentary on the absurdities of corporate culture. It critiques not only the characters within the series but also the broader societal norms that contribute to workplace dysfunction.

Beyond its comedic elements, "The Office" serves as a social commentary on the human condition within the confines of a workplace. The series tackles issues such as power dynamics, office politics, and the impact of corporate culture on individuals. The documentary format allows for a detached yet intimate observation of these dynamics, offering viewers a lens through which to reflect on their own experiences.

The Office has profoundly impacted television, shaping the mockumentary genre and redefining sitcoms. Its success showcased the storytelling power of blending fiction with reality, inspiring creators to explore the mockumentary format's unique potential. The series' relatable humor and memorable characters have sparked a cultural phenomenon, embedding phrases like "That's what she said" into everyday language. By breaking the fourth wall and highlighting the mundane absurdities of office life, *The Office*

resonated with audiences worldwide. Its legacy endures, influencing countless shows and proving that sharp wit and innovative storytelling can leave a lasting imprint on popular culture.

Therefore, "The Office" as a mockumentary transcends the traditional sitcom format by seamlessly integrating documentary-style storytelling with humour and social commentary. Its enduring legacy lies not only in its comedic brilliance but also in its ability to capture the zeitgeist of office culture, making it a timeless and influential piece of television history.

"Modern Family" revolutionized the sitcom landscape by adopting a mockumentary format, providing a fresh and innovative perspective on the traditional family sitcom. This critical commentary will explore key elements of "Modern Family," including its narrative structure, character dynamics, comedic approach, and its impact on the portrayal of diverse family structures in mainstream television.

"Modern Family" employs a mockumentary style to tell the story of the Pritchett-Dunphy family. The characters speak directly to the camera in talking-head interviews, sharing their thoughts and insights. This format adds a layer of intimacy, allowing the audience to connect with the characters on a personal level. The documentary-style confessionals serve as a storytelling device that complements the traditional narrative, offering a unique perspective on the family's dynamics.

Modern Family is one of the most popular television shows on the air today. Its family style comedy draws in a large audience, giving them a platform to educate their viewers on relevant social issues. Modern Family relies heavily on satire, allowing them to tackle traditionally taboo topics. It's important for us to understand some of the rhetorical choices Modern Family makes

as it not only educates the viewers, but it also impacts the way we communicate as a society. (Wojciehowski, Austin)

One of the standout features of "Modern Family" is its portrayal of diverse family structures. The series presents three interconnected families – Jay and his second wife Gloria, Jay's daughter Claire and her family, and Jay's son Mitchell and his partner Cameron – each with its own set of unique dynamics. By showcasing a variety of family compositions, the show challenges traditional norms and contributes to a more inclusive representation of family life on television.

The characters in "Modern Family" are distinct and well-developed, contributing to the show's widespread appeal. The mockumentary format allows each character to express their perspectives directly to the audience, creating a multi-dimensional portrayal. The diverse personalities, from the traditional Jay to the quirky Cameron and Mitchell, add depth and complexity to the family dynamic, allowing the audience to relate to and empathize with a range of experiences.

Humour is at the forefront of "Modern Family." The mockumentary style enhances the comedic impact by allowing characters to deliver punchlines directly to the camera. The series employs a blend of situational, physical, and character-driven humour, catering to a wide range of comedic tastes. The show's humour is often rooted in relatable family situations, making it accessible and appealing to a broad audience. Julija Korostenskiene, in her research, analyses some parts of the sitcom to identify the kind of humour and comedy presented by the show and their implications in society. She gives the following conclusions,

The analysis of 69 ironic texts extracted from two MF seasons shows that the mode of irony is best approached through the principle of meaning inversion, where the non-vocalised meaning (i.e. Meaning II) exposes the speaker's critical stance

toward the topic addressed. The indefinite boundaries between irony and sarcasm become manifest in texts addressing other cultures.

Having identified irony as a mode of comedy, she goes on to explain the presence of sarcasm and parody as the other two forms of humour.

The mode of sarcasm comprises the overwhelming majority of the texts compiled, with speakers targeting specific human subjects in order to criticise or ridicule them. On other occasions speakers verbalise sarcastic comments of self-deprecatory nature,...The least numerically, but the most extensive in textual form is the mode of parody. Only a very limited number of texts accurately account for parody as impolite mimicry targeting the victim's verbal and non-verbal behaviour....Finally, ironic, sarcastic, and parodic vocalisations of MF characters (especially ironic and sarcastic ones) support the stereotypical representation of the very characters and their daily lives, with sarcasm being the dominating mode. (Korostenskiene, Julija and Aurelija Lieponyte)

While primarily a comedy, "Modern Family" does not shy away from addressing social issues. The series subtly explores topics such as same-sex parenting, intergenerational differences, and cultural diversity. Through humour and heartwarming moments, the show provides a platform for addressing these issues within the context of a modern family, contributing to broader conversations about societal norms and family dynamics.

"Modern Family" had a significant impact on the television landscape, winning critical acclaim and numerous awards during its run. Its success demonstrated that a mockumentary format could breathe new life into the traditional sitcom genre. Moreover, the series contributed to a shift in the portrayal of

diverse family structures on television, paving the way for more inclusive storytelling in subsequent shows.

In conclusion, "Modern Family" as a mockumentary is a testament to the versatility of the format in conveying the complexities of modern family life. Through its narrative structure, diverse character dynamics, humour, and social commentary, the series left an enduring mark on television, influencing the way families are portrayed and stories are told in the sitcom genre.

"The Office" and "Modern Family" are both iconic television series that utilize the mockumentary format, albeit in different ways, to present distinctive comedic takes on everyday life. Here's a comparison and contrast of these two mockumentaries:

The Office embraces a more straightforward documentary style, with a single-camera setup that simulates a real documentary. The characters frequently break the fourth wall, speaking directly to the camera, creating a sense of immediacy and realism. *Modern Family* also employs a mockumentary approach but with a more dynamic visual style. The show features a blended use of single-camera and traditional multi-camera setups. Characters speak directly to the camera in talking-head interviews, but the show is not as committed to a strict documentary aesthetic.

Setting and Premise

The Office is set in the mundane environment of a typical office, the show satirizes corporate culture and the dynamics among office employees. The setting allows for a focus on the microcosm of workplace relationships and the monotony of daily office life. *Modern Family*, on the other hand, portrays the lives of three interconnected families, each with its unique dynamics. The setting is more diverse, ranging from suburban homes to workplaces, schools, and family events. The

show explores a broader spectrum of familial relationships and societal dynamics.

Character Dynamics

The Office features a mix of eccentric and relatable characters, with a particular emphasis on their interactions within the workplace. The characters are often exaggerated versions of office archetypes, contributing to the show's cringe comedy and satirical commentary on office culture. While *Modern Family* boasts a diverse cast of characters spanning three generations. The character dynamics are driven by the interactions within and between the three families. The characters are more rooted in familial archetypes but are well-developed with individual quirks, contributing to the show's comedic ensemble.

Humour Style

The Office relies heavily on cringe humour, emphasizing awkward situations, uncomfortable exchanges, and the mundane aspects of office life. The humour often arises from the characters' idiosyncrasies and the absurdity of their workplace interactions. *Modern Family*, invariably incorporates a mix of situational, character-driven, and physical humour. The comedic style is more varied, catering to a broad audience. The humour often stems from the diverse personalities within the three families and the relatable situations they navigate.

Social Commentary

The Office offers a satirical commentary on office politics, corporate culture, and the absurdities of workplace dynamics. The show provides a lens through which to critique societal norms and expectations within the context of the office environment.

Modern Family, however, tackles social issues related to family life, including themes of parenting, intergenerational differences, and cultural diversity. The series subtly addresses societal norms surrounding family structures

while maintaining a light-hearted and comedic tone.

Legacy and Impact

The Office had a profound impact on television, influencing the mockumentary genre and shaping the approach to workplace comedies. Its legacy is marked by its distinctive narrative style and the widespread adoption of mockumentary elements in subsequent shows. *Modern Family*, also left a lasting impact, particularly in its portrayal of diverse family structures on mainstream television. The series contributed to the normalization of non-traditional family dynamics and showcased the evolving landscape of family-oriented sitcoms.

Conclusion

In summary, while both "The Office" and "Modern Family" share the mockumentary format, they differ in their narrative styles, settings, character dynamics, humour approaches, and the social issues they address. Each has made a significant mark on television history, showcasing the versatility of the mockumentary genre in capturing the humour and complexities of everyday life.

Therefore, mockumentaries, with their unique blend of fiction and reality, have become a powerful and entertaining means of cultural commentary. Through an analysis of key characteristics, historical evolution, and societal impact, this paper has sought to shed light on the significance of mockumentaries in the realm of film and television. As the genre continues to evolve, it remains a fascinating area of exploration for filmmakers and audiences alike.

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