

Talking to Strangers

The Use of a Cameraman in *The Office* and What It Reveals about  
Communication

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### Abstract

In the television mock-documentary *The Office*, co-workers Jim and Pam tell the cameraman they are dating before they tell their fellow co-workers in the office. The cameraman sees them getting engaged before anyone in the office has a clue. Even the news of their pregnancy is witnessed first by the camera crew. Jim and Pam's boss, Michael, and other employees, such as Dwight, Angela and others, also share this trend of self-disclosure to the cameraman. They reveal secrets and embarrassing stories to the cameraman, showing a private side of themselves that most of their co-workers never see.

First the term "mock-documentary" is explained before specifically discussing the *The Office*. Next the terms and theories from scholarly sources that relate the topic of self-disclosure to strangers are reviewed. Consequential strangers, weak ties, the stranger-on-a-train phenomenon, and para-social interaction are studied in relation to the development of a new listening stranger theory. Examples of self-disclosure from episodes of *The Office* are used by dividing the situations into different categories based on how the person interacted with the cameraman. Conclusions are then drawn from the instances of communication with the cameramen from *The Office*, after which the listening stranger theory will be defined and explained. Last, the listening stranger theory is related to real-life situations and supported by communication research from books and journal articles.

## Talking to Strangers

### The Use of a Cameraman in the Office and What It Reveals About Communication

#### **Introduction**

If a person asks the average John Doe on the street a personal question, Mr. Doe will probably balk at that person's audacity to ask it and refuse to answer. However, that same John Doe might get on an elevator or a plane ride and be willing to tell his life stories to the stranger sitting next to him. The idea of a listening stranger is often comforting and safe to a person who needs someone to talk to but would rather not talk to a friend.

Taking this notion a step further, one can say that a camera crew filming a group of people for a raw footage or for a documentary might take the form of that listening stranger to one of the people being filmed. The person reveals information and interacts with the camera and the cameraman behind the lens, while supposedly knowing virtually nothing about the cameraman himself. The cameraman is essentially the listening stranger.

#### **Mock-documentary Defined**

The popularity of the mock-documentary and other semi-reality media is on the rise worldwide. As defined by Jelle Mast in the article "New Directions in Hybrid Popular Television: A Reassessment of Television Mock-documentary," a mock-documentary is a fake documentary that "looks and sounds like (real) documentaries" (2009, p. 231). Mast mentions several examples including Comedy Central's *Reno 911* and BBC's *The Office*, the popularity of which created several offshoots of the original,

including the American version on NBC. These mock-documentaries are a “staple aspect of contemporary television and popular culture” (2009, p. 231). Audiences are responding well to the mock-documentary format of television, as spin-offs and scenarios similar to the mock-documentary are occurring in other television shows and films. Examples of these include NBC’s show *Parks and Recreation*, the Christopher Guest films *This is Spinal Tap*, *Waiting for Guffman*, and *A Mighty Wind*, and the popular film *Borat*.

In addition to the entertainment of the mock-documentary, audiences seem to recognize a bit of their own lives in the fictional situations on the shows. Mast suggests that this appearance of reality is created by “the authenticity of the portrayed events (e.g. interference of programme-makers in the pro-filmic, or ‘performing’ and ‘playing up’ to the camera on the part of filmed subjects) and the tension between recording and the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson, 1933)” (2009, p. 232). Viewers are drawn in by that familiarity and by the appeal for communication with a listening stranger, which will be discussed in the next section.

### ***The Office as a Mock-documentary***

The American version of *The Office* is a television comedy and mock-documentary on NBC, now in its seventh season. The show focuses on the filming of a fake documentary about “modern management techniques and employee behavior” (*The Office*, 1.1 “Pilot,” DVD episode summary). The documentary crew follows the Scranton, Pennsylvania, office workers of Dunder Mifflin Paper Company and their boss Michael Scott. Over the first five seasons, the characters have exhibited the behavior described above. Characters reveal often embarrassing and difficult information during periods of

time called talking heads when only one character sits in front of the cameraman and speaks his or her mind. Other characters interact with the camera in front of their fellow office workers. For instance, during an especially stressful or awkward exchange with another office member, characters look at the camera for support or assistance. A study of each of these kinds of interaction with the camera will help explain why people find the idea of a listening stranger comforting. However, in *The Office*, there are a few instances in which the camera had the opposite affect on a worker, and those will be studied as well.

Because *The Office* is a fiction television program, a defense and support of its use to demonstrate a communication concept is necessary. Mast says the following concerning mock-documentaries: “The formats’ playfulness, both in terms of appeal and genre, poignantly brings to the fore long-standing issues in documentary practice, like the authenticity of the portrayed events...” (2009, p. 232). While *The Office* is not a scholarly source, the writers and directors of the show attempt to gain viewers by making it appear as true to real life as possible. Most of the characters have typical personalities, fairly normal backgrounds, strengths and weakness, talents and flaws, and moments of spontaneity just like real people. The only exception is Dunder Mifflin employee Dwight Schrute, a very quirky beet farmer whose house has no electricity. While the situations the characters get into are often exaggerated for humor, the human interaction and self-disclosure are, with a few exceptions for the sake of comedy, realistic and can be studied for this topic. *The Office* is not like *LOST* or other unrealistic drama and fantasy shows; the viewers of the show can relate to the characters and can find something appealingly familiar in the types of communication created by the producers and directors.

## Review of Existing Self-Disclosure Theories

### Consequential Strangers/Weak Ties

Self-disclosure is a facet of communication that has been studied by several scholars, resulting in several key theories related to the listening stranger idea. The first is “consequential strangers,” a concept presented by Melinda Blau and Karen L. Fingerman in the 2009 book *Consequential Strangers: The Power of People Who Don't Seem to Matter...But Really Do*. According to Blau and Fingerman, a consequential stranger is someone a person sees often but is not a close friend; it could be a mailman or a grocery store clerk. “They range from long-standing acquaintances to people we encounter on occasion or only in certain places. They cut a wide swath across our lives, and yet each is linked to us in some way and fills a specific need” (2009, p. 3).

They further explain that although the term contains the word “stranger,” the consequential stranger is not actually a stranger by its textbook definition: “A stranger is someone you don't know and can visually identify by ‘category’—a man, a waitress, a person of Asian descent. A *consequential* stranger is someone you also know something *about* and with whom you are actually ‘acquainted’” (2009, pp. 3-4). Consequential strangers are the link between complete strangers and close relationships.

The consequential stranger is also linked to a concept termed the stranger-on-a-train phenomenon. The stranger-on-a-train phenomenon is a situation of self-disclosure that can be developed into a listening stranger theory which will be theorized later in the thesis. According to Blau and Fingerman, “the aptly named ‘stranger-on-a-train’ phenomenon occurs when we divulge secrets to people we don't know but happen to sit

next to for an extended period of time” (2009, p. 156). This idea was developed by Zick Rubin in his 1975 article “Disclosing Oneself to a Stranger: Reciprocity and Its Limits.”

An early variation of the consequential strangers theory can be found in Mark Granovetter’s article “The Strength of Weak Ties.” In the article, Granovetter terms these relationships “weak” or “peripheral ties” (1973). He uses mathematical models to describe the bridges that form between strong ties and weak ties, the strong ties being friends and weak ties being acquaintances. He attempts to prove that weak ties are an integral component of social structure (1973, p. 304). According to Granovetter, weak ties, which are often thought of as causing alienation among people, are “indispensible to individuals’ opportunities and to their integration on communities” (p. 307). The cameraman in *The Office* could be termed as a consequential stranger or a weak tie in some of the examples of self-disclosure but perhaps a more fitting term for what occurs with *The Office* is para-social interaction because it deals with an audience’s relationship with a television personality.

### **Para-Social Interaction**

In the article “Mass Communication and Para-Social Interaction: Observations on Intimacy at a Distance” from 1956, Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl describe a phenomenon that occurs when a large group of people share a form of one-sided relationship with a television personality or character. Horton and Wohl call this character a “personae” who “offers, above all, a continuing relationship. His appearance is a regular and dependable event, to be counted on, planned for, and integrated into the routines of daily life. His devotees ‘live with him’ and share the small episodes of his public life – and to some extent even of his private life away from the show” (p. 216).

This theory has a two-fold application to the theme of this paper. First of all, the viewers of the show have a parasocial relationship with the show's characters. The viewers know information about the characters, but the characters know nothing about the viewers. The personal lives and interactions of the characters is shared by the viewers. In Blau and Fingersman's book about consequential strangers, the authors describe an audience-television personality relationship: “

When Robin Roberts, a TV newscaster on the *Good Morning America* team, learned she had breast cancer in 2007, she invited millions of viewers into the experience. She brought a video camera to doctors' appointments. Chemotherapy, radiation, shopping for wigs—nothing was off-limits. She laughed and cried, and we rooted for her just as we cheered on Lance Armstrong, Christopher Reeve, Magic Johnson, and Melissa Etheridge, just as we wished that Buchwald (Arthur) would live forever. We don't know these people, but we certainly know a lot *about* them, and being privy to the details of their makes them *feel* like consequential strangers. They *could* be people we know; in fact, they could be us” (2009, p. 99).

In this case of parasocial interaction, the television personae Robin Roberts actually became a consequential stranger in viewers' lives. Similarly, the characters of *The Office* can appear to be consequential strangers in the lives show's viewers. The viewers enjoy getting to know the characters and rooting for them to succeed every episode.

The second aspect is that each character in the show has a parasocial relationship with the fake documentary cameraman. The cameraman is, for the most part, an unknown entity that the characters have become used to expecting in their daily lives, and the

cameraman knows all about the characters because the documentary crew appears to have only one or two cameraman filming the office workers. This aspect will be discussed in greater detail later in the thesis.

Once examples of the characters' behaviors toward the listening stranger from *The Office* have been analyzed and compared to the existing self-disclosure theories, a discussion of further relevant findings in communication theory is necessary. Finally, a conclusion will be made about why the listening stranger theory is so appealing to viewers of *The Office* and to people in general.

### **Establishing the Cameraman in *The Office* as a Listening Stranger**

Despite the fact that *The Office* has been running for six seasons, neither the characters nor the audience members know anything about the camera crew. Never does the cameraman come out from behind the camera and show his face or reveal his name or any personal information. In fact, the characters probably rarely see the actual face of the cameraman because it is partially hidden behind a camera. Never does a character take the camera and interview the cameraman. The interviewer is always the interviewer and never the interviewee. The only self-disclosure is from the characters, and the cameraman remains faceless to the audience and nameless and unknown to everyone. Even though he spends time with the characters every day, he is in essence a stranger to them and, more accurately, a consequential stranger.

### **Cameraman as a Safe Haven to Reveal Secrets/Very Personal Information**

In *The Office*, much of the Dunder Mifflin employees' time is spent on one-on-one time with the cameraman. During these talking heads, as they are called, the employees share personal information with the camera, information that most of their co-

workers do not know. In fact, they often tell the cameraman secrets that they do not want anyone else besides the cameraman hearing. The first category of information is information that might be incriminating against their careers.

The employees share personal information that might get them fired if their bosses knew this information. In 2.5 “Halloween,” Dwight says he might leave Dunder Mifflin if he finds another work place that values loyalty more. If Dwight’s boss knew that he is considering leaving the company, he might be in danger of losing his position at Dunder Mifflin. In 2.15 “Boys and Girls,” Michael admits during a talking head that even though it is an important part of Dunder Mifflin, he has not been down to the warehouse in a long time. In doing so, Michael reveals to the cameraman he has not been completing all the requirements of his job. In 2.21 “Conflict Resolution,” Toby tells the camera that the complaints that Dwight files to go to the New York corporate office are actually in a box under his desk. Toby has not sent them and does not plan to do so. In 3.19 “Product Recall,” Creed says that every week he is supposed to do a quality inspection on the paper, and he rarely ever does it.

In addition to sharing personal information about their jobs, the employees share secrets and shady information about themselves and their families. In 2.6 “The Fight,” Dwight reveals that his grandfather was a Nazi during World War II. In 2.19 “Michael’s Birthday,” Kelly mentions her sister’s death during a talking head. In 2.22 “Casino Night,” Creed tells the camera he loves stealing things. In 3.1 “Gay Witch Hunt,” Oscar at first denies to the camera that he is gay several times, then finally admits he is. Later in the same episode, Roy says that after Pam dumped him, he got arrested for drunk driving and went through a very rough time in his life. In 4.3 “Launch Party,” Andy brings in the

swan ice sculpture for the launch party. He looks around to make sure nobody is near and then whispers to the camera, "I stole it." In 4.4 "Money," Creed says he never files bankruptcy; he just transfers his debt to the name William Charles Snyder. In 5.4 "Crime Aid," Creed says, "Nobody steals from Creed Bratton and gets away with it. The last person who did, disappeared. His name? Creed Bratton." Both of these instances of self-disclosure could result in imprisonment for Creed if the cameraman decided to notify the proper authorities of Creed's crimes. In 5.13 "Stress Relief," Jim and Pam talk to the camera about the rough patch her parents have been going through that nobody else knows.

Employees also share with the cameraman secrets about their relationships with co-workers. In 2.17 "Dwight's Speech," Jim tells the camera that he is going to take a trip, and get out of town for awhile because he is annoyed with Pam's wedding planning in the office. Also noteworthy is the fact that he tells the camera about his vacation plans before he tells anyone else in the office. In 3.9 "The Conflict," Jim tells the camera that he is dating Karen but is not ready to tell everyone in the office yet because they will act weird about it. While the other employees do find out soon, it is important that Jim was willing to tell the cameraman first. In 3.11 "Back from Vacation," Michael tells the camera that no one in the office is supposed to know that Jan went to Jamaica with him on vacation. In 4.1 "Fun Run," Jim says he broke up with Karen. As for his current romantic life, he is now single and looking. Later, in 4.10 "The Chair Model," Jim tells the camera he is not kidding about proposing to Pam. He then shows the ring and says he bought it a week after they started dating. In 4.14 "Goodbye Toby," Jim says to the camera, "I'm going to propose tonight . . . holy crap!" In 5.6 "Customer Survey," Jim

says he needs to be making more money so that he can buy his parents' old house. He also says Pam does not know and asks the cameraman to keep it a secret because he wants it to be a surprise. In 5.25 "Café Disco," Jim and Pam say they are getting married that day. Jim tells the story of how he told Pam at breakfast that he wanted to marry her as soon as possible.

Notable in some of the above situations is the fact that the characters specifically ask the cameraman to keep a secret for them. The characters seem to trust the cameraman in this parasocial relationship, despite the fact that they know little to nothing about the cameraman. Also notable is the idea that the audience's parasocial relationship with the characters keeps the viewers in on the secret as well.

All of these situations involve Dunder Mifflin employees sitting in front of the cameraman and sharing a secret, personal story, or embarrassing fact. Often these are pieces of information that their co-workers do not know and that they do not want their co-workers to know. The reason these employees are more willing to reveal this information to a listening stranger than to people they work with on a daily basis will be discussed later.

In all of the above instances, the characters are carrying on a parasocial relationship with the cameraman, or the audience is carrying on a parasocial relationship with the characters. These two distinct groups know details about the characters' without the characters knowing much about them. "Sometimes the 'actor' – whether he is playing himself or performing in a fictional role – is seen engaged with others, but often he faces the spectator, uses the mode of direct address, talks as if he were conversing personally and privately. The audience, for its part, responds with something more than mere

running observation; it is, as it were, subtly insinuated into the program's action and internal social relationships and, by dint of this kind of staging, is ambiguously transformed into a group which observes and participates in the show by turns" (Horton & Wohl, 1956. p. 215). This self-disclosure from the characters to the cameraman and essentially the audience itself seems to be appealing to the audience as the show continues to grow in popularity.

### **Camera as a Diary for Characters to Reveal Embarrassing or Personal**

#### **Habits/Hobbies**

During talking heads, the employees of Dunder Mifflin share with the camera private habits and hobbies, what they do when they are not at work. They also treat the camera like a sort of diary because they share their thoughts on personal problems and issues.

Hobbies and habits are a major part of the communication the employees share during talking heads. People also reveal stories from growing up that other workers in the office do not know. In 1.1 "Pilot," Pam tells the camera she likes to do watercolor art. Later in the same episode, Dwight tells the camera he is a volunteer sheriff's deputy during the weekends. In 1.6 "Hot Girl," Michael tells the camera personal details about his life, such as the magazines he subscribes to and who his heroes are. In 2.17 "Dwight's Speech," Dwight tells the camera about his sixth grade spelling bee failure and how he misspelled the word "failure." In 4.5 "Local Ad," Kevin says he used to do commercials and was known as the Kool-Aid Man in high school, and Oscar says he used to want to do TV commercials. In 5.1 "Weight Loss," Stanley says he has been trying to lose weight even before the office's weight loss contest, because his body is not what is used to be.

He shows a picture of what he used to look like when he played football. In 5.10 “Moroccan Christmas,” Andy says he used to get really drunk in college, and he describes in detail his drinking process.

Other situations involve characters’ sharing personal feelings and thoughts as they would a diary. In 1.2 “Diversity Day,” Jim looks at the camera and says, “Not a bad day” after Pam falls asleep on his shoulder. In 1.3 “Healthcare,” Jim says his job at Dunder Mifflin is not a career—if it were, he would have to throw himself in front of a train. In 2.3 “Office Olympics,” Dwight admits to the camera that he is relieved that Michael does not want him to live with him anymore. In 2.17 “Dwight’s Speech,” Oscar vents to the camera about turning the office thermostat down every morning and says he does not care if people like it warmer. In 3.7 “Branch Closing,” Pam describes her fantasy of quitting, slapping someone, making a big speech, and storming out forever. In 3.16 “Cocktails,” Pam tells the camera that she is going to start being more honest with people about what she wants.

Although Creed does not open up to people very much, he does have a few revealing talking heads. In 3.19 “Product Recall,” he says, “The only difference between me and a homeless man is this job. I will do anything to survive—like I did when I was a homeless man.” In 4.1 “Fun Run,” Michael says his need to be liked is not as bad as his need to be praised. In the same episode, Pam says she is not dating anyone— “When I do fall in love, like when it’s for real, the last person I’m gonna talk about it to is a camera crew or my co-workers . . . Trust me. When I fall in love, you’ll know.” As demonstrated before, Pam has already revealed so much information to the camera. Here she claims she will not tell the camera something, a behavior she has yet to display. Pam might also be

speaking to the viewers, an idea which has already been discussed. In 5.17 “Golden Ticket,” Michael tells the camera his idea for a shoe store for men called “Shoe La La.”

People also reveal unpleasant or disagreeable actions they have done. In 2.12 “The Injury,” Ryan reveals to the cameraman that he crushed up four extra-strength aspirin and put them in Michael’s pudding and that he does the same thing for his dog. Michael had appointed Ryan his nurse after Michael burned his foot that morning on the George Foreman grill he keeps in his bed, and Ryan was becoming tired of waiting on Michael. Michael also reveals many of the disturbing situations he endured as a child. In 2.19 “Michael’s Birthday,” Michael tells the story of his seventh birthday about getting a rash from the pony and missing everything while his mom rubbed lotion on him. He also tells about when he was 17 and was going to go on a date with a girl, but she went out with the wrong Michael. In 3.8 “The Merger,” Michael talks about his mom and Jeff and how when he moved in with them, he had to fix everything. Later in the same episode, Michael tells the camera that by the end of the fourth grade, his closest friend was the lunch lady.

Judging from his talking heads, Michael seems to have the most unpleasant past. In 3.14 “Phyllis’ Wedding,” he says he has only been to one other wedding. He was the ring bearer and peed in his pants because he was nervous. The dog ended up being the ring bearer. In 3.15 “Business School,” Michael talks about his cool teacher who hung out with them and told jokes but then had an affair with a student. As a result, 12 other students came forward to say they also had affairs with the teacher. Michael says it really ruined eighth grade for him. In 4.2 “Dunder Mifflin Infinity,” Michael says he failed

second grade and had to retake it. It seems that Michael finds telling the cameraman about his stressful childhood and adolescence a sort of therapy.

In 5.22 “Heavy Competition,” Andy says he learned something about himself after Jim pranked him and then says, “I wish this was a sofa so I could sit here and talk for hours.” In 2.5 “Halloween,” Michael describes his Halloween costume from last year and then says to the camera, “Aww, I wish you were here last year.” These two situations are perhaps the most important of the diary entries of sorts by any of the Dunder Mifflin employees. Andy and Michael show by their words just how appealing and therapeutic a listening and uninvolved stranger can be. According to Blau and Fingerman in their book about consequential strangers, “sometimes, the other person need only listen: The mere act of *describing* a difficult event in detail can ease stress over time” (2009, p. 106). Andy and Michael use their talking heads in front of the cameraman to describe their troubles, a sort of talk therapy that reduces stress.

### **Cameraman as a Friend or Buddy**

Over the course of the show, many of Scranton’s Dunder Mifflin employees treat the cameraman as a friend or buddy. The listening stranger status still remains the same, as they are not truly “friends” as the word is commonly defined. The people certainly have some type of relationship with each other, but it is not equally reciprocal. The cameraman rarely communicates verbally with the workers, so no true friendship can be formed. Therefore, the situations in which the cameraman is treated as a friend or buddy do not conflict with the cameraman’s identity as a listening stranger. These situations do show that in real life, a bond can be formed with someone about whom a person knows very little. Therefore, they could be considered examples of the consequential strangers’

idea because people often inadvertently become friendly toward people they come into contact with every day. However, in *The Office*, no stronger or real connection is formed because the cameraman does not personally involve himself other than to relay or obtain information to and from the characters. These situations will be discussed later.

Perhaps the person who befriends the cameraman the most is Jim. In almost every episode, Jim interacts with the cameraman and not just during talking heads. He looks at the camera and smiles and makes snide comments about other people. He looks at the camera, laughing at funny situations, as if he is inviting the cameraman to join in the fun. He also actually invites the camera to follow him when he is about to pull a prank on someone in the office. In 1.1 “Pilot,” he waves the cameraman in to Michael’s office, while he puts the mug he planted inside a gelatin mold on Michael’s desk. In 2.11 “Booze Cruise,” Jim makes a bet with the cameraman—if Michael does not stand at the front of the boat and shout, “I’m the king of the world” by the end of the first hour, Jim will give the cameraman his next paycheck. When Michael does as Jim predicted within the hour, Jim looks at the camera and points to his watch, then to Michael.

Jim’s playful relationship with the camera creates some of the most interesting moments of the show. In 3.19 “Product Recall,” after riding in the car with Andy and hearing him say, “Beer me” repeatedly, Jim gets out of car and looks at the camera saying, “Lord, beer me strength.” Later in the same episode, Dwight does an imitation of Jim in which he constantly makes faces at the camera and says, “La la la la, little comment.” Dwight and the other co-workers notice that Jim buddies up to the camera more than anyone else. In 5.26 “Company Picnic,” Jim finds out that Pam is pregnant,

and he looks at the camera, smiling and laughing with tears in his eyes. Jim shares even one of the most private and life changing moments with the cameraman.

Other workers treat the cameraman like a buddy as well. In 1.2 “Diversity Day,” Michael shows the cameraman the document that he signed as “Daffy Duck” to share a laugh. In 1.3 “Health Care,” Michael tells the cameraman to come with him on “Mission Surprise” as he drives around Scranton, trying to come up with the surprise he promised the Dunder Mifflin employees. In 2.7 “The Client,” Michael turns to look at the camera and mouths, “Wow” when he finds out that Jan is divorced. In 2.9 “Email Surveillance,” Dwight walks past camera and whispers with a smile, “He has no idea,” referring to the surprise party for Michael. In 4.7 “Survivor Man,” Oscar tells Jim he likes the combined birthday idea, but when Jim walks away, he gives the camera a skeptical and unconvinced look. In 5.4 “Crime Aid,” Michael tells the camera that he let Holly win their putt putt game; Holly shakes her head, smiling at the camera, and says, “Nooo.” In 5.10 “Moroccan Christmas,” Toby calls his daughter Sasha to find out if she wants the Princess Unicorn doll for Christmas. She responds excitedly, and he looks at the camera and nods his head triumphantly, wanting the camera to share in his victory. While Dwight prepares the office for a simulated fire drill in 5.13 “Stress Relief” by making the door handles hot and lighting a trash can on fire, he looks at the camera and nods.

An extended interaction with the cameraman occurs in 5.15 “Lecture Circuit Part 2.” Pam tells Michael she will read Holly’s “Dear Michael” letter that he retrieved from her computer. While Michael goes to get his laptop, Pam looks at the camera and says, “What? I’m not in love with her.” Although the cameraman is not seen, the audience can judge from Pam’s reaction that the cameraman seems shocked and disgusted with Pam

for saying she will read the letter. Pam had told Michael it would be a “breach of trust” if Michael read the letter, so Pam’s volunteering to do it obviously does not sit well with the cameraman, judging by her defensive reaction. When Michael meets Charles at the corporate office in 5.18 “New Boss,” he looks at the camera from far away and gives a thumbs up. In 5.25 “Café Disco,” Michael points at the camera and says, “Café Disco!” during the dance party.

Pam seems to have a special relationship with the cameraman—they share office secrets, and the cameraman often nonverbally shares his opinion with Pam. In 2.12 “The Injury,” Pam sees Angela’s secretly watching her as she talks to Jim on the phone about Dwight’s concussion and then looks at camera with a knowing smile. Pam and the cameraman share the secret of Dwight and Angela’s romantic relationship, which the cameraman had helped her uncover in 2.9 “Email Surveillance.” When Pam gets excited about new developments she always looks to the camera. In 4.12 “Did I Stutter,” Pam says she slept over at a “friend’s” house and forgot her contacts, so she had to wear her backup glasses. She sits looking at camera for a second, and then says, “Shut up!” The cameraman does not seem to believe Pam’s statement that she was merely staying at a “friend’s” house. Another theory might be that Pam is talking to the audience, anticipating its response to her somewhat suspicious behavior.

The idea that the audience, not the cameraman, is actually the listening stranger in a parasocial relationship might explain several of the situations in the above categories. In all of the above situations in which the office workers treat the cameraman or the audience like a buddy or a sidekick, there is no true exchange, no real friendship. The cameraman simply documents people being friendly with him, but he cannot respond

because he is doing his job. He is there to find out about the Dunder Mifflin employees, not for them to find out about him. Likewise, the audience has no real connection with the characters other than the act of one-sided listening. Therefore, the cameraman and the audience remain listening strangers. They remain someone to whom many personal details and private moments have been voluntarily revealed.

### **Cameraman as a Means of Validation or Help in Awkward Situations**

In any workplace, there will inevitably be awkward moments and stressful situations. During many of those in *The Office*, people have asked the cameraman for help both verbally and non-verbally. People also look to the cameraman for validation of something they have done. These moments occur in the public parts of the show, not when a person is sitting alone in front of the camera for a talking head, but when he or she is interacting with his or her coworkers.

With the awkward moments bound to happen, many of the workers have learned to rely on the uninvolved third party of the cameraman or the listening stranger for help in sticky situations. The cameraman is someone they can look to when they do not know how to react to cheesy jokes or uncomfortable situations. In 1.1 “Pilot,” Pam looks awkwardly at the camera several times while she talks to Jim before leaving with Roy. In 1.6 “Hot Girl,” Pam looks directly at the camera when Michael asks her how girls her age feel about futons. Later in the same episode, Jim looks pleadingly at the camera for help while Pam’s former boyfriend Roy tickles her on the desk beside him. In 2.1 “The Dundies,” Jim looks at the camera after Michael makes the cheesy joke, “Hey, hey, hey, fat Halpert!”

In 2.13 “The Secret,” Jim looks at the camera after Michael says, “Must be torture for you.” Michael is referring to Pam’s planning her and Roy’s wedding at work, and it is awkward for Jim because he had recently told only Michael that he had a crush on Pam. Jim is afraid that Michael will spill his secret and rightfully so. Jim relies on the cameraman for some comfort as the cameraman already knows of Jim’s feelings for Pam from Jim’s candid talking heads about her. Later in the same episode, Pam gives the camera a weird and suspicious look when Angela is nice to her and asks her out to coffee. Even later in the same episode, after Andy punches the wall, both Jim and Michael immediately look at the camera—Jim with a wide-eyed, frightened look and Michael with a confused look. In 4.7 “Survivor Man,” Jim stares horrified into the camera when Phyllis accidentally calls him Michael. In 4.12 “Did I Stutter,” Michael continually looks uneasily at the camera behind Stanley’s head while Stanley yells at him. In 5.7 “Business Trip,” Jim looks at the camera beseechingly when Kevin slaps him on the butt; he does so again when Creed gives him a quick shoulder rub.

In all these instances, the cameraman does nothing to help or relieve the characters from the awkward moments, maintaining the parasocial relationship. At other times, workers use the camera for validation or support when they have done something controversial or told a joke. Also, they look to the camera for support when other workers have done something wrong against them. In 3.3 “The Coup,” Michael turns around to look right at the camera with disgust when Dwight accepts Michael’s offer for his job after Dwight tells Jan he can do a better job. In 3.8 “The Merger,” Michael jokes, “It’s an orientation, not a borientation” and then looks at camera laughing, as if to see if the

cameraman found the joke as funny as he did. In 5.1 “Weight Loss,” Kelly looks at the camera triumphantly after turning down Ryan’s offer to go out later.

### **Cameraman as a Shoulder to Cry On**

There are several situations in which characters cry during talking heads. They do not seem to hesitate at showing emotion to the listening stranger. During a talking head in 2.15 “Boys and Girls,” Pam talks about her dream for a house with a terrace, then starts crying and hides her eyes with her hand, saying she will never have a house like that. During a talking head in 3.7 “Branch Closing,” Kelly cries with mascara running down her face, saying that she will kill herself if she stays at Scranton and Ryan has to leave. In 1.1 “Pilot,” Pam cries in front of the camera after Michael pretends to fire her. However, she hides her face as if she does not want to show too much emotion. Whether she was afraid to cry in front of the cameraman or in front of Michael and Ryan, both present, cannot be determined. It must be noted that this situation was not a talking head because the characters Michael and Ryan were present. In 4.9 “Dinner Party,” during a talking head, Dwight says, “Does it bother me that I wasn’t invited to Michael’s dinner party?” He says nothing but looks down and starts crying. During a talking head in 5.20 “Dream Team,” Andy, with bloodshot and teary eyes, says his maid died.

A significant situation occurs in 3.22, “The Job.” Jim briefly interrupts Pam’s talking head in order to ask her out, she reacts with tears in her eyes and forgets the question the cameraman had just asked her. This is the first time a character, in this case Jim, interrupts another character’s, in this case Pam’s, private talking head, and it marks the beginning of the long-awaited Jim and Pam relationship. This example is also

significant because it is a talking head in which the cameraman speaks to the character. These situations, few and far between, will be discussed later in the thesis.

The above situations in which characters cry in front of only the cameraman establish him as a shoulder to cry on in times of need. The characters feel comfortable enough to show themselves to the cameraman at their most vulnerable moments, moments they might not be willing to share with their fellow workers for fear of embarrassment or ridicule. A listening stranger with no strings attached is much easier to influence than a person who knows one's past and one's "baggage." Oftentimes one simply needs a person to cry with and no words, which is exactly what the cameraman and listening stranger can provide. The appeal that those situations of sharing raw emotion with an uninvolved personae has for the audience plays into the popularity of the mock-documentary and the idea of the para-social relationship the audience has with the characters.

### **Instances in Which the Characters Talk Candidly About Other Characters to the Cameraman**

There are numerous times when characters have vented about other characters or spoken candidly about them in front of the cameraman. It is important to remember that most, if not all, of these instances occurred during talking heads, when it was just the character and the cameraman alone.

In 1.3 "Healthcare," Jim tells the camera that any time Michael asks him to perform a task, he tells him Dwight should do it. This is a revealing statement for Jim to make. It shows that Jim does not fear that the cameraman will tell on him and that he trusts the cameraman's silence. Other people voice their dislike of their co-workers. In

1.4 “The Alliance,” Pam, fed up with the judgmental way Angela treats her and everybody else at the office, says Angela was gambling that she would not smack her. In 2.15 “Boys and Girls,” Angela says that judging from Jan’s outfit, Jan aspires to be a whore. In 2.17 “Dwight’s Speech,” Ryan says he thinks Jim will never go on vacation because he does the same thing every day. During a talking head in 2.18 “Take Your Daughter to Work Day,” Ryan vents about Kelly’s wanting to get married and have babies with him immediately. In 2.20 “Drug Testing,” Jim ponders the things Dwight does for Michael and wonders what Dwight is getting out of that relationship.

During a talking head in 3.1 “Gay Witch Hunt,” Karen mentions that Jim is always looking goofily at the camera. Jim looks at the camera more than any other person in the office because he treats the cameraman like a buddy, as has already been established. In 4.3 “Launch Party,” Phyllis says that Angela has been more difficult lately and that she is going to try out some tips from the Internet for dealing with difficult people. In 4.4 “Money,” Kelly says Darryl is the most complicated person she has ever met. In 4.12 “Did I Stutter?,” Ryan warns Jim about goofing off on the job. During a talking head in the next scene, Toby says that all the time Jim has been hanging out with Pam has finally caught up with him, which Toby says because he is jealous of Jim and Pam’s romantic relationship.

Other times the office workers share positive comments about the people they work with every day. In 5.3 “Baby Shower,” Michael says he had a good feeling when he hugged Holly. In 5.4 “Crime Aid,” Holly tells the cameraman that a lot about Michael seems too good to be true but so far it has all been true. In 5.13 “Two Weeks,” Kevin admits to the cameraman he always thought Michael got a bad rap and that he was funny.

He contemplates telling Michael but decides not to do so. Therefore, Kevin reveals that he will tell the camera something that he would not tell Michael himself. The listening stranger receives more information than the familiar acquaintance. In 3.7 “Branch Closing,” Jim, after hearing that Stamford’s regional manager Josh Porter used his new position to leverage a job with Staples, comments firmly, “Say what you will about Michael Scott, but he would never do that.”

Some of the details people discuss about their coworkers involve issues they are dealing with as friends, enemies or romantic partners. In 5.5 “Employee Transfer,” Holly describes the conversation she had with Michael about them either staying in Scranton or going to the Nashua branch in New Hampshire. During the same episode, Michael tells the camera he is not going to give up this easily on his relationship with Holly. During a talking head in 5.10 “Moroccan Christmas,” Phyllis says Angela does what she tells her to do so Phyllis will not tell what she saw Dwight and Angela doing, referring to when she saw them kissing after hours in the office. In 5.26 “Company Picnic,” Michael tells the camera that he lied to Kevin about his just being friends with Holly. He says that he made a list of reasons they should be together and that he is going to show her the list later that day. Later in that episode, Michael tells the camera that he thinks he and Holly are one of those couples that have a long story—it will take a long time, and then it will be perfect.

In 3.7 “Branch Closing,” the employees at the Scranton branch have just found out they will keep their jobs. Kelly runs into the break room and basically attacks Ryan with hugs and kisses, yelling “I’m so happy we don’t have to break up now.” Ryan responds by giving the camera a happy and sweet look. In the next scene, a talking head

with Ryan, he looks down smiling and says “I don’t know. I can’t explain it.” Viewers are unsure of whether Ryan truly has romantic feelings for Kelly, and in these scenes his interaction with the camera show that although he does not understand exactly why, he is happy to be with Kelly.

When Dwight leaves Dunder Mifflin to work for Staples in 3.12 “Traveling Salesman/The Return,” many of his fellow office workers use their talking heads to talk about how they feel about him and his departure. Some disclosures are more revealing than others. Ryan simply says he will not miss Dwight. Jim says he and Dwight used to go on sales calls all the time, and he shows a picture of the two of them. He also admits that he misses Dwight, saying with a little embarrassment and regret, “Congratulations, universe, you won.” Angela tearfully says Dwight was one of the most honorable and sufficient employees she has ever known. Michael tells the camera Dwight’s leaving is a big loss and that Dwight was the top salesman.

Perhaps some of the most interesting details the cameraman hears about other characters are Pam’s and Jim’s thoughts about each other. The two do not hold back from revealing to the camera their feelings. In 1.4 “The Alliance,” Jim tells the camera that Pam is so great. However, it must be noted that he appears a little embarrassed after saying it. During a talking head in 1.5 “Basketball,” Jim tells the camera that Pam sometimes get depressed about still not being married after her three-year engagement to Roy. In 1.6 “Hot Girl,” Jim says that he is Pam’s go-to guy for her problems at work and with her fiancé Roy. In the same episode, Pam tells camera that Jim is a great guy, but he is like a brother to her. She adds that they are best friends in the office, and she hopes he finds someone for himself. In 2.7 “The Client,” Jim does nothing to hide his feelings for

Pam when he says dejectedly, “It’s not really a date if she goes home to her fiancé, right?” In 2.10 “Christmas Party,” Jim shows the camera what he got Pam for Christmas, all the while telling little stories about Pam. He also shows a card, saying, “. . . because Christmas is the time to tell people how you feel.” In 2.14 “The Carpet,” Jim tells the camera that Pam set a date for her wedding to Roy.

When Jim begins dating Karen, the dynamics between Jim and Pam change, affecting how they talk about each other in talking heads. In 3.10 “A Benihana Christmas,” during a talking head, Pam says she has been somewhat cold to Karen and does not have any reason to be, not admitting the real reason, that she has feelings for Jim. In 3.14 “Phyllis’ Wedding,” Jim starts to say what he would do if hypothetically Pam were still interested in him, but then he stops and says it is just a hypothetical situation. Minutes later, Jim says to the camera, “Here’s a not hypothetical. I’m really happy that I’m with Karen.” In 5.13 “Stress Relief,” Pam wonders aloud what Jim could have said to her dad that made her dad want to leave her mom and at what point Jim might say the same thing in their own marriage. During the same episode, Pam tells the camera she and Jim are soul mates after she finds out that Jim told her dad how much he is in love with her.

The episode 3.22 “The Job” features the pivotal moment when Jim asks Pam out to dinner. Right before that Pam is discussing how she feels about her and Jim and where they are at right now. She says Jim was really nice about what happened, referring to when she told him of her feelings for him in 3.21 “Beach Games.” She says Jim told her he missed their friendship. She then says they will always be friends, and as for being

more than that, they just never got the timing right. However, she discovers she is wrong when Jim comes in at that moment to ask her for a date.

All of the above situations show that the cameraman provides the employees with a non-threatening environment to voice their complaints about each other. The cameraman still remains a completely unknown entity to the characters, maintaining the para-social relationship.

### **Instances in Which the Cameraman Is Not Wanted**

As mentioned in the introduction, the characters sometimes become embarrassed by the cameraman's presence or do not desire his presence at all. In 1.6 "Hot Girl," Pam is putting on lip gloss but wipes it off when she looks up and sees the camera watching her. In 2.6 "The Fight," Jim starts to type out an apology note to Pam for being too flirty with her but stops and deletes it when he sees the camera filming him. After Dwight kisses Angela in 2.22 "Casino Night," she slaps him and walks away, starting to smile. However, she abruptly stops smiling when she sees the camera. In 4.4 "Money," Michael takes on a second job at a telemarketing business. While Michael tells the cameraman that working there is similar to working at Dunder Mifflin because it involves sales, his manager comes up and asks what he is doing. The manager then notices the camera and becomes nervous and defensive. He explains to the cameraman that he is running a legitimate and legal operation. Michael says the cameraman is with him and introduces the manager to the cameraman.

Characters occasionally ask and even physically make the cameraman leave. In 2.1 "The Dundies," Michael makes the cameraman leave after Jan tells him that corporate is not paying for his Dundies party; he physically makes the cameraman leave by getting

up from his desk and lightly pushing him out. The cameraman then watches and listens through closed blinds as Michael argues with Jan about the excessive amount of parties Michael has thrown at the office. In 2.7 “The Client,” Michael crawls under his desk to avoid the camera while talking to Jan on the phone about their night together. The cameraman follows him around the desk and films Michael under his desk. Michael gets annoyed at this breach of privacy and says, “Excuse me, excuse me!” to the cameraman, who finally backs away. In 2.8 “Performance Review,” Michael is speaking to Jan on the phone, and Jan asks if the cameras are there with him before she says anything personal. He lies at first but then admits that the cameraman is there, at which point Jan hangs up the phone.

In 5.1 “Weight Loss,” Jim visits Pam at her dorm at art school in New York. The two hug and kiss in the doorway of the room as the cameraman stands in the hallway. Jim and Pam then look at the cameraman as if he is intruding, and Jim walks toward the door, saying, “Have you seen Pam’s art?” He slams the door on the camera. Annoyed by the dismissal, the cameraman stands there and sighs audibly. In 5.4 “Crime Aid,” Michael and Holly sneak back into the office to get away from the camera so they can kiss. She uses the excuse that she forgot something and wants Michael to come with her, but when they go in, she explains she just did not want to kiss Michael in front of the camera. She asks if the cameras can hear them; Michael says not if they turn the microphones the whole way down. However, unbeknownst to Holly and Michael, the mics pick up every sound.

These cases where characters have stopped what they doing or tried to escape from the camera’s presence are few and far between, and they usually pertain to personal

and intimate moments between two characters. The listening stranger situation usually occurs between two people, the speaker and the listening stranger, and the person's communication must be unprompted voluntary self-disclosure. For instance, the stranger-on-a-train phenomenon, mentioned earlier, involves a person's opening up to a stranger without any prompting for information. If the listening stranger begins to ask the speaker questions, he or she might balk at the invasion of privacy. The information must be given freely for the safety and comfort of the self-discloser.

### **Instances in Which the Cameraman Changes the Plot/Interacts with the Characters**

In his article, Mast says that "the filmed subjects frequently acknowledge the presence of the camera crew as they reflect, comment, inform, testify or recount while going about their doings and in interview segments (where we occasionally see or hear the interviewer)" (p. 240.) This kind of situation has been seen many times during the show when the cameraman or men working on the documentary crew decide to have a mind of their own. Whether they are asking questions during talking heads, relaying information from one character to another, or filming when they are not wanted, they are involved in plot details and even change the plot when they reveal what they have filmed to characters.

Perhaps the most glaring example of this is the cameraman's catching two characters, Jim and Pam, in a secret romance in 4.1, "Fun Run." Unbeknown to the coworkers-turned-lovers, a cameraman had followed Pam's car and caught Jim's getting into Pam's car and kissing her before they drove away. The cameraman, still remained unseen by the viewers, assembles the pair in the conference room at Dunder Mifflin and shows them the footage. Jim initially denies that they have a relationship, but Pam blurts

out that they are dating and that it is going great. More importantly, she says they have not told anyone, which means the cameraman forces Pam and Jim to reveal prematurely that they are dating. Because Jim and Pam are pivotal characters on the show and their romance was highly anticipated by viewers, the fact that a cameraman is responsible for bringing the couple to light is important because it shows that the cameraman can be involved in changing a major part of the plot.

Another strong example of the cameraman's interacting with characters and changing the plot as well occurs over a span of several episodes during season two. Pam asks the cameraman to help her spy on Dwight and Angela to confirm her suspicions that they are dating. The situation comes to head in episode 2.9 "Email Surveillance" when the cameraman walks to Pam's desk, gets her attention, and motions her over to Dwight's desk. She sees Dwight's eating the candy bar Angela had bought him from the vending machine and says, "Yes! Thank you!" The cameraman had helped Pam watch the behavior of the office workers, and he did so without speaking a word, simply with motions. Even though the cameraman is interacting with Pam, he is still nothing more than a friendly stranger because they do not exchange words. The only verbal messages are coming from Pam.

The cameraman, who is in essence a character in the show, often takes matters into his own hands and investigates without any knowledge of the people being filmed. While hiding, he films private moments in the office such as flirty chats between Jim and Pam. He also peeks through closed blinds to see what Michael is doing in his office in 1.1 "Pilot" and other episodes. In 2.7 "The Client," the cameraman hides in a car in the Chili's parking lot to film Michael's kissing Jan and leaving with her. In 2.10 "Christmas

Party,” the camera zooms in on Jim’s picking off Pam’s the letter he had written her and putting it in his back pocket. This is crucial because Jim was going to confess his feelings for Pam in that letter, and the camera caught the moment when Jim decided not to let Pam see the letter. In 4.12 “Did I Stutter?”, the cameraman sneaks back into the office to hear Michael reprimand Stanley for his disrespectful behavior, after Michael had asked everyone, including the cameraman, to leave the office.

Another interaction the cameraman has with the characters is the relaying of information from one person to another. For instance, in 1.1 “Pilot,” the cameraman tells Pam that during his talking head Jim said her favorite yogurt is mixed berries. In Jim’s talking head in 4.4 “Money,” the cameraman relays to Jim Pam’s earlier explanation for Jim’s hugging and kissing her after they set up a date at an Italian restaurant: “Jim’s just really passionate about Italian food.” Jim replies that he is in love with Italian food, and he is referring to Pam. Jim tells the camera he is in love with Pam, which is a very personal and important detail revealed first to the camera.

The cameraman often asks characters questions during their talking heads, which are barely audible to the audience watching the show. The characters often repeat them to make sure they heard it right and to make sure the audience can hear the question, and then they answer them. One of the most significant questions the cameraman asks comes from 3.8 “The Merger,” when the cameraman asks Jim where he stands with Pam, to which Jim replies they are just friends. The cameraman has shot some challenging questions at Jim over the years. In 3.1 “Gay Witch Hunt,” the cameraman asks Jim why he transferred to Stamford. The cameraman asks Jim if he thinks he will be invited to Pam and her then-fiancé Roy’s wedding in 1.1. In 5.1 “Weight Loss,” the cameraman

asks Jim why he has not proposed to Pam yet. Jim says they agreed they did not want to spend the first three months of their engagement apart while Pam attends art school in New York.

The cameraman also asks other characters difficult questions. Dunder Mifflin's boss Michael is asked why he has stayed at Dunder Mifflin so long (5.7 "Business Trip"). In 1.6 "Hot Girl," the cameraman asks Michael if he has a special someone, to which Michael replies, "Yes, everyone in the office." After rumors start in 2.7 "the Client" that Michael is involved with corporate boss Jan, the cameraman asks him if anything happened. Michael is at first hesitant to tell but then reveals that he and Jan spent the night together talking. In 4.10 "Chair Model," the cameraman asks Michael what it is like being single. He says that he likes it and that it makes him more desperate, yielding the quickest results. Dwight is asked if he thinks he can trust Jim when the two form an alliance and if he feels bad betraying Jim (1.4, "The Alliance"). In 4.1 "Fun Run," the cameraman asks cat-lover Angela how her cat Sprinkles is doing, and she thanks him, saying, "No one ever asks about Sprinkles." In 5.7 "Business Trip," the cameraman asks Dwight what he would define as the perfect crime.

Two common themes or conclusions can be harvested from the crop of instances in which the cameraman changes the plot and intentionally interacts with the characters. First, the cameraman never reveals anything about himself; therefore, he remains a listening stranger. Second, the characters become unwilling to share information when it is involuntary and forced by the cameraman. This leads to the idea that self-disclosure to a listening stranger must be voluntary.

### **An Analysis of *The Office* Examples**

The talking heads, which are one-on-one situations between a character and the cameraman, in *The Office* make for some of the most realistic moments in the show. In the 2001 book *Faking It: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, authors Jane Roscoe and Craig Hight describe what is called the “interaction mode” in mock-documentaries:

This mode takes shape around the direct encounter between the filmmaker and the subject of the documentary. It tends to stress the verbal testimony of the social actors, and it is their story that occupies the central role in any interactive text. Because of this, the most commonly used convention is that of the ‘talking head,’ an expert or eyewitness directly addressing the camera . . . the insights offered through this mode are gained through those interactions” (Roscoe & Hight, p. 20).

*The Office* uses this interaction mode, and the interactions the actors have with the filmmaker are some of the most crucial moments of the show. The talking heads reveal some of the most important information.

### **Why the Listening Stranger is So Appealing**

In review, the first two conclusions from *The Office* examples are that the cameraman never reveals anything about himself; therefore, he remains a listening stranger. Second, the characters become unwilling to share information when it is involuntary and forced by the cameraman. In the book *The Office and Philosophy: Scenes from the Unexamined Life*, Rick Mayock’s article “Being Your Self in The Office” helps support the third and perhaps most important conclusion relating to the formation of the listening stranger theory. Mayock says, “When Dwight and his *Officemates* speak directly to the camera they reveal the private side of themselves”

(Wisniewski, 2008, p. 253). Later he says, “Michael, Jim, Pam, Dwight, and the other characters of *The Office* struggle to define themselves in an artificial and often alienating environment” (p. 253). The talking heads in front of the cameraman represent a safe haven and an escape from the environment Mayock describes. The *Officemates* can put down their facades and be themselves in front of the camera, without fear of retaliation.

Moving away from the TV examples and into real-life scenarios, the listening stranger situation provides a welcoming environment typically free of strings attached and baggage. According to Blau and Fingerman in their book about consequential strangers, “intimate relations demand this type of reciprocal disclosure with consequential strangers, the choice is yours” (2009, p. 156). A person has no history or past issues with a stranger, so it is easier for one to talk about what is going on his private life. Also, the listening stranger is usually not acquainted with the people that the speaker is discussing, so it is more likely that the stranger will sympathize with and side with the speaker. The listening stranger also represents a diary for someone who needs to get something off his or her chest.

### **Support and Further Appeal of the Listening Stranger Communication Theory**

Several books and journal articles explain and support the listening stranger theory. Although they do not specifically create a theory about people’s being willing to talk to strangers, they do provide factually and experimental proof that the listening stranger theory holds weight. They also provide reasons why people are drawn to that type of self disclosure.

If the Dunder Mifflin employees had been asked about the things they disclosed to the cameraman, they might have been taken aback and refused to answer. The

attraction for sharing their private sides was the volunteering of this information. They told their secrets on their time and on their own terms. There was no pressure involved. In the 1986 book *That's Not What I Meant!: How Conversational Style Makes or Breaks Your Relations with Others*, Deborah Tannen touches on this subject of volunteering information. She says, "Some people show interest by asking questions, and others expect people to volunteer what they want to say" (1986, p. 58). Lawrence Grobel also talks about it in his book, *The Art of the Interview: Lessons from a Master of the Craft*; he dedicates an entire chapter to teaching interviewers to get personal information out of celebrities (2004, pp. 195–219). Most strangers do not feel comfortable asking each other personal questions; therefore, they can tell each other what they want without any prompting or prodding. They feel safe in their own thoughts and secrets.

The question of what people are actually doing when they communicate to a stranger can be answered several ways. Communication can be an experience to the person sending the messages, a way to gain self-knowledge. In the book *Communication As... Perspectives on Theory*, Gregory J. Shepherd describes communication as "an experience of self" (2006, p. 24). It can be a deliberation, a decision about a choice in one's life pp. 164–173). Whatever the communication, it seems to be some kind of therapy for the person sharing the information with the stranger. In the book *Messages: A Reader in Human Communication*, Sidney M. Jourard describes self disclosure as a therapy situation which does require some courage (Jourard, pp. 163–164).

An experiment done on conversations between strangers versus conversations between friends, as described in an abstract of Benjamin Fialkoff's dissertation "An Exploratory Investigation of Conversation between Strangers" shows a key result. After

the experiment, many of the strangers showed a “desire for future social relatedness” (p. 5759). When strangers talk and share themselves with each other, they sometimes want to continue sharing with each other in the future. As seen from the experiences of the office employees in *The Office*, people want to connect to others whether they are good friends or not, and that connection can be between people who barely know each other as long as one person is providing self-disclosure.

In the book *Dialectical Approaches to Studying Personal Relationships*, Kathryn Dindia quotes N. J. Herman: “Individuals selectively conceal such information about themselves at certain times, in certain situations, with certain individuals, and freely disclose the same information at other times, in other situations, with other individuals” (Montgomery & Baxter, p. 93). In many of the examples from *The Office*, characters tell the cameraman details they would not share with their officemates. Given the show’s popularity, the viewers watching *The Office* seem to find this type of disclosure appealing.

### **Conclusion**

From the many situations in which the Dunder Mifflin employees interact with the cameraman or the listening stranger, one can glean several general conclusions and use them to form a communication theory. The first conclusion is that while the show is fictional, the writers and producers create situations that closely mirror reality; therefore, one can gain knowledge about communication from the show that may translate to real-life communication. The next conclusion is that because the communication between the person and the cameraman is not reciprocal, the cameraman remains the listening stranger throughout most of the show. The third and last conclusion is that people in the

office are more willing to share secrets, emotions, and embarrassing stories with the camera than with their co-workers. They are also more willing to look to the cameraman for support and validation during awkward and stressful moments. When one combines all three of these conclusions from *The Office*, one can form a communication theory called the listening stranger theory.

The listening stranger theory states that people tell strangers secrets and embarrassing details about themselves because they seek a nonjudgmental and comforting listener. This self-disclosure can only take place in non-threatening environments, and all information must be volunteered by the person who shares.

*The Office* may just be a silly show and an entertaining distraction for most people, but there are lessons one can learn from the characters brought to life in this mock-documentary. The interactions between a subject and a cameraman and the appeal that these interactions have on an internationally growing audience lead one to see the appeal of Blau and Fingerman's "consequential strangers," Horton and Wohl's "para-social interaction" and other ideas. Although it has not yet been studied on a national level, the listening stranger theory takes support from the works of Blau and Fingerman, as well as Horton and Wohl, and may prove to hold weight in the field of communication theory.

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