TELEVISION REPRESENTING TELEVISION: HOW NBC'S *30 ROCK* PARODIES

AND SATIRIZES THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

by

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A THESIS

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Title: TELEVISION REPRESENTING TELEVISION: HOW NBC'S *30 ROCK*

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This project analyzes the current NBC television situation comedy *30 Rock* for its

potential as a popular form of critical cultural criticism of the NBC network and, in

general, the cultural industries. The series is about the behind the scenes work of a

fictionalized comedy show, which like *30 Rock* is also appearing on NBC. The show

draws on parody and satire to engage in an ongoing effort to generate humor as well as

commentary on the sitcom genre and industry practices such as corporate control over

creative content and product placement. Using a textual analysis, the show is examined to

explore issues related to the television industry, the production of culture, and the culture

of production. Of concern is the contradictory relationship between the critical potential

of *30 Rock*'s self-reflexive content and the commercial, commodity structure of the

television industry within which the series is located.

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INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2006, NBC premiered two television programs, both about producing late night comedy sketch shows. One version was a drama, a serious portrayal, and the other was a sitcom, a humorous and even satirical portrayal. The drama, *Studio 60 on Sunset Strip*, had an average rating of 3.6 at the end of the 2006-2007 season while the sitcom, *30 Rock,* had an average rating of 2.7 (Hibberd, 2007). The drama garnered more viewers. But which one was picked up for a second season? Despite the lower rating, *30 Rock* triumphed. There may be many reasons why the heavily promoted and projected favorite *Studio 60* (written by the esteemed Aaron Sorkin of *West Wing* fame) was dropped while the underdog comedy was kept.

One of these reasons may be the portrayal of the subject matter—both shows featured a late night comedy show that resembles the well-known and popular *Saturday Night Live* but in drastically different ways. Perhaps a serious portrayal about the behind-the-scenes of comedy does not resonate as well as a comedic perspective on the comedy process. The characters on *Studio 60* were too somber and approached comedy and television production with the gravity of running the White House. The sitcom format, as opposed to the drama, is comedic in its nature, allowing for characters to poke fun at themselves, especially when it comes to the production of a comedy show.

The aim of this project is to examine one sitcom in particular, *30 Rock*, in an effort to understand its humor and critical capabilities. The television sitcom is an important text to study for at least two reasons. One, the sitcom is among the oldest and most recognizable forms on television. Sitcoms are an established genre with a rich, evolutionary history spanning from simplistic and moralistic origins that signify what the middle class *should be*, to representing working class families facing "contemporary realities" (Henry, 2002, p. 272). The second reason is that the sitcom has emerged as a potential site of social critique, commenting on everything from current events and politics to reflecting on popular culture. Over the past couple of decades, the sitcom has escalated its humor to a level containing self-aware jokes and reflexivity, such as acknowledging genre conventions, television structure, popular culture, and the presence of an audience. Perhaps the prime example of a sitcom containing satire and parody to the effect of social critique is *The Simpsons*. The show has received a significant amount of scholarly as well as popular attention (Gray, 2006; Henry, 2002; Knox, 2006; Turner, 2005). In an effort to expand the existing work concerning television and the significance of satire and parody, I offer a current television sitcom as a case study to analyze the dynamics and signification of critical humor.

30 Rock is an NBC sitcom about a fictional variety show that is set in 30 Rockefeller Plaza, home to NBC Universal. The network and NBC's parent corporation, General Electric, are frequently a part of the sitcom's content. *30 Rock* focuses on several subjects pertaining to television, such as sketch comedy (e.g. *Saturday Night Live*), the structure of the television industry, television stars, and popular culture. Through humor,

the show provides comments on issues such as media ownership, network executive control over creative content, television ratings, stereotypes, and many other aspects. But even with the subtle reflections on and critiques of television and popular culture, the program is itself a cultural product and part of the television and cultural industries.

What follows is an examination of how television's programming represents and reflects not only the television industry, but also the cultural industries—the entities that produce, create, facilitate, distribute, and negotiate culture and cultural commodities such as the television sitcom. Vital to the discussion is a framework for conceptualizing two humor devices that both carry potential for critical commentary: parody, which aims to mimic, imitate, and directly parallel other texts and formats, and satire, a type of humor with the intent of critiquing the status quo.

Of central concern to this project is the tension between the sitcom's ability to be satirical, which may include criticism of the industry, and the sitcom as commodity within the industry. This potentially contradictory relationship presents an interesting case study to examine commodified cultural products, the role of humor, and the possibilities of meaningful social criticism. Satire and parody, especially within the sitcom form, have the potential to portray the complexities and relations within and around television, providing a unique perspective on the politics, content, consumption, production, and representation of television. Using this program as a case study offers the opportunity to examine some of the ways that satire and parody within a popular culture text—the sitcom—may simultaneously critique and participate in the culture industry.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This project draws on three broad areas of theory and research: approaches to the cultural industries, television studies (with emphasis on the sitcom genre and textual studies), and theories of humor. In the following discussion, these areas are briefly examined with the goal of developing frameworks for defining culture, the sitcom, humor devices used in the sitcom, and their interrelationships.

The Context of Television Studies

Why study television? Newcomb (2005b), editor of the influential *Television: The Critical View*, offers two answers: "because it changed my life" (p.110) and to address "the larger social and cultural constructs that surround us" (p. 111). While the first reason is relevant on an individual level, the latter point acknowledges personal experience is set within a larger social and political context. He also raises two others questions: how does television tell stories and how do television stories relate to the societies and cultures where the programs appear? These three questions are the guiding framework to academic television studies. Paths to answering these questions are not just within the academy but also in the historical context "outside the academy." Newcomb is referring "mainly to the changes in technology, policy, and economics, including political economy, and the consequent alterations surrounding what television means industrially

and creatively and, perhaps most important, culturally and socially as experienced in homes, hotels, shopping malls, and other settings." (2005b, p. 108).

Early studies of television focused on the larger constructs but from the perspective that television was a social problem with adverse effects (Newcomb, 2005a). Developments in areas such as cultural studies and political economy have contributed to a television studies field better equipped to examine the complex social and cultural contexts, both positive and negative, associated with and around television. Thus, rather than a study of television and solely quantitative effects, television studies emerged as an interdisciplinary field. This new approach "produced methods to analyze the complex relations between texts, audiences, and content, as well as the relationships between media industries, state, and capitalist economies" (Kellner, 1995, p. 31). The movement to include a broader range of approaches, such as the move from quantitative to qualitative and from static to dynamic relations, along with influences of political economy, have lead to the analysis of issues such as ideology, high and low culture, the culture industry, class struggle, power, identity, dominant institutions, and hegemony.

Culture and the Cultural Industries

Drawing on cultural studies and political economy, the circuit of culture framework was developed to address the complexities in the production, regulation, dissemination, and identification of culture. The cultural circuit is a guiding framework to understanding the relations and practices that produce and form culture (du Gay et al., 1997). The circuit consists of five cultural moments: representation, identity, consumption, regulation, and production. The point in time, with given conditions and

circumstances, at which these processes intersect is called the articulation. As a circuit, each of these moments are relevant and important to one another; focusing on one aspect, such as representation, does not exclude discussion on the other four moments. This framework was developed in response to the growing recognition that culture is as crucial to study as political and economic forces in society. This project is mostly concerned with representation aspect of the circuit of culture as it relates to television, though in this representation, issues of regulation and production are considered.

Defining culture will vary greatly, though this project aims to examine culture from cultural studies as well as political economy frameworks where culture carries meanings and culture can be commodities. Williams refers to culture "as the active cultivation of the mind" and considers the forces that develop culture, the "process of this development," and its forms (1981, p. 11). Hall explains culture as "shared meanings," elaborating on the processes and practices that construct meaning. Meaning is relevant to all the processes in "our 'cultural circuit'—in the construction of identity and the marking of difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct" (Hall, 1997, p. 4). Mass and popular culture have been commonly used to describe shared meanings. But Kellner (1995) argues that these terms are ambiguous, because "popular" can refer to originating from the people (such as the working class) and "mass" can denote a commodity culture. Instead, he offers the designation "media culture," used to encompass the industry and its artifacts, and which also "calls attention to the circuit of production, distribution, and reception through which media culture is produced, distributed, and consumed" (p. 34). This designation serves well in the context

of this discussion since the subject of this study—a television show commenting on the television industry—seems to embody the complexity of media culture.

Culture can also be paired with economy to help understand the industry of culture as well as provide the dimensions of meaning and identity to the production of culture (du Gay, 1997). Through a discourse of economy, including how economy relates to culture and the language used to construct that, du Gay opens the notion of the economy as a cultural phenomenon as well as an economic process, which can then be seen to carry meaning. Cultural economy can be usefully broken into macro and micro levels—a focus on industries and a focus on individuals. The former provides the perspective to assess production, structure, and the factors involved in producing culture. The latter is useful to examine not only identity and meaning-making, but also the culture of production. Negus writes that the micro approach "focuses on everyday human *agency* and the making of *cultural* meanings" (emphasis in original, 1997, p. 69), reminding us that people in the culture industry are just as involved in culture and meaning making as the "consumers" of media, thus leading to a discussion on the culture of production.

Stokes (2003) offers a succinct definition of the culture industry: "one which has as its main function the production or distribution of art, entertainment or information" (p. 101). Hesmondhalgh (2002) takes production a step further, noting that "the cultural industries have usually been thought of as those institutions… which are most directly involved in the production of social meaning" (p. 11). The term covers the full range of organizations, functions, and products, such as media corporations, publications, events, programming, music, and so on. From the critical lens developed by Adorno and

Horkheimer (from the Frankfurt school), the culture industry produces culture as a

commodity; not culture by the masses but cultural products by the industry, dictated by

the marketplace (Jhally, 1989). Hesmondhalgh (2002) notes that Adorno and

Horkheimer's conception of the "culture industry" carried the assumption of a unified

logic of *all* culture and a pessimistic view of "culture subsumed by capital" (p. 17), a

view that he found too limiting. Thus he offers the term *cultural industries* to reflect on

the multitude of cultural possibilities and associated industries. Specifically, he draws on

the French sociologist school (Bernard Miège) to expand the notion of the culture

industry into the cultural industries with the underlying assumptions that culture is

contested and complex.

Returning to the issue of commodities and the cultural industries, Murdock and

Golding (1997) write that the mass media are "industrial and commercial organizations

which produce and distribute commodities" (p. 4). Specifically, culture as commodity

occurs when "institutions in our society… employ the characteristic modes of production

and organization of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the

form of cultural goods and services" (Garnham, 1995, p. 78). A key component to this

political economic approach is that while cultural and media products are commodities,

the fact that they are *cultural* and *media* sets these commodities apart from others. The

commercial system of buying, selling, packaging, and disseminating culture through

channels of mass media may be similar to the practices of industrial corporations.

However, there are a number of differences that sets culture as commodities and media as

commodities apart. For one, "In addition to producing and distributing commodities,

however, the mass media also disseminate ideas about economic and political structure"
(Murdock & Golding, 1997, p. 4). Thus, the content and meanings of these media and
cultural commodities are not just bought and sold, used, and shared, they also carry
ideological dimensions. Another departure from the typical commodity is that media can
be shared an indefinite number of times, though only purchased once or not even at all, in
the case of television.

Also a factor of the cultural industries is the shift towards complex ownership and
transindustrial media conglomerates (Hesmondhalgh, 2002; Louw, 2001; Meehan, 2005).
Hesmondhalgh (2002) calls this current era of ownership "complex professionalism,"
which is marked by "the increasing presence of large corporations in cultural markets" (p.
160). And as Bagdikian (2004) notes, the trend of traditionally non-media related
corporations purchasing media "properties" results in primary objectives of profit and
expansion, rather than cultural production for the sake of culture. Among the key
characteristics of the complex professionalism in the cultural industries is synergy, a
notion where "cross-promotion and cross-selling opportunities" are maximized by
common ownership. (Hesmondhalgh, 2002).

Synergy goes hand-in-hand with industry concentration, where conglomerates
consolidate and integrate. Murdock and Golding (1997) write of two types of integration:
horizontal, which "enables companies to consolidate and extend their control within a
particular sector of media production and to maximize the economies of scale and shared
resources" and vertical "when a company with interest in one stage of production process
extends its operations to other stages" (1997, pp. 11-12). These forms of integration

allows for greater opportunities to streamline production, such as a single corporation capable of producing, disseminating, and promoting a cultural product such as a movie, in addition to owning the movie theater, the amusement park, and the television shows and magazines which interview the movie stars.

A prime example of the concentrated, integrated, synergistic transnational conglomerate is General Electric, the multi-national corporation that purchased NBC in order to "spread investment across a range of sectors" (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 166). Given that General Electric and NBC are of particular interest to this project, the following is a very brief corporate profile with emphasis on NBC Universal. GE purchased NBC in 1986 (although, GE had owned RCA and the beginnings of NBC up until 1931). In 2004, GE joined the ranks of other big multi-faceted media corporations by acquiring Universal Studios, which included movie studios, cable networks, and theme parks (Meehan, 2005). With this addition to the media arm of GE, Meehan (2005) writes that it seems as though "GE coordinated its broadcasting, cable, and satellite operations to fully exploit its intellectual properties…The acquisition signaled an intensification of the vertical and horizontal integration that GE had already achieved in ownership of … NBC Studios" (p. 63). The NBC Universal division of GE now includes the NBC network, operations of television stations and cable networks, production facilities, distribution channels, Universal pictures, digital media (hulu.com, a joint venture with Twentieth Century Fox), and other businesses. As of 2008, GE reported profits around 26 billion, of which, NBC Universal makes up 11 percent of the total segment profit (General Electric, 2009, p. 20). The other four major segments of GE are

Energy Infrastructure, Technology Infrastructure, Capital Finance, and Consumer and

Industrial. This information background will be useful in the analysis to help situate the

show's humor.

The Television Industry

As part of the cultural industries, television is a complex system of owners,

producers, advertisers, audiences, and texts. Institutional practices such as ratings and

focusing on demographic audiences have dictated the course of television programming

since television in the U.S. emerged as a fully commercial venture (Meehan, 2005).

Gitlin (1983) notes that network executives are primarily concerned with maximizing

profits by reaching the maximum audience, with little concern for "quality and explicit

ideology" (p. 25). In terms of audience, advertisers and networks seek programs with

mass appeal in order to attract a large number of eyeballs. However, programming that

attracts smaller audiences is acceptable as long as the programming attracts consumers

with higher income (Attallah, 1984; Hamamoto, 1989).

Once a television show, as well as a genre, proves successful in the ratings,

networks will typically try to reproduce that success, resulting in formulaic programs. As

Gitlin (1983) explains the process, television's "style becomes ritualized because

executives keep it that way and at the same time because its public expects television to

look the way that thirty years of commercial history have made it" (p. 30).

Hesmondhalgh (2002) notes that this is an important aspect to the cultural industries

where formatting is a strategy to cope with financial risks and ensure audience numbers.

One aspect of formatting is genres, which "are ways of organizing, regulating, and

hierarchizing themes, signifiers, and discourses" (Attallah, 1984, p. 232). Genres then are beneficial on an economic level as well as on an audience level where we as viewers become familiar with these standardizations. Formatting also includes relying on known stars with familiar qualities to associate with texts (for example, using a celebrity to host a new game show) and serials, which promise sameness with, minor but not threatening variations. Another strategy is scheduling, where executives focus on the "flow' of programming, considering whether a demographic tuned in for one show will watch the subsequent show (Gitlin, 1983). This strategy also aids in developing programming blocks of similar programming, especially the practice of scheduling a lead-in program in order to strengthen ratings for the next program. The concept of flow originated with Williams (1975) who considers flow a highly planned sequence of programming, a phenomenon that we as viewers are accustomed to viewing and accepting.

It is important to consider the political and ideological dimension to television programming. As Gitlin (1983) notes, executives are not interested in the ideological and political underpinnings of programming—unless it's useful to attract audiences and higher ratings. Furthermore, Gitlin writes of television entertainment

> beneath its consensus on uplift and the well-appointed life, has become a contested zone. As long as television shows are packaged more than written, the process is automatically political more than artistic…Their polling process softens most sharp. lines, one reason why the shows usually lack the conviction and the sense of internal proportion that make real art. These shows are registries of symbols, central bulletin boards on which the looks of social types get posted. (p. 248).

Although written more than 20 years ago, this process applies to the history as well as contemporary television programming. While programming may contain

ideological dimensions (consider *All in the Family*, where the clash between liberalism and staunch conservatism, marked by racism and xenophobia, played out), the fact that television is a medium for the masses smoothes over any real conflict. Thus television becomes a conservative medium, with executives aiming towards rating success and audience appeal, even if underlying themes of politics, race, women's rights, social injustice, anti-war sentiments, fundamentalist agendas, and so on, surface into programming. Politically and socially relevant content, that may be construed as liberal, may be further negated by the overall picture that television presents; consider the difference between FOX's entertainment programming (namely, *The Simpsons*) and the FOX News Network, known its neo-conservative views.

Attalllah (1984) points out that the television industry is dependent on audience approval and acceptance, thus necessitating a balance between audience pleasure and economic pressures from advertisers and network expectations for profitability. He uses the sitcom as an example to illustrate how a program needs to have entertainment value, be different from other programs while maintaining familiar structures, and to some degree, to represent reality. But economically, the program needs high ratings, which ties in with advertising money and profitability for the network; or as Attallah describes from an institutional and economic perspective— as a commodity no different than any other.

However, television programming, and media commodities in general, are not strictly commodities like any other. Media commodities are different for a number of reasons. As noted earlier in the discussion, media commodities carry ideological

dimensions. Also, as noted with Attallah's point on the television audience, the audience is a commodity associated with the media commodity. Mosco (1996) explains this as "Mass media programming is used to construct audiences; advertisers pay media companies for access to these audiences; audiences are thereby delivered to advertisers" (p. 148). This is a concise summary of Smythe's (1977) argument of television as a two-commodity system, where audiences are primary commodities and what advertisers "buy are the services of audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times" (p. 4). The audience commodity facilitated a tangential industry of program ratings as a way to further analyze demographics and attach economic value to these groups (Meehan, 2005).

An interesting dichotomy to the media commodity concept is brought to attention by Murdock and Golding (1997), who draw in the conflicting perspectives of media commodities: "For the owners, investors and managers media products are commodities to be packaged, promoted and marketed in the same way as any others… For many of the people who actually make them, however, media products are not simply commodities but media for creative expression" (p. 21). The creative and artistic value to these cultural commodities adds another layer that distinguishes these sorts of commodities from others. Television programming offers an illustration on how this dynamic between economic commodity and creative expression plays out and attempts at balance.

The Television Sitcom

When Attallah was writing in the early to mid 1980s, the sitcom was widely viewed as an "unworthy" subject in academia and wrote in order to illuminate the

relevancy of studying this popular television genre. Among the reasons to study the sitcom is that this genre is a significant part of the television landscape as well as socially significant as a popular cultural form that reflects situations of work, family, relationships, and current events (Henry, 2002). The following section offers a brief outline of the development of sitcoms as industrial cultural practice as well as notable characteristics and representations.

The sitcom genre originated on radio, "born" amidst conflict, and was "the aesthetic site upon which the inconsistencies, clashes, and conflicts of the larger social system were argued and settled" (Hamamoto, 1989, p. 4). As a genre, the sitcom was a key component to luring audiences to the new medium of television, where the sitcom has gone through a number of eras. The early era of the television sitcom (1950s and 1960s) was much more sanitized and uniform than the radio sitcoms—ethnic characters and conflicts of the radio era were transformed for television where shows focused o suburban, nuclear families living middle class lifestyles (Henry, 2002; Marc, 1989). The 1970s brought on a contrasting era of the sitcom featuring the working class (specifically *All in the Family*), representations of the workplace (such as *Mary Tyler Moore*), and plotlines centered on current events (*M.A.S.H.*, a show that although was set during the Korean War, was a metaphor for the Vietnam War). These changes in storylines and representations are an interesting indication of shifts in social contexts and audience expectations for more relevant storylines.

During the early 1990s, a number of sitcoms appeared on primetime television that later would facilitate changes to the sitcom format and representations. Henry (2002)

notes the significance of three "working-class" representations that introduced the subversion of "the myth-traditions of the family sitcom" – *Roseanne*, *Married...With Children*, and *The Simpsons* (p. 266). I bring in these examples of the domestic sitcom because, as Henry argues, these shows reached a level of satire, a complex term to be discussed, imbued with critique of traditional media-constructed norms of the family.

A note worth mentioning in the context of this project is the connection of the sitcom to advertisers, various moments in which the commodity dimension of these cultural products become visible. As will be explored later in the analysis of *30 Rock*, the use of advertising and particularly product placement are central plot points in the show. As Hamamoto (1989) notes, advertising in sitcoms is nothing new, nor is self-reflexivity of sitcom characters and plots concerning the advertised products. Early radio sitcoms "were often produced entirely by advertising agencies working for corporate advertisers" and early television sitcoms contained a "flow" between sitcom content and commercial content (Hamamoto, 1989, p. 5). While the format of the sitcom is built around commercial interruptions, we as viewers have become accustomed to the lack of commercials within the show—a trend that is changing with the "revival" of commercials in shows that the industry calls product placement.

Studying television, and specifically the sitcom, has resulted in diverse research focused on aspects such as production, regulation, consumption, and content (Attallah, 1984; Bonner, 2003; Gray, 2006; Mills, 2005; Thompson, 2007). This study is concerned with conventions of the sitcom genre, how the sitcom has possibly changed, and representations. Sitcoms are centered on humor and characters and are based on socially

understood notions (within cultural, geographical, and social contexts) of what is

humorous (Mills, 2005). Mills argues that sitcoms are dependent on cultural conventions,

defined by both producers (the industry) and the audience (the consumers). These

conventions include genre format, expected narrative structures, and aesthetics. Common

characteristics of sitcoms have been and continue to be multiple plot lines, consistency in

characters and situations, development of a problem and resolution within each episode,

use of stand-up comedians as actors, and the laugh track (Gray, 2006; Mills, 2005). The

laugh track is of particular interest to this study. Traditionally, the staple of the sitcom is

the laugh track, which signifies to the audience what is funny and simulates "liveness"

(Mills, 2005). Yet recently, laugh tracks have been abandoned, which Mills suggests

signifies changes in sitcom styles that stray away from an artificial quality to more

"realistic" and documentary conventions. This aesthetic style of presentation lends a

different televisual quality to the sitcom, offering more opportunities for varied and

complex camera angles and settings to suggest a representation closer to reality—a

televisual style in contrast to the multi-camera, live studio-audience that presented a

theatrical aesthetic.

Among the central characteristics of the sitcom is the contemporary content.

Attallah (1984) observed that sitcoms can provide social commentary on issues such as

class, the family, war, and sexuality. Mills (2005) attributes the social commentary aspect

to the structure of the U.S. television industry, in which the production process from

writing to recording often occurs in a short amount of time. This short time frame allows

for the sitcom to comment on current events and concerns, resulting in a "genre as a

social barometer" (p. 57), reflecting public concern while writers offer social

commentary in the parallel universe of the sitcom. But Attallah raises the point that

perhaps sitcoms with social commentary are an "industrial strategy" and are intended to

"capture an audience" rather than raise consciousness (1984, p. 242). The dynamic

between strategy and genuine social commentary further illustrates how the cultural

industries can produce a cultural product (the sitcom) that may be relevant and critical,

but also profitable, because the commodity draws in an audience. Hamamoto (1989) also

addresses the tension between the sitcom's content and the structure of the television

industry—the sitcom carries "emancipatory beliefs" but is "restricted by the commercial

system" (p. 2). These tensions are underlying issues in this project, as will be discussed

in the analysis of *30 Rock*.

Sitcoms have depicted a variety of situations such as the family, the workplace,

and/or particular lifestyles, such as the young and single (Gray, 2006; Mills, 2005). For

the purpose of this research, it is helpful to mention the primetime sitcoms (in the United

States) that take place in a cultural industries setting, or in other words, in workplace

settings such as radio and television.

The radio industry was represented in at least two programs about the radio

workplace: *WKRP* and *Newsradio*. The television broadcast news industry, was central to

Murphy Brown, in which CBS's *Sixty Minutes* was parodied and the show's content

regularly drew on current events (Prince, 2008). Several other comedies within the

television industry setting are *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (comedy writers), *Mary Tyler*

Moore Show (local news in Minneapolis), *Back to You* (local news in Pittsburgh), *Sports Night* (parody of ESPN's *SportsCenter*), and *30 Rock* (the focus of this project).

Other television comedy shows worth mentioning that are highly reflexive about the culture industry, particularly television and film, are two HBO programs: *The Larry Sanders Show* (about a late night comedy show) and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (the everyday life of Larry David, writer and producer of *Seinfeld*). These two shows offer a first-person perspective on the inner workings of the cultural industries in a humorous format that challenged the sitcom label (future analysis of these two texts would be beneficial to the study of comedy and the representation of the cultural industries). Also, the animated primetime sitcom, *The Critic*, focused on numerous aspects of the movie and television industries, providing unique opportunities for parodies through animated representations of current films, celebrities, and issues in the cultural industries. Through research, there appears to be little attention given to the representation of working in the culture industries within these and similar television shows. However, it is worth mentioning that there is scholarly attention given to these representations in film.

Situating the Sitcom in the Intertextual Landscape of Culture

Before discussing humor and comedy, it is vital to discuss the reflexive component of the television sitcom and what that means, particularly within the postmodern context. Specifically, what is reflexivity and how does that fit with the notion of the text and intertextual? The postmodern, as Kellner (1995) views it, is both about the breakdown of meaning and the reconstruction of new modes in meaning. So approaching television texts with a postmodern framework is useful to examine how texts play with

notions of narrative, forms, and conventions. A basic understanding of text is as artifact or object. Drawing on notions of discourse (in terms of social experience) and meaning, a more complex rendering of text acknowledges the interpretation of the reader and the text's meaning (Fiske, 1985). In terms of television, the text is the television show, though Fiske (1985) discusses the "peripheral" texts such as promotional items and media attention that further add meaning to the initial text. Another descriptor for the peripheral texts is the "paratext," which "refer to those elements of or surrounding a text whose sole aim is to inflect particular reading of that text" (Gray, 2006, p. 36).

Intertextuality "refers to the 'connections' between texts and can be defined as the process by which texts communicate meaning to audiences through references to other texts, genres, discourses, themes or media" (Casey et al., 2002, pp. 126-127). Furthermore, intertextuality relies on audience knowledge of other texts and audience familiarity with cultural codes (among other conventions and practices) in order to "read" a text situated in a network of texts (Casey et al., 2002). Gray (2006) distinguishes critical intertextuality as the territory where readers can take the texts and paratexts to "subvert" preferred meanings, offering alternative, critical interpretations.

Henry (2002) explains the "intertextual incorporations" in *The Simpsons* as "include[ing] material from all aspects of the cultural terrain" (p. 268). Furthermore, this intertextuality is marked by "self-conscious blurring of boundaries" that is a tool that "effectively comments on itself [*The Simpsons*] and the culture which it is a part of" (p. 268). It is the self-conscious element that relates to the self-reflexive—how a text (or rather, the characters in the text) recognizes that it is a part of a larger network of texts

and is based on the "real world." And in the case of the television program, particularly the sitcom, the self-reflexive element also pertains to the awareness that the text is produced for an audience. In the larger picture of self-reflexivity and television, Aden (1991) explains that understandings of "relationships among text, genre, audience, and form" is necessary (p. 401). And in the case of the sitcom, in order to comprehend self-reflexive elements, audiences are required to be familiar with their own understanding of television conventions such as the sitcom's structure, suspending beliefs, and recognizing the constraints of time and space.

Although self-reflexivity has been a part of television history, such as characters from one show entering the world of another show (Aden, 1991), the self-reflexive and intertextual are considered central to the postmodern (Henry, 2002). The postmodern, in this case, refers to the notion of a period following the modern era, where in modern texts are characterized by traditional narratives and forms that tend to not cross boundaries. In the case of the sitcom, self-reflexivity and intertextuality can be considered the acknowledgment of standard television conventions (specifically through parodying these conventions) and of content that includes references to the intertextual landscape of television popular culture.

Writing about *The Simpsons,* Knox (2006) notes that qualities of postmodern television are that a "self reflexive and intertextual aesthetic [that] displays a sense of ironic knowingness" as well as "a sense of hyper self-consciousness about its own textuality" (p. 74). Thus, these qualities of postmodern television acknowledges conventions of television (such as in the case of *The Simpsons*, references to genre,

storytelling, stereotypes, etc.), with a nod to the intertextual history and contemporary texts that inform the current text. Whereas television texts in the past may have been self-reflexive by allowing for characters to cross time slots (in effort to cross promote the shows), the contemporary self-reflexivity invites texts, characters, genres, and so on from across the intertextual landscape as part of the text's content. Similar to *The Simpsons'* vast amount of references to popular culture and the surrounding media landscape, Kellner (1995) writes of *Beavis and Butt-head* (the animated MTV show about two male teens) as postmodern text. He explains "In a certain sense, *Beavis and Butt-Head* is 'postmodern' in that it is purely a product of media culture, with its characters, style, and content almost solely derivative from previous TV shows" (p. 145). A postmodern text then contains the self-reflexivity and awareness of media culture that diachronically and synchronically informs the show's content and its context.

Furthermore, the postmodern contains political motives. As Henry (2002) writes about *The Simpsons*, "as a postmodern text, *The Simpsons* does indeed have an 'ulterior motive': to critique contemporary American society using the past as well as the present with a strong satirical impulse" (p. 268). Yet it is hard to ignore that despite the underlying political motives, the program is a part of the cultural industries—a contradiction that will be discussed in a subsequent section. Also indicative of the postmodern is the increase of self-referential elements and blurring of not only genre lines, but also between fiction and reality. Morreale (2002) notes the series finales of *Murphy Brown, The Larry Sanders Show*, and *Seinfeld* exhibits these postmodern

elements, especially extending beyond the screen of the television text and into intertexts of other cultural outlets.

The advantage of including the postmodern into the discussion is to help make sense of and understand the role of parody and satire in the self-reflexivity and intertextuality found in contemporary sitcoms. However, drawing on Gray (2006), discussions of the postmodern can be "distracting to a study of both intertextuality and parody" given that on the one hand, intertextuality has been around long before contemporary times, and on the other hand, that the postmodern at times tends to devalue parody through the process of pastiche (p. 5). Though parody will be discussed to a greater extent in the following section, parody is loosely defined as mimicking of and borrowing from other texts and forms with underlying intentions of critique.

The pastiche becomes a concern because in the postmodern landscape, where there is so much borrowing and referencing of previous texts and forms, parody loses its power and capability to convey meaning, especially critique. Jameson (1991) defines pastiche as "like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique idiosyncratic style... but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives, amputated of the satiric impulse... Pastiche is thus blank parody" (p. 17). But as Gray argues, the postmodern does not necessarily empty the critical potential of parody. Accordingly, while this project references the postmodern elements of contemporary sitcoms, of greater concern are the intersection of humor, intertextuality and self-reflexivity.

Approaches to Humor: Bergson, Freud, and Bakhtin

Prior to examining the mechanics and roles of satire and parody, a discussion of selected approaches to humor is useful to provide a foundation for analysis, which provides context for considering the critical elements of humor. Several scholars have focused on humor in a theoretical light. Within their investigations emerge helpful frames for understanding satire and parody.

Bergson (1956) is useful in that he theorizes about the social significance of comedy. He opens his theories with the idea that laughter is human and inherently involves community. Comedy can serve to point out the mechanical, rigid elements of society (consider the humor of the Chaplin film *Modern Times* and its commentary on industrial society). Within this perspective, institutions and one-track minded characters are humorous for their inability to adapt and function in dynamic environments. Bergson notes that comedy performs a social function by essentially folding deviants into conformity. Along these lines, comedy and laugher also work as a "release valve," allowing us to laugh at social ills and injustices while neutralizing eccentricities and aggressiveness. As a social function, comedy serves to create and solidify a community. Laughter does not occur in isolation, "our laughter is always the laughter of a group" (p. 64). However, the group can be exclusive—"laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry" (p. 64). Consider television programming as an example that speaks to Bergson's concept. The more popular the show (by ratings standards), the more people are included in the laughing experience.

Freud (1989) focused on categorizing jokes and theorizing how and why we derive pleasure out of humor. On the subject of pleasure, he writes that joke-making "is an activity which aims at deriving pleasure from mental process, whether intellectual or otherwise" (p. 113). To understand a complex joke, we go through a process that connects two unrelated objects (such as Freud's example with a joke about women and umbrellas) or laugh at a kernel of truth concealed in humorous delivery. Similar to Bergson's point that laughter is a collective activity, pleasure also comes from being on the side of the joke-maker, not on the side of the object of the joke. Freud notes that there are three components to joke making: the teller, the listener, and the object. The first two derive the pleasure at the expense of the object.

Freud identifies two types of jokes: innocent and tendentious. Of interest to this study is the latter type, a joke with a purpose. He classifies two purposes, either serving as a hostile joke, which relates to aggressiveness, or as an obscene joke, which relates to exposure. The obscene joke, including smut, aims at exposing the object, often in a sexual manner. This in turn relates to the repressed, for what is repressed for Freud is our sexual desires and language that involves excrements (sexual and bodily). The hostile joke is significant for this study since Freud considers satire under this heading. Satire and aggressive humor serve a number of functions such as criticizing authority figures, making institutions the butt of jokes, and bringing our enemies down to an inferior level. The joke then becomes the "mask" or façade that enables criticism and rebellion against dogmas, laws, institutions, and people. When morals and institutions are attacked, Freud refers to these as "cynical" jokes, pointing to marriage as a commonly joked about

institution. In cynical jokes, subconscious connections are covered up by cynical remarks, where the pleasure is derived from a "roundabout" declaration about the joke's object.

Among the influential scholars in humor with wide application to television is Bakhtin (1984) and his concept of the carnival. Through his discussion of the carnivalesque, he raises an interesting dichotomous yet interwoven relationship. between official culture and folk (popular) culture. Bakhtin also provides a useful framework for understanding parody that is applicable to this project concerning the role of satire and parody within the culture industry.

Bakhtin (1984) explains that carnival folk culture (as was portrayed in Rabelais's novels set in the medieval times) is "not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (p. 7). He sets up. carnival as an organic space that embodies everyone, encouraging participation in bodily, material celebration of feasting and laughing. In carnival, a different language (referred to as marketplace speech in the context of medieval folk culture) developed in order to communicate the "frank and free" and "liberating norms of etiquette and decency" (p. 10). This is contrasted with official culture, particularly the official feast that was steeped in tradition, hierarchy, and formal language. Bakhtin refers to the separated life of the carnival as second life where folk culture and humor prevail in a spirit of renewal and change. In Bakhtin's conception of carnival laughter, there is room for conflicting aims and feelings. Unlike Freud, who stresses a distinction between joke teller and object, Bakhtin notes that carnival laughter is "also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves" (p. 12), suggesting no distinction between teller and

object. Thus the object in folk humor is a mixture of folk culture as well as official, rigid, and hierarchal culture, a conception of humor that will be useful later when reconciling the success of a television program that openly ridicules the corporate parent that enables the show's existence.

In Bakhtin's conception of humor (as explored through Rabelasian literature), humor is ambivalent and carries mixed emotions and perspectives. Furthermore, instead of perceiving humor as fulfilling negative functions, Bakhtin stresses the "positive, regenerating, creative meaning" of carnivalesque laughter (p. 71). Laughter is explicitly *not* a part of official culture (including governing entities such as the church and the state) where seriousness prevails in a rhetoric of oppression and fear. However, official culture at some point recognized the need to legalize and sanction laughter, feasts, and even "grotesque degradation of various church rituals and symbols" (p. 74). Bakhtin writes that in these festive, carnal, orgiastic celebrations, the rituals and symbols of official culture are brought down from an intangible, feared level into the realm of material, bodily conceptions. This movement from the feared and into the mocked, revered, and renewed speaks to the agency of folk culture to reinterpret official conceptions of nature and life. Yet, this also highlights the inherent contradiction of the carnival, where although the people have the power to reinterpret, this is a period of time dictated and sanctioned by official culture.

Parody and Satire

Given the foundational theories to comedy, I'd like to offer a working framework for understanding parody and satire as they pertain to this project. While throughout this

project the two humor tropes are discussed in conjunction, defining these two concepts

separately will aid in later analysis of the text. Certainly there are instances where parody

and satire work with one another to achieve similar goals, particularly aimed at critique.

Two specific tropes of humor are emphasized in this project: parody and satire.

Berger (1993) defines parody (in literary terms, though it can be applied to television) as

"mimicry or imitation" and deals with identity. Parody also serves as a reflective tool,

particularly calling into visibility genres and conventions (Ben-Porat, 1979; Gray, 2006;

Knox, 2006). Drawing on Bakhtin, Gray suggests that parody requires another genre's

grammar and form. Within television, parody is often semiotic and/or indirect, embedded

within relations between characters and signs throughout the show (Gray, 2006).

Criticism is a part of parody by taking conventions out of context and adding

commentary while keeping and making visible the "conventional style," thus offering

different interpretations and meanings (Bush et al., 1994). Gray (2006) calls parody "a

critical form of intertextuality" for that reason (p. 4).

Satire is a type of humor based in language and can draw on many other humor

techniques such as irony, insult, and exaggeration (Berger, 1993). Its purpose tends to be

directed toward critique, particularly the status quo and those in power. As a "critical

representation," satire may comment on a number of societal and cultural values,

structures, and prejudices (Ben-Porat, 1979). Berger writes, "satirists attack specific

individuals or institutions or happenings" (p. 49). Satire begins with the assumption that

"the ideas and things it mocks—usually ideas and things invested with authority—are

wrong, and that exposing this fact through satire will erode their authority and precipitate

change" (Turner, 2004, p. 238). Simpson (2003) conceptualizes the discourse of satire in three parts (which correlate with Freud's joke-making triad): the satirist (the producer), the satiree (the audience), and the satirised (the subject). Including the audience as a part of the triad is crucial to the execution and understanding of satire. For satire to be effective, as well as parody, the audience must have a frame of reference and familiarity with not only the subject of the joke but also the context in order to understand the humor and the relevancy of the critical gesture.

Among the best television sitcom examples of both parody and satire as critique is *The Simpsons*, especially when episodes offer representations of the television industry and its practices. Knox (2006) notes how one particular episode "engages in a critique of the network, form, and medium on which the series depends for its very existence" (p. 75). In general, satire is used to illustrate how the writers are conscious of the culture industry context and can critique the industry through humor. The show is rich with parody of advertising, the domestic sitcom genre, and the news media (Gray, 2006). Parody and satire, though, are not specific to the cartoon format. Thompson (2007) argues the potential of new forms of sitcoms to further add satirical value through parodying visual conventions of the observational style of the documentary. Drawing together two programs about producing television (*The Larry Sanders Show* and *30 Rock*), Thompson writes, "those two programs seem to have adopted the observational style as a corollary to parodying television production; if parody not only simulates form but critiques it then the observational aesthetic is adopted as another method of telling the 'truth' about television production" (2007, p. 67). The observational style is in contrast to

the theatrical, studio-audience style established throughout the history of the sitcom. The observational incorporates the documentary style of filming, which is an illustration of the postmodern blending of genres, enabling the television sitcom to convey some of the codes traditionally associated with the documentary. As Thompson points out, in the case of television programs that are about television production, then the documentary style lends a sense of representational "truth" to the shows' content.

The critical capabilities of the television sitcom are not such a clear-cut matter of satire and parody. Knox (2006) calls the tenuous relationship between critical content and the commercial value of a television show as a "double-coded identity" (p. 73). While *The Simpsons* (and similar programs featuring parodies and satires) is a critique of the domestic sitcom and at times a critique of the television industry and associated consumerism, the show also economically contributes to the network as well as the industry. The content of the show relies on the context of television and the industry for plots and jokes, forging a cyclical relation where the show continues to mock the industry and maintain viewership while the commodity aspect is also maintained. Furthermore, the relation between the show and the network, Fox, is almost one of necessity. Fox has defined its success on the brand of humor that *The Simpsons* offers (as well as other shows that set the network apart such as *Married...With Children*), mostly because the show resonates with desirable demographics (males 18 – 49) and is a profitable commodity (Gray, 2006; Mills, 2005). Indeed, Matt Groening (the creator of the show) has noted that no other network at that time (1989) would tolerate *The Simpsons'* style of humor and would most likely want to compromise the creative product (Doherty, 1999).

Parody and satire are not specific to the sitcom genre. These humor devices can be co-opted by the cultural industries as a strategy, whether to market a product or a television show. After analyzing *Saturday Night Live* commercial parodies and discussing the larger implications with television advertising, a group of researchers concluded that parody has been incorporated into ads in general. The researchers note that parody is just another advertising technique; "parody now seems to benefit those who deploy a genre that is frequently the target of parody (Bush et al., 1994, p. 76). What happens to the critical potential of parody is that the parodying of products and ad conventions become a gesture to consumers of a self-reflexive aesthetic indicating that we (the advertisers) know that you (the consumers) know that you are being advertised to as an advertising strategy to reach us as consumers. This is significant because the cultural work, *Saturday Night Live*, indirectly may have influenced the trend for advertising to parody and make fun of itself. Within the larger scope of popular culture, the self-reflexive and self-referential aesthetic that are associated with entertainment have seeped into advertising, a "wink wink" sort of phenomena where advertisements acknowledge the sophisticated audiences and their awareness of advertising techniques.

Areas of Inquiry

Television programs, particularly the sitcom, have incorporated parody and satire (Mills, 2005; Gray, 2006; Knox, 2006). Fiske and Hartley (2003) point out that television programs use parody to examine television, offering the audience a self-critical view. Within several shows, the television industry has been a focal point of the storyline, or at least has been referenced. The general questions are raised: How does one of television's

own programming (the sitcom, *30 Rock*) represent itself—the television industry? Do these representations allow for the contradictory outcomes of both making the programming more popular while maintaining a critical dimension to the representations? More specifically, assuming that comedy, particularly parody and satire, are means of representation as well as potential critique, how does *30 Rock* represent and comment on the television industry? An overarching question in this project addresses the role of satire within the context of postmodern entertainment: can satire as a form of critique maintain its progressive, critical edge within the commodified cultural structure it critiques? These questions are addressed by examining several relevant *30 Rock* episodes through a textual analysis method.

CHAPTER III

READING TELEVISION: A METHOD

"Reading" television as a text is now a well-established method to understand a

variety of issues such as power, class, race, and identity and a variety of genres such as

sitcoms, dramas, talk shows, and soap operas (Acosta-Alzuru, 2003; Attallah, 1983; Fiske

& Hartley, 2003/1978; Gray, 2006; Hartley, 1999; Hamamoto, 1989). Goals of textual

analysis are to identify how language and signs are used to construct meaning, how

producers encode messages, how texts are underlined by ideology and power, and how

the text relates to historical context (Curtin, 1995). Particularly in the case of *30 Rock*,

textual analysis aims to examine the show's dual imperative to be commercially

successful while critically reflective of the television industry itself.

The textual analysis method used here follows from the work of Stuart Hall. Hall

is among the scholars in the cultural studies tradition that gave academic attention to the

text as a viable space that conveys meanings. The text is the television program, *30 Rock*,

which is analyzed to understand the reflexivity of the television industry in representing

itself. The show uses satire and parody to represent the television and the cultural

industries in a way that is comedic yet possibly revealing of the complex relations

between industry and culture. Although focusing on how the program is produced and

how audiences interpret the program are interesting directions for research, this research

focuses on the program as a text—the content and the context. Thus, the analysis is an interpretation of how this program depicts the television industry and the production of culture through the use of comedic tropes as well as an examination of the constraints of comedy within the conservative commercial environment. Using *30 Rock* as the artifact may reveal the "structures of meaning" (Hall, 1975, p. 17) as well as their contradictions underlying the representation of the television industry.

Hall's approach focuses on decentering the text, where the text is studied as a process and deconstructed (in Curtin, 1995). Following that, the approach involves analyzing the signification of the text and then reconnecting the text with the larger social and historical contexts as well as the text's relation to cultural production. The method emphasizes the "analysis of language and rhetoric, of style and presentation" (Hall, 1975, p. 15). Key components to Hall's strategy are noting how meaning is constructed and recognizing how producers may make assumptions about the audience. The textual analysis, while focusing on meaning also asks about the context—assumed audience, assumed social discourse, and the existing circumstances (Hall, 1975; Hartley, 1999). Acosta-Alzuru (2003) summarizes Hall's method in three steps: first, "soak" in the text; second, re-read the text and identify the "discursive strategies and themes" (p. 146); and third, interpret the findings.

Textual analysis involves a number of useful concepts and approaches, particularly semiotics, including but not limited to rhetorical tropes associated with comedy and the process of encoding and decoding. Hall's analysis regards texts as a discourse, or the "structure of meanings in linguistic and visual form," which include

how elements are organized, the "styles of presentation," and the producer's "meaningful

choices" (1975, p. 18). Meaning is specifically constructed and transmitted through signs

and symbols. Hall (1997) writes, "Signs stand for or *represent* our concepts, ideas and

feelings in such a way as to enable others to 'read', decode or interpret their meanings"

(p. 5). Thus, semiotics, or the study of signs, seeks to understand the meanings behind

signs and symbols. The sign is the basic unit and is composed of "a *signifier*, that is, the

image, object, or sound itself—the part of the sign that has a material form—and the

signified, the concept it represents" (Seiter, 1992, p. 33). Signs can be categorized as

iconic, indexical, and symbolic. An icon is a signifier that resembles what is signified,

such as an icon of a dog represents a dog. An index is a signifier that logically connects

with what is signified, such as smoke is an index of fire. Indexical signs are socially

constructed through conventions developed through historical and cultural contexts.

Symbolic signs are the connotations (the learned meanings and connections from a sign),

the second order of signification. Seiter notes that television uses all three types of signs

and that they are not mutually exclusive. Also relevant is the concept of metonym, a form

of signification where a sign (as a part) signifies the whole, a concept that can also work

with physical objects signifying abstract concepts (Fiske & Hartley, 2003). For example,

a shot of a city street can signify urban life.

Television is a medium especially conducive to semiotics and interpreting codes.

In addition to culturally and socially constructed signs, television has its own conventions

and aesthetic codes that we, as viewers, have learned to understand and accept, such as

camera angles, editing, and cuts to commercial. The producer will encode meanings

through the use of signs and conventions just as the viewer will decode these meanings. Following the identification of signs, what the signs signify, and the codes used to encode and decode the meanings, the textual analysis continues by examining the dominant messages and how subjects are represented.

The Case Study

This project examines a selection of episodes over the course of the series to form the central text for analysis. These are selected because within these episodes the creative process and corporate interference are central to the plot. While all episodes feature some aspect of the culture industry and the process of producing a television show, there are several episodes that exemplify the sitcom's representation of the television industry. All of the selected episodes are analyzed on a number of levels including, but not limited to, the connotations and denotations of signs, the significance of various characters, and their relationships. Conversations and interactions between the two main characters are central to the textual analysis since the two characters are metonyms for the creative and corporate sides of cultural production. How the sitcom conforms or breaks genre and television conventions is also considered in order to provide perspective on how the sitcom has evolved to be self-reflexive and potentially critical. Critical is conceptualized in a cultural studies framework where texts are capable of commenting, attacking, and critiquing structure and limitations of not only the text itself, but also the text's content. Furthermore, the analysis, while focusing on text, also briefly addresses the structure of the television industry in order to examine the self-reflexive representation of the cultural industries, particularly when looking at the ownership structure of NBC.

While there are advantages to textual analysis, such as understanding underlying structures of meaning, there are limitations. As a researcher and media consumer, I come to this project with my own framework of understanding that is different than other interpretations and consumption. Another limitation is that while I can interpret this text and make assertions about producer intents, this project does not involve interaction with the creators, writers, and producers of the program. However, due to technological advances and industry practices to extend the cultural product beyond its medium (in this case beyond the television screen), commentary from the DVD and videos on *30 Rock*'s official Web site provide insight. Thus, while this project is a textual analysis of the actual sitcom are drawn in so that a fuller understanding can be constructed.

Show Background

As of spring 2009, *30 Rock* finished its third season on NBC. The show is set at 30 Rockefeller Center in the General Electric Building in New York City, the home of NBC studios. The official *30 Rock* website described the show as "a workplace comedy where the workplace exists behind-the-scenes of a live variety show." The main character is Liz Lemon (Tina Fey), the head writer for the live, sketch-comedy variety show, *The Girlie Show* (referred to as TGS in this discussion). There is a cast of characters related to the production of the show: the producer (Pete), several show actors (such as Jenna, Josh, and Tracy Jordan), and several writers (such as Frank and Toofer). Also, there is Kenneth, the over-enthusiastic NBC page, a job that entails facilitating tours, seating show guests, and aiding Liz, the writers, and the actors. The other primary character is Jack Donaghy, the NBC executive, or known by his official title—the Vice President of

East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming. For an overview of characters, brief descriptions, and the actors, see Table 1 in the appendix.

While the majority of episodes feature some aspect of the television industry and the process of producing a television show, I have chosen seven episodes as the text to analyze because these episodes provide a composite picture of the show, the key issues under consideration, and how it represents the television industry. Examples form other episodes will also be used since the show contains numerous jokes and references that also convey commentary on the industry. Paratextual examples, as in texts that exist outside of the sitcom text, are also utilized such as information from the Web site, DVD commentary, and interviews in order to enrich the textual analysis.

As a sitcom, it is common that problems are presented and resolved within the same episode. Many of the storylines are self-contained within the 30-minute television programming slot; however, references and characters occur throughout the series. Plots range from focusing on Liz's personal life and her conflicts pertaining to managing the show, the staff and cast as well as intervention from Jack to plots revolving around Jack's personal life and the boisterous personalities of TGS's two leading stars, Tracy and Jenna. The storylines of concern to this paper are how the show within *30 Rock* is produced, the culture of production (as in a focus on the writers and their relations), corporate and network relations with the creative process, references to GE and its corporate structure, and references to industry practices, such as market research, demographics, ratings, product placement, and cross-promotion.

The primary textual analysis is comprised of three episodes from the first season, three episodes from the second season, and one from the third season. The pilot episode is used because it establishes the show's context and direction, with an introduction to the main characters. The other six episodes each have a predominant focus on the television industry, particularly on how the creative process (the culture of production) is compromised by the network (those in control of the production of culture) as well as on corporate structure and representations of cultural industries practices.

Episode Overviews

The following provides brief synopsizes of the primary episodes. For more information, such as original airdates, on these episodes see Table 2 in Appendix.

The first episode (the pilot) introduces the situation—there is a successful comedy sketch show but it only attracts women and older gay males. GE sends in a new executive (Jack) who retools the show to increase ratings and gain the coveted male 18-49 demographic by introducing a new star (Tracy Jordan, played by the former *SNL* actor, Tracy Morgan) into the program. The writers resist, especially the head writer (Liz). After a series of events, including Liz drunkenly deciding she may need to quit and an unsuccessful attempt by Jack to run the live show, Liz accepts the change to her show.

The next two episodes center around corporate intervention into the culture of production. In "Jack the Writer," Jack decides to sit in on the writing process and irritates the writers with his suggestions and interference. The writers protest to Liz, prompting her to tell Jack to leave the writers' room, which leads to an apology and an exchange between the two about Jack's likeability. Toward the end of the episode, Liz is too

friendly with Jack while Jack is showing two GE executives around the studio, causing

Jack to scold Liz in order to save his repertoire with the executives. In the other episode,

"Jack-tor," the plotline stems around Jack's (and GE's) insistence that NBC writers

should integrate GE products into their shows. The writers try to resist but end up writing

an integration sketch anyways, where they ask Jack to act in the sketch as a self-

referential joke.

In "Rosemary's Baby," the third episode in the second season, Liz is presented

the GE Followship Award for essentially following GE and NBC directives, such as

product integration. Her complicity in comedy writing is challenged when she meets her

idol, Rosemary Howard (played by Carrie Fisher), a character that was the first female

writer on *Laugh-In* (interesting connection, Lorne Michaels was a writer for that show).

Rosemary is invited to be a guest writer and presents a number of ideas to the writing

staff that "push the envelope." Liz turns down all of her ideas because they are too risky,

causing Rosemary to accuse Liz of being a corporate cog. In an effort to prove Rosemary

wrong, Liz stands up to Jack, claiming the show should be edgier, which results in Liz

and Rosemary getting fired. Upon realizing that Rosemary is a bit crazy, Liz bemoans

losing her job and promptly asks for it back.

The following episode, "Greenzo" is part of the analysis for two main reasons.

One, the episode occurred during NBC Universal's directive that all NBC programming

correspond to a company-wide environmental campaign, "Green is Universal," where

programming should contain environmentally themed content. Thus, the plot was rather

self-reflexive about the initiative. And two, because of that self-reflexivity, the comedy

can be rather critical. The episode features Greenzo (played by David Schwimmer), the corporate mascot for the environmentally conscious GE/NBC Universal. Greenzo goes on *The Today Show* to promote the GE washer as a part of the environmental initiative. After a series of events, Greenzo goes off corporate message, resulting Jack to panic and attempt to use Al Gore as a spokesperson for the corporate initiative.

"Succession," an episode from the middle of the second season, is analyzed for its focus on corporate structure and the dichotomy between corporate and creative cultures. In this episode, Jack learns that he has been chosen to succeed Don Geiss (played by Rip Torn) as CEO of General Electric, which has to remain secret until the board approves. Jack chooses Liz as his successor. Liz quickly adjusts to the prospect of being a corporate executive. Before Geiss can solidify Jack as the CEO, Geiss falls into a diabetic coma, resulting in his daughter and her fiancé, Devon Banks (played by Will Arnett and who is Jack's nemesis) to take over GE.

Lastly, the primary episodes for the textual analysis draws on "Retreat to Move Forward," the only episode in the third season that has a predominant focus on corporate culture and structure. This episode is significant for its treatment of corporate culture. Jack asks Liz to go with him to the Six Sigma corporate retreat, where he is delivering the key note address. Liz reluctantly goes to the retreat that is filled with corporate hierarchy and specialized language. While at the retreat, Jack is scolded by one of the Six Sigmas for having casual contact with a subordinate. Jack tells Liz that in "mixed company," as in executives, they have to have the expected boss-employee relationship Jack ends up embarrassing himself in front of his corporate colleagues and the only one to help is Liz.

CHAPTER IV

ANALYSIS

In order to fully engage in the analysis, the show's context is useful to note. The show within *30 Rock* is a clear reference to *Saturday Night Live*, a late-night comedy show on NBC that has been running for over 30 years. Tina Fey, the creator, writer, and executive producer for *30 Rock*, had been a writer on *SNL* for nine years, seven as head writer, so she certainly draws on that experience and it is reflected in *30 Rock* (Steinberg, 2007). Lorne Michaels, the creator and executive producer of *SNL*, also serves as an executive producer for *30 Rock*. *30 Rock* is a joint production between NBC Universal and Broadway Video, Michaels' production company.

This information is relevant to the show because it outlines how this television program is connected with NBC as well as a long-time partner of NBC—Michaels. It is possible that, similar to how Matt Groening and James L. Brooks (the executive producer of *The Simpsons*) have a written agreement that allows them to lampoon Twentieth Century Fox and News Corp with no repercussions (Gray, 2006), the producers and writers of *30 Rock* have an agreement that allows them to mock GE and NBC. However, this is only speculation, and no articles have been found that address this issue. As for what is known about the process, a preliminary script is approved by the executive producers. And in terms of being told to change the script, Tina Fey has said "it's been

great that no one has ever tried to water the show down or change the tone of it" (in

"Behind," 2009), claiming that that the executives are not interested in changing content.

Analysis Organization

Drawing on Negus (1997), the analysis can generally be split into the macro and

micro relations within cultural economy. The macro-level approach is helpful to

understand the various factors in producing culture, including industry structure.

Assessing interpersonal interactions and individual meaning making are aspects of the

micro level. This approach also can be used to understand the culture of production. The

micro level will be further developed into themes that emerged from analyzing the text.

Although it is important to note that these are fluid divisions and there is overlap between

the macro and micro relations as well as the themes.

Before delving into the macro and micro relations, this analysis considers *30 Rock*

as a sitcom in general, with emphasis on sitcom conventions. Following an analysis of the

show's sitcom elements, macro relations are discussed, which includes a perspective into

the structure of NBC Universal and its representation in the show as well as perceptions

of industry structure. The micro level highlights the relationship that develops between

Jack and Liz, the culture of production (as in the writing process and the behind-the-

scenes look at television production), and the impact of corporate interference in the

creative process. Where macro and micro overlap is the dichotomy of the creative

culture, as represented by the TGS writing staff and actors, and of corporate culture, as

represented by Jack Donaghy and his associations. This dichotomy is played out by

interpersonal interactions and visual differences. Since these two sides are represented by

show characters and interactions, it is argued that they are metonyms for the larger facets of the cultural industries, and so are useful to analyze the macro level. Additionally, an overarching component is the self-reflexive element in *30 Rock's* comedy and representation of the television. This issue will be discussed in a separate section.

30 Rock in the Context of the Sitcom Genre

As a sitcom, the show follows some common television conventions. The story arc of the show is familiar—a problem is introduced in the beginning and is somewhat resolved by the end. The situation part of the comedy stems from the workplace, where coworkers and bosses morph into a family (as observed in *Mary Tyler Moore*, a show that *30 Rock* is said to parallel). The core relationship is between Liz and Jack, as will be explored throughout the analysis.

Like most sitcoms, this sitcom also has an upbeat opening sequence, which introduces the main characters and the actors that play them. The aesthetic of the opening resembles a collage: a series of photograph-esque moving images of the actors in black and white set over colorful still shots of various angles and details of the iconic 30 Rockefeller Plaza. These images include views of the GE building, the iconic NBC Rainbow Room sign, the ice-skating rink, and various statues in the plaza. The opening sequence includes the 30 Rockefeller Plaza address engraved into the building's cornerstone as a means to indicate to the viewer the source of the show's title. This sitcom also uses cutaway shots as a way to transition between scenes. Again, like most sitcoms, these cutaway shots feature the exterior shots of the sitcom's location—in this case, there are numerous perspectives of 30 Rockefeller to provide a sense of place.

Many of the shots are filmed from a low angle, giving the building a grandiose stature. These exterior shots serve to establish the building as an indexical sign for NBC Universal headquarters, and by extension, General Electric. Furthermore, these shots convey a symbolic meaning of the NBC empire and its prominence in New York City.

This sitcom also parodies common conventions endemic to the genre and to television. Characters typically do not look directly at the camera, as that is an acknowledgement of an audience (this aesthetic is usually reserved by news). There are a few moments when characters purposely mock this convention. For example, a character is told not to look at the camera when he performs in the fictional variety show (TGS). He then looks directly at the camera, at the viewers at home, in a self-referential, mocking act. The televisual time constraints are also parodied when characters acknowledge the narrative structure of television programming that is broken up to accommodate commercials. This is illustrated when Liz is watching a video and sarcastically says "we'll be right back," followed by a cut to commercial. However, the majority of the time, *30 Rock's* characters and narrative structure remain within the conventions of the sitcom.

Unlike sitcoms in the past, *30 Rock* (along with a few other contemporary sitcoms) does not have a laugh track. Perhaps, as observed by Mills (2005), the lack of the laugh track is intended to simulate a realism that is borrowed from the documentary aesthetic. Canned laughter is used as a way to indicate to the audience when to laugh and what's supposed to be funny. So within this text, no laugh track implies there is no single way to interpret the funny parts, allowing viewers to decide. This move also indicates a

more sophisticated mode of comedy, where layers of humor strike different audiences depending on one's familiarity with the subject matter and textual knowledge. The use of a laugh track could end up disrupting the flow of dialogue and plot development, so its lack of presence allows for more dialogue and consistent flow. Furthermore, laugh tracks are typically part of television shows that are filmed live in front of a studio audience with only one or two sets. *30 Rock* is filmed in a single-camera shoot, with no audience and several sets. Although this show is not without comedic cues—music provides subtle cues to indicate humorous situations and not so subtle cues to set scene moods.

Macro Level: The Representation of the Industry

On the macro level, *30 Rock* is a representation of how NBC is structured. Rather than a generic corporation and a generic television network, the show is set in the real context of NBC. In the majority of episodes (and in all six of those analyzed), there is always a reference that GE is the parent company of NBC Universal—the merged television network and production company. Jack regularly references GE, praising GE innovations and the various elites in the corporation. For example, he regularly talks about GE's fictional CEO, Don Giess, and at times has referenced the former (and real) CEO, Jack Welch. Jack's perspective symbolizes GE as a large, functional family, with the parent company fondly overseeing its various subsidiaries and looking for ways to maximize relations (and profitability) among the subsidiaries. However, from the writers' and creative side's perspective, GE is a "massive conglomerate parent company." Going "upstairs," or being summoned by "upstairs" or corporate, is perceived as a chore. The term "upstairs" is a metonym that implies the corporate and executive institution that

dictates decisions from the top to be trickled into the "lower" levels, such as the television show. "Corporate" is envisioned as an exterior, uncontrollable force that is always hovering above, and yet has very little to do with running the show.

The corporate institution includes a division called "standards," as referred to by *30 Rock* characters. The term is presumably industry lingo, which is short for the network division, Standards and Practices, an entity responsible for overseeing the language and content of network television shows and ensuring that content is not offensive, too sexual, or too risky. Similar to "upstairs," standards is a metonym for not only the actual division at television networks, but also the practice of censorship and the process of setting standards. Standards is referenced a number of times in regards to possible sketches. In the first instance, occurring in the pilot episode, Liz and Pete were walking and talking about TGS. Pete talked so quickly about a problematic and risqué sketch that a casual viewer would not pick up the reference, but this bit of dialogue indicates a "true-to-life" aspect of creative production. Rather than rework the sketch, Liz decides to drop. it, signifying that standards is a nuisance and not worth dealing with. In another episode, Jack tells Liz that standards has with a problem a certain prop. in a sketch about dogs. This time, she says she'll fix it, indicating that Liz desires to remain within NBC's prescribed boundaries of acceptability.

A prevalent and ubiquitous sign throughout the show is the NBC Universal logo, prominently featured in each episode and often times as part of the background. The history of NBC can be seen displayed in photographs hanging on the wall as well as the evolution of the NBC logo and iconic peacock. Real NBC Universal brands appear in the

background and at times, as part of the plot. Thus, there are instances of blending the fictional (TGS and Jack Donaghy) with real NBC Universal shows such as *The Today Show* and *Late Night with Conan O'Brian*, as well as NBC/MSNBC news personalities. This suggests on one level, creating a sense of realistic portrayals of the television industry, and on another level, indirect promotions for other NBC shows.

Corporate structure is a source of parody. Although General Electric is the real corporate parent to NBC Universal, *30 Rock* created a universe where GE's corporate structure is parodied. This element of the show is not featured in any of the episodes selected for analysis, but it is important to include so as to provide a richer understanding of the show's comedy. In "The Rural Juror" (season 1, episode 10), Jack introduces Tracy and the audience to GE's corporate structure. Jack suggests to Tracy that he use the Tracy Jordan name to sell a product. So Tracy creates a product idea and asks Jack "so GE will produce The Tracy Jordan Meat Machine?" Jack responds, "No, GE could never make something, so um… unique. We'll have to pass this off to one of our subsidiaries." Jack pulls a chart down from the ceiling. The chart displays GE's (fictional) ownership structure—NBC happens to be towards the bottom of GE's "domestic appliance" division. According to the fictional chart, NBC is actually owned by the Sheinhardt Wig Company, a "fact" within the show that appears a number of times throughout the series. NBC, in turn, owns an iron works company, which owns a North Korean meat company that will ultimately produce Tracy's invention. The chart is conveniently available to download from *30 Rock's* official NBC Web site. To see the chart and the ownership structure, see Fig 4.1.
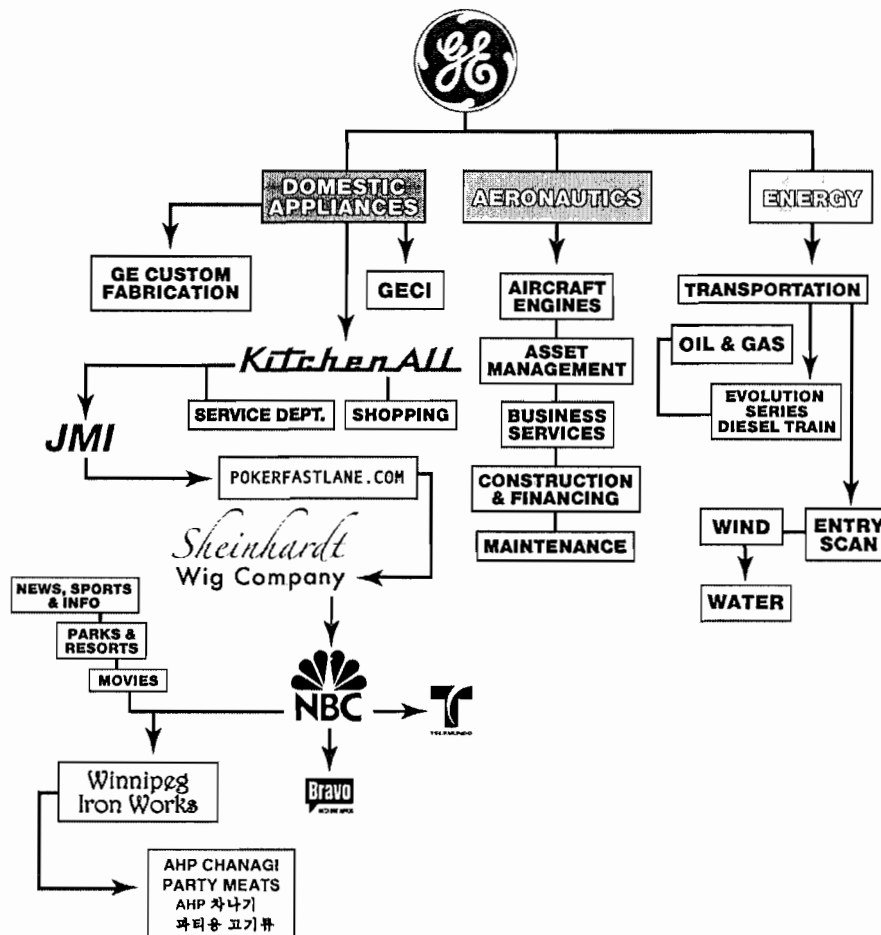
Figure 4.1 "GE Org Chart"
As featured in "The Rural Juror," Season 1, Episode 10
Retrieved April 23, 2009 from, http://www.nbc.com/30_Rock/exclusives/

This part of the fictionalized universe within *30 Rock* acts in the interest of ironic

self-reflexivity, an acknowledgement of GE's ownership structure and the vast amount of

differing subsidiaries a "massive conglomerate" can have. The fabrication that NBC is

owned by a wig company, which is owned by "pokerfastlane.com," which is owned by

Kitchen All presents an absurd exaggeration about transindusrial ownership. The critique

surfaces from the absurdity of such a structure, given that the absurd is a useful tool of

satire. The chart is also interesting in that GE is split into three divisions: domestic

appliances, aeronautics, and energy, which is a departure from the five actual divisions.

The question arises, why isn't entertainment its own main division? And how

does the corporate structure (albeit exaggerated and fictional) happen when an appliance

company that somehow has majority stock ownership in a poker company ends up

acquiring a wig company that "owns NBC outright," as Jack explains to Tracy. It is this

absurdity that facilitates the satirical view of the transindustrial corporation. Similarly,

Jack's title of "Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven

Programming" signifies a satirical impression of network executive positions, where two

points of critique surface: One, that someone with no prior knowledge of the television

programming can become the vice president of that entity; two, that as Liz points out

when she meets Jack, "It sounds like you program microwave ovens." The absurdity of

the title is an underhanded comment on the transindustrial nature of GE, a multi-

conglomerate corporation containing entertainment as well as consumer product

subsidiaries that can be united under one vice president.

Macro-Micro Overlap: The Relationship Between Jack and Liz

In all of the episodes analyzed, Jack's and Liz's interactions are central to plot

development as well as the comedic moments. Over the course of the three seasons, as

exemplified by the seven episodes, their relationship evolved from an uncertain boss-

employee context to one of friendship that happens to be between a corporate executive

and a head writer in the entertainment division. While the relation between Jack and Liz

is intended as the entertaining, classic comedy duo found throughout the television

comedy tradition (such as Lucille Ball and Ricky Ricardo; Mary Tyler Moore and Edward Asner), their relationship on a connotative level reveals the structure and projected nature of the television industry as well as the complexities of Liz Lemon's position as an intermediary between corporate and creative cultures.

In the pilot episode, the dynamic between Jack and Liz is introduced. By the end of this pilot, their relationship comes off as a satire of what a professional, boss-employee relationship should look like. To some extent, their interaction seems typical, such as when Jack explains he's changing the show, mandates to Liz that she must meet Tracy Jordan, and takes an authoritative role in the production of the live show. Although their relations are also atypical—on the one hand, this is because as a television comedy, there is an expected level of comedic interplay, and on the other hand, these instances operate as satirical. For example, within the first day, Jack critiques Liz's appearance and personal life (an interaction that persists throughout the season), and Liz throws a water bottle at the back of Jack's head in a drunk and defiant move.

The central Liz and Jack relationship begins when Liz and Pete are summoned upstairs. Rather than the old boss and office, they see the office undergoing construction and redecorating. Jack enters the room by kicking in a plywood board, emphatically announcing his entrance into the room and the executive position. His entrance and strut towards Liz and Pete signifies upcoming changes to Liz's show, TGS, as well as a new level of control in the show's production and content. Jack is a GE executive, credited as an expert in market research and innovations—the GE Trifection oven being his "greatest triumph." While Liz, Pete, and nearly every other character are in the television industry,

Jack comes from the corporate world and the consumer product industry. He has no background in television. This presents an introduction to the *30 Rock's* commentary on network executive control, where an executive with no prior television experience can dictate and alter the process of creating and producing Liz's show.

During this first meeting, Jack exudes the presence and knowledge of an executive, particularly when he speaks about market research. To illustrate his synthesized knowledge of market research, he sums up Liz perfectly in about three sentences, covering everything from her insecurities to consuming choices to "picking up knitting for about… a week." Liz is instantly annoyed at Jack – not just because he can easily figure her out as a person, but also because his presence is an attack on her creative realm. However, Liz's creative realm *is* a space that is constructed with market research and packaged into a product for a predictable audience that can be summarized by business terms. In this initial interaction, Jack exhibits his corporate, business approach to creative content by drawing on market research as well as his consumer goods background. Liz, in contrast, is defensive, threatened by his demographic numbers, and sarcastic in tone—indicating disrespect for his authority. This early stage of their relationship exemplifies the clash between the economic-driven mindset towards production of culture versus the creative approach endemic to the culture of production.

In the beginning of Jack's position as network executive (and hence, the first few episodes of *30 Rock*), the Jack and Liz relationship is ambiguous. Upon first meeting Jack, Liz is sarcastic (as a defensive mechanism) and bitter toward him. In the fourth episode ("Jack the Writer," one of the episodes analyzed), their ambiguous relationship is

the core of the plot. Her writers place Liz in a position where she has to tell Jack that he cannot sit in during the writing process (this example of corporate interference in the creative process will be discussed in the following section). Pete, the TGS producer tells Liz that she needs to speak up on behalf of the writers or else they will revolt. Liz replies, "What do you all not understand? He's our boss." She exhibits a firm conception of the boss-employee relationship, making it difficult for employees to express dissent and little room to be rebellious. Liz reluctantly agrees to confront Jack and appears to be uneasy and awkward about her role as mediator between the two parties. This representation seems realistic in that the manager is placed in a position between corporate interests and worker/creative interests. Liz is still clearly unsure about the power dynamics and levels of control between herself and the boss. Liz ends up telling Jack to leave and admits defeat, noting that she should be fired. The issue of insubordination is raised and the flexibility of resistance. Jack actually says it is good to have "honest communication between coworkers," indicating the value of honesty over resistance and retreats to his rightful place, upstairs.

The two subsequent plot points further illustrate the vague boundaries of their relationship. Jack's assistant, Jonathan, notifies Liz that Jack expects an apology for "banning him from the writers room." Liz timidly goes into Jack's office and apologizes. After brushing off the apology as absurd, Jack admits that he thinks no one likes him (an odd thing for a seemingly confident executive to express). Liz placates him saying she likes him and the writers like him. Jack sets the tone that he would like them to have a "friendly" relationship, later offering her a pair of VIP concert tickets as a friendly token.

Having established a somewhat friendly and slightly casual relationship, Liz assumes that she can talk to Jack more as a friend than as a boss anytime. In an effort to appease her writers, she asks Jack for the key to the roof-deck, so that the writers can eat pizza there and take a break (as the writers mention, *The Today Show* people are out there all the time). What ensues is an interesting example of not only how their relationship evolves, but also a glimpse into the representation of corporate culture.

Jack is walking towards the writers' room accompanied by two men in suites; men similar to Jack's elite, executive stature. He tells his colleagues, "this is where my writers work" and they joke about the smell. The use of "my" indicates a sense of ownership and control over a creative product (TGS) he is not directly involved in. Jack continues, "Since Tracey's arrival, the show is up in key demographics for driving male viewership and we're effectively synergizing backward overflow." This dialogue satirizes the interaction among executives and the use of insider jargon.

While Jack is conducting business, Liz interrupts and very casually asks Jack, "can we eat our pizza outside? 'Cause those [people] from *The Today Show* eat on the roof garden all the time. And I thought since you and I are best buds, maybe you can do me a solid and slip me the key." The situation quickly becomes awkward; Liz rambles about Jack's cool boss persona. The men in suits look at each other in disapproval of Liz's behavior and informal interaction with Jack. Embarrassed, Jack pulls Liz aside, apologizes for what he is about to do, and scolds Liz for her inappropriateness. He is apologetic because he wants to be liked by Liz and maintain a friendly relation. However, he is also dictated by the form and posture that an executive needs to possess as well as

an obligation to the hierarchal and authoritative corporate structure. Thus, he performs according to corporate culture. Yelling loud enough for the executives and for Liz's staff to hear, Jack scolds Liz for everything from her "ignorance" to her "mouthful of greasy peasant food" to her "40 years of public education and daytime television viewing." He makes the point to identify the two men as executives "from Fairfield, Connecticut, that's GE headquarters" in a belittling tone of voice and threaten to demote her to writing arena football promotions. The executives look pleased, nod in approval, and turn around. Liz is shocked by this reaction and seems hurt about the authoritative, "mean boss" persona that Jack used to impress his cohorts. In this interaction, Jack reverts to the standard, stereotypical role for a corporate executive—a role embodied by arrogance, belittling employees, and drawing on elite, class differences. But when apart from his executive colleagues, Jack tries to be friendly and apologetic. Jack tries to maintain a dual relationship with Liz—the stern and authoritative executive as well as the favorable and benevolent leader.

In the following episode, "Jack-tor," we see Jack and Liz start to break the stiff employee-boss binary. Specifically, power dynamics are tested towards the end of the episode. Liz asked Jack to play himself in an upcoming sketch about network executives. Jack accepts the challenge though he is not equipped at all to be an actor, let alone perform on live television. In a moment of desperation, Jack calls Liz at three in the morning, implying a new level to the boss-employee relationship that starts to cross over into friendship. Jack is at the TGS studio stage in need of help from Liz. Jack tells her, "There's something about performing that I can't wrap my brain around. All this creative

crap… acting…" He asks her help. as he falls to the ground, hyperventilating at the thought of failure. He instructs her to "talk me down." This is where the power dynamic is somewhat reversed, placing Liz in a position of authority over Jack since he is in her TGS realm. Jack reveals vulnerability for the first time, exhibiting a fear of failure and somewhat of a weak demeanor. As Jack is lying on the ground, Liz bends over him and shouts, "Here's your pep talk. You're not an actor. You're Jack Donaghy, all right so quit your whining and nut up. You're right, if you can't do this, you are a failure…Any dum-dum can act, Jack, so be a man and get it done." In this authoritative move, Liz reminds Jack who he is and that his behavior is absurd, especially when considering that the actors are rather dim. This resonates with Jack, lifting him back to his appropriate level. Of course, once the sketch is over, regular boss-employee relations return, though there is a friendly tone between the two. Liz begins to call him Jack, not Mr. Donaghy, and Jack calls Liz, "Lemon."

Their relationship over time qualifies as friendship—a "natural" part of any sitcom's character structure where the main characters are often the source of plot points, help the flow of the narrative, and maintain viewer interests. By the middle of the second season, not only are they friends, but Jack also trusts Liz enough to promote her as his successor for when he gets promoted to CEO of GE (which ends up. falling through). What is interesting in the context of this discussion is when their friendship is problematic from the corporate standpoint. As indicated earlier with the "Jack the Writer" episode where Jack and Liz try to establish a "friendly" relation, corporate code of conduct is conceptualized as disapproving of informal boss-employee relations. This

point of conflict manifests itself in the most recent episode used for analysis, "Retreat to

Move Forward." Jack approaches Liz as a friend, asking her to accompany him to GE's

corporate retreat, Six Sigma. Jack is a "little apprehensive about going," which Liz then

parallels to "camp jitters." The following conversation ensues:

> Liz: "You haven't seen your little business camp friends in a year and now
> you're afraid everyone's gonna think you got weird.
> Jack: "Lemon, the retreat to move forwards is a global meeting of GE's best and
> brightest. Careers are made there. It would be helpful to have someone there
> with me who's got my back."
> Liz: "I hate those corporate things. Bunch of drunk people talking about synergy."
> Jack: "First of all, never bad mouth synergy. And I'm asking you to go as a
> favor."

This dialogue on one level, exhibits the friendship between the two of them. The fact that

a corporate executive is asking the head writer of one of the many shows at NBC to

accompany him signifies their close relationship, especially the idea that Jack *needs* Liz

as support. On another level of signification, this dialogue offers a satire on the corporate

retreat. From a Freudian perspective, Liz is bringing corporate practice down to a level

that is compared to summer camp. She belittles the importance of the retreat, continually

though out the episode drawing parallels to the awkwardness and friend cliques at camp.

True to the dynamics of camp, Liz is pushed aside by Jack once he comfortably

slips into the company of the GE elites. Liz clearly does not fit into the culture of the

retreat; her presence offers a satirical distinction between her attitude and the serious

disposition of the rest of the retreat participants. For example, Liz awkwardly approaches

two people discussing "leveraging disintermediation paradigms" and "synergized

classifications." She tries to introduce herself and the two people are more concerned

with her "level," presumably a hierarchy system. The most significant aspect of her presence is that she remains in the same mode of communication and interaction with Jack as she would back at 30 Rock. Liz joins Jack and his colleagues in a competitive team building exercise. The room carries a series and stoic tone, a stark contrast to Liz emphatically shouting at Jack "say something haircut" and "ah-doy!" Liz and Jack win the competition, so Liz hugs Jack in celebration and then gloats at the others in the room. One of the corporate elites pulls Jack aside and expresses a dissatisfaction at Liz's behavior. The man says to Jack: "That woman is a subordinate of your. Her behavior is totally inappropriate. Familiarity. Nicknamification. And you seem to encourage." Jack admits Liz is "unique," which is unacceptable to his colleague. Jack looks embarrassed as Liz continues to gloat and mock the other participants.

Not only is Liz obviously not a part of the corporate culture, she is not supposed to have the informal, friendly relationship. with her boss. Jack is forced into a position to comply with corporate culture expectations. He tells Liz "I need you to behave appropriately… you can't say ah-doy to me in *mixed* company… While we're here, I need you to call me Mr. Donaghy." An offended Liz relates the situation back to the camp analogy in that she is not wanted as well as shouting "friendship over." Their friendship is compromised by the corporate culture, an indication that friendship complicates formal constraints between a boss and employee. Nicknames and familiarity are unacceptable behavior for either party.

At the conclusion of the episode, Jack is set to give the keynote address. But he embarrasses himself when he is heard over the speakers giving himself a "psyche up

speech." Liz tells her table mates, "we have to help him!" And they respond, "when a big one falls, four little ones go up," an ethos that exhibits a ruthless drive to climb up. the corporate hierarchy. Liz comes to his aid by embarrassing herself, rather than allowing Jack's debacle to take momentum. In the end, Jack tells her "Lemon, that was heroic." And Liz replies, "That's what friends do, Jack." This episode essentially solidifies their friendship as a strong bond that prevails despite the constraints of corporate culture. Yet, this episode reinforces views of a boss-employee relationship. While Jack and Liz may attain such a status, their friendship does not change the views of Jack's colleagues.

Micro Level

Culture of Production

The emphasis on the culture of those that produce culture through creative labor is useful to set up in opposition to the corporate culture. The Jack and Liz relationship exemplifies this division on one level, although it's a bit complicated given Liz's intermediary position. This dichotomy is illustrated more distinctly by the representation of the writers' room and the TGS stage area. As viewers, we are shown the TGS set, complete with cameras, cranes, technicians, and workers moving equipment and changing sets. Generally, we can assume that this representation is how a television show is prepared, produced, and executed. The production process is sometimes demystified by showing the viewers the imperfections related to production, especially right before the show goes on air, such as script changes and incorrect costume changes.

The writers' room is particularly interesting because as viewers and consumers of television, we rarely see the creative process and the setting (exceptions include, but not

limited to, *The Dick Van Dyke Show*, *The Larry Sanders Show*, and a show similar in theory to *30 Rock—Studio 60 on Sunset Strip*). This show provides a representation, and we have no reason to doubt this portrayal, as the room seems rather normal and plausible. The room is large with painted walls and a large board with a number of colorful index cards. We assume this is the sketch board, though we never see it up close. A stereotypical toy basketball hoop is affixed to a wall. There is a long table in the middle of the room with comfortable chairs, where the writers meet. The table is covered in stacks of paper, beverages, and an assortment of objects. The full table connotes a creative process that involves a lot of time and revision. It is interesting to note that over the course of the show, the writers room in season one appears to be much sparser than in the two subsequent seasons. In season two and three, the room has more toys, knick knacks, posters, and book shelves. The storyboard is still on the wall. And there seem to be more flat screen televisions, which usually have a promotional screenshot for TGS.

Only a few of the writers have speaking roles. And the writers are generally only shown in the context of their room or around the stage. Their purpose is to write jokes (for TGS), though we as viewers rarely see how they write jokes or even the final skits (cultural products). What we do see is banter among the writers and Liz, as well as banter directed at the TGS actors, Jenna and Josh. The writers' interactions with one another are very casual. At one point, Liz suggests a dance party break from work because they have all been working so hard and accomplishing a lot. Overall, the writers and their work style signify a relaxed approach to work. This is a sharp contrast with the executive style—a style exemplified by sleek suits, wood paneled office, a fully stocked bar, and an

aura of luxury. The show presents a dichotomy, a clear distinction, between the ones in power (corporate) and those that produce the cultural products (the writers).

This distinction in cultures is of particular focus in the "Succession" episode where Jack is told he will be the next CEO of General Electric. At the start of the episode, Liz is having a particularly unpleasant day dealing with the writing staff. Liz is scolding Frank for losing the TGS script (he downloaded a virus on her computer). She tells the writers they have to spend all night writing a new script, resulting in a string of insults and one writer throwing a ball of paper at her. While this scene suggests an informal creative environment, it also indicates a lack of respect for Liz and her authority, as evidenced by Frank using her computer without permission and one writer shouting "you suck" among a slew of insults.

Around the middle of the narrative arc, Jack decides to choose Liz as his successor, telling her "Lemon, I'm promoting you to head of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming." Liz visibly and staunchly protests: "No, no, I'm not an executive. Executives are like uh uh [Liz has a stern face and stiffly moves her arms around like a robot]. And I'm like ah ah [Liz over-emphatically smiles and loosely moves her arms around]. I'm a creative person." Her mind changes when Jack shows her starting salary of an executive, to which Liz responds by slapping Jack. The scene quickly cuts to the writers' room, with Liz storming in and shouting, "I'm going corporate!" The writers look shocked and silent, the scene ends abruptly and cuts to commercial. From this sequence, Liz visually tries to signify the differences between corporate and creative, conveying that corporate is rigid (and thus, not for her) and that creative is loose and

friendly, where she feels comfortable. It is the monetary incentive that changes her perception of corporate and the prospect of leaving the chaotic realm of the writers. This flip in Liz's perspective towards corporate illustrates her relation between corporate and creative cultures in that her ties to the creative side of the industry are not as strong as self-driven interests in monetary gains. Furthermore, Jack's promotion indicates a strong bond between Liz and himself, where he values her loyalty as well as friendship.

Following the commercial, Liz has altered her appearance, changing from jeans and a TGS sweatshirt into a pantsuit and a stylized hairdo—business attire. Already her physical appearance impacts her attitude, a superior and confident executive (though she admits she's a bit nervous and "business drunk"). She is at the table with Jack and four other men in the executive dining room. Each person has a packet with the GE logo prominently displayed that reads "Microwave Start Buttons: Development Overview." Jack starts off by explaining that this project has taken "four years and ten million dollars to develop." Liz chimes in "I kinda like the old button," which Jack turns into "button classic"—a reference to Coke's failed campaign in the 1980s to introduce New Coke and so rebranded the old Coke as Coke Classic. Liz is congratulated for making her first decision as an executive.

Worried that she may wrong, Jack tells Liz "there is no wrong, Lemon, you just have to find a subordinate you can push the blame on." In Liz's realm within the culture of the production, her writers blame her for losing the script and even for creating the show in the first place. The writers easily displace their responsibility on Liz when it strikes them as convenient to view Liz as an authority figure, and thus an outlet for anger.

Comparatively, corporate culture, as embodied by Jack, suggests that blame never be placed on the authority, but rather displaced on subordinates who blindly take the blame.

Corporate Interference into the Creative Process and Product

GE and NBC enter into the creative process through a number of avenues. The birth of the show's overarching narrative structure begins with a new corporate executive that intervenes in the production of Liz's show, setting a tone for an ongoing plot point in the series—corporate interference into the writing process, content, and actors. When the viewers as well as Liz and Pete are first introduced to Jack, his office is being remodeled. Liz notes that the office looked good before. Jack responds, "Sometimes you have to change things that are perfectly good to make them your own." This line is a direct piece of foreshadowing the changes to come. More so than desiring to make a show like TGS his own, Jack is interested in "retooling" TGS in order to increase its ratings. This is when the first corporate inference occurs. The following is the conversation that ensued when Jack explains the results of market research on TGS:

> Jack: "You're missing men between 18-49."
> Liz: "I'm not missing them, they're just not there."
> Jack: "I think I can fix that."
> Liz: [sarcastically] "So your job is you take things that are already working and you *fix* them… That's a great job."

As noted earlier, Liz has no room to accept Jack's interference into *her* show. However, as part of a larger network, and by extension, a larger corporate parent, Liz's show is susceptible to corporate input. As insinuated by their discussion on demographics, ratings and the coveted male demographic are required to make a show successful. Drawing on his experience with the successful GE Trivection Oven, Jack uses the oven's three-heat

system as a metaphor for how to retool TGS. He insists that TGS is "missing the third kind of heat" and that a new character will fix the ratings. Jack suggests Tracy Jordan, a crazy actor known for oddities and a mental imbalance. Again, Liz is resistant and defensive. Though she does not overtly mention this, having a new actor on TGS completely changes the character of the show. Before Tracy's arrival, TGS was called "The Girly Show" a male movie star is not only an interference into the show's production, but also a new identity. In the larger picture of Jack's insertion into Liz's show, creative content becomes a commodity, a product optimized to increase ratings by adjusting the show's mechanics and including another sort of commodity—the celebrity that can bring in ratings and increase the show's profitability.

The Writing Process

Interference from corporate into the culture of production is the main plot of "Jack the Writer," the fourth episode. Inspired by the Six Sigma management training (what Jack calls the "elite GE executive training course" and is the focus of the episode, "Retreat to Move Forward"), Jack decides to sit in on the writing sessions in order to "understand every aspect of the business." Jack views this move as good management, while the writers look unsure and unwilling to have him there. The writers look annoyed, while Liz grudgingly starts the writing process by working on Toofer's cereal commercial parody. The writers begin with a round of brainstorming for cereal names. Jack laughs boisterously at one of the suggestions and tells the group, "I think we all really laughed" so let's move on. Through this disruption, Jack provides an element of efficiency by inserting himself in a business manner with authoritative decisions.

The next day, he suggests that the writers follow the comedic cues of Dilbert. On the following day he tells Frank to change the joke about Jeb Bush because "he's a friend of mine." The last part of the day-to-day sequence, Jack reads punch-lines from index cards, insisting that the writers develop a sketch based on his one-liners. Jack is also shown dominating the conversation by telling a story about Tom Brokaw, suggesting that there is a sketch idea in that story. By this point, Jack's physical appearance has changed from his standard polished suit and into no suit jacket, loosened tie, and rolled up sleeves, signifying somewhat of a transformation into the creative realm, although this change in appearance does not change the quality or impact of his ideas.

His presence clearly restricts the flow of ideas, resulting in stifled writing and compromised jokes, as evidenced by the lack of completed scripts. Liz, acting as the "good" employee and underling to the executive, goes along with it as long as she can until the writers gather in her office and revolt. Comments from the writers include "you have to get Donaghy out of the room" and that he's "stifling us." With this act, the writers (as part of the culture of production) express resistance against corporate influence and demonstrate agency by persuading their boss, Liz, to confront her boss.

Product Placement

Among the most relevant issues featured in the show is product placement within television programs, or what is referred to as "product integration." This continues to be an issue throughout the course of the show, whether product placement is the subject of satire, occurring as real product placement, or viewer confusion as to what *is* a product placement or not. The issue of real product placements and the self-reflexive element

pertaining to the show's characters acknowledging that there is product placement within their text will be further discussed in the next section. What follows in this discussion is how *30 Rock* satirizes the industry practice of product placement.

In the episodes analyzed, a few references were made to product placement. In "Rosemary's Baby," Liz is given the GE Followship Award, "presented annually to the woman, sorry, person, who best exemplifies a follower," as said by Jack. He presents her a giant GE check (complete with GE logo) and has the memo line filled to say "mindless following." Jack goes on, "when I think of the free-spirited Liz Lemon I met just one year ago, so resistant to product integration, cross-promotion, and ad-verlingus, it pleases me to see how well she has learned to follow." Liz responds with "Is this because of that GE sketch?" The scene cuts to a flashback of a TGS sketch with Tracy, Jenna, and a third character who has a microwave for a head, and as Jenna says "an excellent GE microwave!" After the flashback, Liz mumbles, "you said I didn't have a choice."

Part of this joke is that Liz is rewarded for following a directive that she had no agency to respond to. The underlying aspect of this scene though, is the critical commentary about how Liz's creative oversight has favorably evolved (corporate perspective) to follow industry strategies of product placement and cross-promotion (not quite sure what ad-verlingus is, perhaps using advertising language in creative content or more likely a double-entendre). While the image of a person with a microwave head can be seen as humorous, the fact that the sketch was written to specifically highlight a GE product indicates corporate interference into the creative content. Ironically, later in the episode when Liz is trying to defend that TGS comedy can be very edgy (meaning on the

critical edge of humor), one of the writers shares the latest sketch idea: "Barry the humping dog is shopping for a GE washer and dryer." The other writers sarcastically mutter, "I have not seen that before…" and "that's a very sharp idea."

Another reference to product placement includes a scene from the "Greenzo" episode. The corporate mascot, Jack explains, is the "first non-judgmental, corporate friendly, environmental advocate." With this in mind, Greenzo is developed as a means to dually promoting GE products as well as a façade of environmental concern. In a sense, this episode acts as a product placement for all of GE. The direct reference to product placement occurs when Jack, Liz, and the writers are watching Greenzo's first appearance on television on NBC's *The Today Show* with Meredith Vieira. The studio is filled with a number of kids as well as the typical crowd of people holding signs outside of the studio. Meredith asks Greenzo "what can kids and parents do to protect the Earth?" Greenzo is standing next to a washer and dryer, "well kids, you can tell your parents to buy GE front loading washing machine to save water." The scene cuts back to the writers room where Jack smiles and nods at the Greenzo segment. Later in the show, Greenzo is back on *The Today Show*. As Greenzo talks about how the "air is going to be poisoned unless we switch to green technology," we see Jack enthusiastically responding to the television, "sold by our company!" Again, the viewer is satirically reminded that GE products are part of the environmental movement.

The focal point of the production placement theme in *30 Rock* is exemplified by the episode, "Jack-tor." The main plot revolves around a corporate directive that "suggests" that NBC programs integrate GE products into broadcast television. The

storyline begins when we see Jack in his office, pleasant instrumental music starts to play, and the onscreen subtitle appears: "Jack Donaghy, Vice President, East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming." He begins to talk, looking directly at the camera. About 10 seconds in, the screen perspective switches to a television frame, indicating that Jack is in a video. Jack is showing a GE/NBC promotional video, with the writers as the intended audience. The following is the transcript of that video, with visual descriptions placed in brackets (such as facial reactions within the video):

> Jack in the video: "Hello. For over 100 years, GE has been imagining the future today. And I'm here to talk to you today about a wonderful new synergy. It's called…called product integration. [Jack motions the viewer to follow him, then stands in front of an easel with a board featuring the GE logo]. It's revolutionizing how we monetize broadcast television. How does it work? Simple. All you have to do as writing staff of a NBC show is incorporate positive mentions or 'pos mens' [word is displayed on screen of video] of GE products into your program. For example, you can write an episode where one of your characters purchases and is satisfied with [flips the board to show a GE product] one of GE's direct-current drilling motor for an off shore or land-based project. [Cut to the audience: Liz us shown with a smug look. Jack nods in approval of the video]. Product integration. Setting a new standard of upward revenue-stream dynamics…for all of us."

The video is an interesting text to analyze within the context of the show and the industry. On the industry level, product placement (or the corporate terminology— integration) has increasingly become a common practice. Examples include the Staples brand integrated into *The Office* (another NBC program) or using Coke or Pepsi products in various television shows (especially prevalent in *American Idol*). In this case, however, *30 Rock* is satirizing GE's suggestion to promote *their* products into the plots of NBC shows. Whether GE has ever officially made this policy or suggestions to the writing

staff of NBC programs is unknown. But, the language of the promotional video in this episode provides a potentially realistic representation of a GE strategy to "monetize broadcast television" and working towards an "upward revenue stream dynamics." In the context of this television show, this language comes off as satirical and even absurd, especially the suggestion to incorporate a presumably expensive and industry-specific product that is not targeted towards the general consumer. In the video, Jack is featured in his office, signifying his executive power and position. The audience for the video is NBC writing staff. However, the inclusion of the last four words "for all of us" implies that introducing product integration into NBC programs is beneficial for everyone involved, including the writers. But how is that beneficial, or even acceptable, for the writers? We as viewers see Liz's and Jack's reactions, providing a stark contrast. Liz seems disturbed, Jack is clearly enthusiastic about this economic opportunity.

The conversation that follows reinforces the contrast between creative idealism and corporate practices, while also providing a satirical perspective on what television's content means in the context of the industry. Liz quickly responds to the video with "you're saying you want us to use the show to sell stuff?" and "No, come on Jack, I'm not doing that. We're not compromising the integrity of the show to sell—." Liz stands up to Jack and corporate intervention, drawing on a moral standpoint, which considers product integration as an assault on the creative product. Following a self-reflexive product integration parody (that will be addressed in the next section), the scene concludes with a final exchange that is just as revealing as the promotional video. Liz tells Jack, "We're not your shills," to which Jack sarcastically responds with, "Oh! I'm

sorry, they're artists [smirking, looking at his adoring assistant]… Get real kids. You write skits mocking our presidents to fill time between car commercials." Jack's position is a reminder of the economic, advertiser-driven aspect of television, especially network television. This is also an example of employing humor—particularly mockery and parody—as a strategic device to keep viewers watching until the commercials come on. Liz represents the idealistic creative vision for content, especially the content that carries substance and critique that have been characteristics of comedy sketch shows (think of the political and social sketches on *SNL*). Jack implies that corporate disregards the content and is only interested in whether the content attracts audiences.

Furthermore, this signifies that those who create—the writers, producers, and actors—have a false sense of how much control they have over creative content. Instead, it is the network that has the power to shape content and act in the best interest of the corporate bottom-line, including the practice of product integration. Essentially, it does not matter if the writers are concerned about "integrity" and maintaining artistic standards, they are contributing to the corporate interest by filling up time between commercials.

The Self-Reflexive Element

Given that *30 Rock* is a show conceived as a behind-the-scenes workplace sitcom and one that is based on the real show, *Saturday Night Live*, it is hard to ignore the self-reflexivity inherent to this show. The realms of reality and fiction blend into a sitcom steeped in self-conscious awareness of the show's character as well as showcasing the sitcom's capability to play with these boundaries.

The previously discussed scene from "Jack-tor" is also significant for its self-reflexivity on product placement. As Liz is defending the creative integrity of TGS, a parody, but real, product placement is interwoven into the dialogue. The writers room is tense at the thought of having to integrate GE products into sketches. During Liz's moral diatribe that TGS is not a commercial, Liz is cut off by Pete, who introduces the ironic parody of product integration. Holding a Snapple bottle, he says, "Wow, this is diet Snapple?" The rest of the writers agree and each chimes in about their own bottle and flavor, including Liz. The office assistant even uses a common advertising technique of sex appeal and persuasion to promote the product. Despite this self-referential parody, the show is still promoting Snapple, an instance that happens again later in the episode when a man in a Snapple costume asks for human resources. The writers of *30 Rock* may indicate that they are critiquing the practice of product placement, but they are still contributing to and working within the corporate-defined culture industry.

The "Greenzo" episode perhaps offers the most critical and sustained self-reflexive plot. The episode was written in the context of a real NBC Universal directive. During the first week in November 2007, NBC Universal initiated a week of programming (more than 150 hours) that focused on environmental issues and messages. This extended to NBC News, NBC Sports, MSNBC, CNBC, and Universal movie and television productions. In a press release, NBC executives announced that the "ongoing 'Green is Universal' initiative will help reach hundreds of million of NBCU's consumers, raising awareness, entertaining and ultimately, driving results" ("NBC Universal's,"

2007). Indeed, that week's episode of *30 Rock* corresponded to the initiative and in full self-reflexive mode.

As discussed earlier, the "Greenzo" episode features a corporate mascot that is the "business-friendly" advocate for the environment. Greenzo's first lines are "Greenzo! Saving the Earth while maintaining profitability" and "the free market will solve global warming, if it even exists." Jack proudly explains that Greenzo will be featured on billboards and will make appearances on *The Today Show*. Recall that once on *The Today Show*, Greenzo promotes the GE washer. Jack also expects that Liz will write material for Greenzo that follows the green initiative in a "business-friendly" way. In terms of critical commentary, Greenzo is an interesting critique on corporate attempts at greenwashing, a satirical jab at the persistence of corporations like GE to take advantage of environmentalism to sell products. The creation of Greenzo, the use of an NBC writer to create material, and featuring Greenzo on NBC's morning show, are all self-reflexive indications of the institutionalizing of the corporate initiative to convey "green" messages in network programming. Though there is no evidence that NBC Universal created a live mascot to promote environmental issues and promote some GE products (the NBC Peacock logo in green is the closest to a mascot), Greenzo as a character conveys a critical comment on an underlying force to the initiative.

The "Green is Universal" phrase is also parodied within *30 Rock*. When Greenzo is on *The Today Show* and again later when the TGS stage is turned into a green theme, there are kids wearing t-shirts that read: "Greenzo is Universal." The Universal part is displayed in the same typeface as the Universal logo. This parody indicates the concerted

effort by NBC Universal to associate its brand (as evidenced by the iconic typeface) with

the environmental movement. While the phrase is clever, "Green is Universal" suggests

an ownership of "green"; again, a critique on the practice of greenwashing.

Aside from Greenzo, the more critical self-reflexive part of the episode is a

speech made by Al Gore. Gore guest stars as himself— an environmental advocate. At

this point in the episode, the Greenzo character has gone "off message" by sabotaging his

business-friendly persona and preaching against corporate polluters. Jack calls Gore in

under false pretenses (that GE has developed a trash-powered car) in the hopes to

convince Gore to act as Greenzo. The following is their conversation:

> Jack: "While you're here, why don't you throw on green tights and a cape
> and tell the kids how big business is good for the environment."
> Gore: "I have no interest in doing that."
> Jack: "Al, we're with you on this whole planet thing. I mean look at this
> set we built with the smiley earth and some green things [gesturing to
> the TGS set that has been redone for a Greenzo kids show]."
> Gore: "Jack, look, we're way beyond that. If your network really wants to
> demonstrate a commitment to the environment, why don't you start by,
> for example, having an entire week with nothing but environmental
> themes on all the programs. Use entertainment for *substance*. You can
> have a character in prime time making a passionate argument to the
> American people that we need CO2 taxes to replace the payroll taxes.
> Your parent company can lobby Congress and the President to pass the
> [Kyoto] Treaty and save the climate!"
> Jack: "Yes! Or! You can put on a silly hat and tell kids how outsourcing
> means cheaper toys at Christmas."
> Gore: "This is not working for me, Jack."

This dialogue is loaded with a number of self-reflexive and satirical

representations. This exchange reinforces the satire that these green initiatives are

business ploys and part of a corporate agenda to promote its own interests. Jack is

representative of this corporate ethos where "big business is good for the

environment." The content of Gore's speech is an excellent illustration of the self-reflexive—his speech nearly reflects what NBC *did* do, as in having a week of environmentally-themed programming. The critical element lies in the other actions that NBC and GE can take, such as lobbying and using characters to promote substantive legislative changes. In contrast to Gore's suggestions, this episode featured the following GE/NBC initiatives—purchasing a GE washer and shutting off computer monitors and lights.

Approached as a whole, this episode offers a mixed message through the lens of self-reflexivity. On one hand, this episode offers the critical self-reflection of the NBC initiative. As a show produced by NBC, the *30 Rock* writing staff had to follow the green-themed content. So they did follow the initiative, but in a way that made a point about the corporate initiative as it related to the GE/NBC family. The writers could have focused on an even more self-reflexive plot where the show *within* the show (TGS) had to deal with the green-theme on a meta-level. Thus, when examined as a whole, the *lack* of any focus on the process to create TGS may be a subtle critique on how the corporate initiative disrupts the production and typical plots of any show. On the other hand, though, despite the critical moments, Liz, or any of the characters (except when Greenzo goes crazy) never voices resistance to the green initiative and to Jack's focus on using the green-theme to promote GE. She does not protest that her duties are being refocused on Greenzo and that her set is reappropriated as a Greenzo set.

The Role of Parody and Satire

The analyzed episodes reveal a number of points of satire, with the help of parody. The predominant satirical jabs are at corporate culture. Given that the status quo is corporate culture, where the economic bottom line and elite males dominate television production, then *30 Rock* at times can offer critical commentary on that culture. For example, Jack's language is a parody of real corporate speak. GE's annual report and corporate website are filled with phrases such as "drive innovation," "leverage strengths," and "delivering through diversification" (GE, 2009). So when Jack says something like "monetize broadcast television," it is rooted in industry language. And when presented in contrast to Liz's loose and casual manner of speaking, Jack's representation of corporate culture is that much more pronounced as an attack on the insider-language that corporate entities use when speaking of creative endeavors.

Along with corporate culture are the satirical plots and jokes on industry practices, such as product placement and cross promotion. These are among some of the more critical stances against network control and corporate intervention. The scene that ensues at the beginning of "Jack-tor" is particularly harsh on product placement, given that *30 Rock* satirized a corporate video with a planned script and strategy to implement product placement across NBC programming. Among the favored jokes at corporate culture and industry practices are directed at Six Sigma, a quality assurance program for elite corporate executives. Devoting a whole episode to parody this GE staple is a move at bringing the GE institution

down a few notches, open to mockery and devaluing. The satire stems from the

fact that the goal of Six Sigma is to achieve near statistical perfection, a feat that

may be applicable to industrial production but not to cultural production, and

specifically, television programming. The GE Six Sigma explanation states "to

achieve Six Sigma Quality, a process must produce no more than 3.4 defects per

million opportunities" ("What," 2009). How can this be achieved in television

programming? Thus the satire is directed at the idea of television programming

being produced, managed, and evaluated in the same manner as GE's other

divisions such as consumer products and energy infrastructure.

30 Rock also satirizes the involvement of GE in the production of television,

offering the perspective that GE is primarily interested in not only ratings and profits, but

utilizing its television programs as a vehicle to advertise GE products. This portrayal

contributes to the discussion of the cultural industries and especially the transindustrial

nature of media ownership—how a media conglomerate such as GE/NBC seeks audience

commodities and maximizes its "monetizing" opportunities through cross-promotion.

Considering that exaggeration and fabricating absurd situations are trademarks of parody

and satire, then it can be concluded that *30 Rock*, on the connotative level, can provide

insightful representations of the television and culture industries as well as media culture.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Returning to the juxtaposition of *30 Rock* and *Studio 60*, it is ironic that the show, which NBC placed little faith in, has succeeded and surpassed the show that NBC executives were more concerned about. In an interview, Lorne Michaels noted that there was only one screening of the *30 Rock* pilot, suggesting that NBC allowed Michaels and Fey to run with their ideas. Michaels has been around the business for over 30 years and seems to have reached a level of trust from the network executives, pulling Fey into the trustworthy boat. Michaels and Fey also had another advantage over Sorkin's show— access to the behind-the-scenes of a late night comedy sketch show, *Saturday Night Live*. Who better to poke fun at *SNL* then the creator and writers?

Although *30 Rock* is a modest success (average number of viewers range between five to eight million and has won numerous awards), it is important to consider the context of primetime television. Sitcoms are dwindling in the primetime network schedule, a mediascape dominated by dramas and reality programming. Predictable plotlines and stale jokes about sex and relationships may still be around (i.e. *Two and a Half Men*, a conventional sitcom that garners the most viewers in the sitcom genre, and *30 Rock* also partakes in the tradition), but there are an increasing number of sitcoms that follow the path of *The Simpsons* humor. These newer sitcoms, *30 Rock* included, contain

humor that is self-reflexive, play with genre conventions, and acknowledge the intertextual network that includes and goes beyond the television screen.

Future Research

The scope of this project focused on only one angle of representation—that of the television industry and the workplace. Future research would be beneficial to examine the characters of Liz Lemon and Jenna as juxtapositions and manifestations of being a woman in not only the workplace, but also society at large. There are a number of episodes that explicitly deal with issues related to being a woman in the workplace as well as challenges to the female identity (two specific episodes are "The C word," which deals with a derogatory term directed at Liz and "SeinfeldVision" where Jenna gains weight and Liz encourages people to accept the plumper Jenna). Race is an ongoing issue and source of storylines, such as racial stereotypes and the clash between Tracy and Toofer (stereotypical male celebrity and the antithesis). *30 Rock* appears to be one of the few shows on television, and certainly sitcoms, that regularly deals with racial issues as plotlines as well as has a fairly mixed race cast.

Revisiting the feminist approach to *30 Rock*, future research on the show's gender politics would be helpful to further dissect and interpret the relationship between Liz and Jack and what they represent. What emerged out this analysis is a need to address the issues of stereotypical and characteristic male and female behaviors. Over the course of the show, the creative aspect of television production appears as a feminine and often times, infantilized, space. The economic and managerial side is masculine, exemplified by Jack. How this dichotomy plays out between these two characters and how the gender

politics spread out to the rest of the characters is an interesting direction for further analysis.

On the production side of research, the speculations of this analysis can only go so far as to assume writers' intents and full validity to the writing and production processes. An in depth look at how this show is written, organized, and viewed by corporate would be very beneficial in forming a more complete picture concerning the show's humor and representations. Participant observation and interviews with people associated with the production of the show would also aid in fuller understanding.

A limitation to the scope of this project is that there is a significant storyline that offers a rather critical view of corporate structure and GE, which is not included in the analysis. These episodes did not directly deal with the representations of television production. The storyline features Jack and his lover, a Democratic congresswoman from Vermont, C.C. Their relationship lasted over a span of several episodes in the middle of the second season. They initially kept their relationship a secret because one, they were on opposite ideological polls, and two, C.C. was involved in a lawsuit against NBC's "corporate parent" Sheinhardt Wig Company. C.C. was representing children that "turned orange" due to a river polluted by Sheinhardt. Several parts of these episodes showed C.C. speaking on cable news networks about the lawsuit and seeking action against Sheinhardt. This storyline appears as a parallel to the case of GE polluting the Hudson River and avoiding the clean up through lengthy court procedures ("Historic," 2007). Along the course of their relationship, C.C. compromises prosecuting Sheinhardt by agreeing to settle out of court, a situation she wanted to avoid so that the orange children

can get justice through court proceedings and encourage awareness about Sheinhardt's actions. Throughout the course of this storyline, political ideology and corporate injustice were ridiculed. However, Sheinhardt's actions were successfully swept under the media rug—signifying that through the narrative arc of the sitcom, that real conflict and critique were subdued by resolution in favor of what Jack represents.

Another vital component for future research and an issue that emerged out of the research is the tension between competing ideologies of creative idealism and conservative capitalism—an issue that is not fully addresses in this project. These tensions played out between Jack and Liz. On one level, they may be metonyms for creative and corporate cultures. But what emerged was a deeper level where Liz's creative idealism (recall her nostalgic love for the liberal Rosemary, her insistence that TGS had integrity, among other examples not discussed in the analysis such as her idealism on race) is set in opposition to Jack's stance as an elite, conservative, white male who is dominating in a transindustrial corporation. Liz's idealism, in her creative endeavors and the wider context of her surroundings and relations, are often times crushed by Jack's reality—a reality constructed by corporations, capitalism, stereotyping, and a position where economics dominates art for art's sake. Thus, Liz's perspective is often times renegotiated when confronted by Jack. "Rosemary's Baby" is a good example where Liz tries to be rebellious and maintain creative integrity thanks to Rosemary's influence, but in the end, returns to Jack and asks him to help her "turn money into more money." Future analysis into the show's underlying ideologies would greatly benefit the study of this sitcom as part of media culture imbued with ideological underpinnings.

The Contradictions of Comedy About the Industry

At times it is difficult to discern whether the parody and satire about GE on the show is in the genuine interest of humor and commentary or an act of promotion. While the scene in the pilot episode where Jack gloriously talks about the GE oven is amusing and provides a satirical comment on corporate management structure, the program was still promoting the GE oven. Tina Fey has noted that GE had nothing to do with the inclusion of the product. Then again, GE, who also admitted that it "had nothing to do with the inclusion of the product," decided "to run Trivection ads during the show to let viewers know the product is, in fact, real" (Bohen, 2006). This is disappointing, especially considering that the show provided GE with the opportunity for generating buzz about this product.

In addition to frequent GE references, *30 Rock* also references other NBC brands such as CNBC, *The Today Show*, and *Late Night with Conan O'Brian*. Perhaps the show is maintaining the reality of what happens within a corporate conglomerate that capitalizes on cross promotion. But the show is also participating in the intertextual landscape of television, providing clear references and self-reflexive awareness that it is a part of a vast television system, where shows reference other shows and networks commonly promote their holdings across their channels.

While the writers may be commenting on industry practices, such as product integration and cross promotion, the show partakes in these. The self-reflexive and ironic parody of product placement about Snapple may be amusing, but in the end, Snapple was promoted, even in spite of the humor, "we know, that

you know, that we know…" mentality. On the issue of cross-promotion, *30 Rock* thrived on the popularity of Tina Fey during the 2008 Presidential election when she was pulled into political sketches on *Saturday Night Live*. Lorne Michaels asked Fey to do the impersonation of the Republican Vice Presidential candidate, Sarah Palin, due to their close physical resemblance. This popularity with viewers was parlayed into viewers for *30 Rock*, partly thanks to NBC scheduling a half-hour *SNL* political sketch comedy show during the usual *30 Rock* time slot along with heavy promoting. Indeed, *30 Rock* is a television program within the television industry, a business that is focused on garnering viewers, increasing ratings, and attracting advertisers. Thus these acts of cross promotion and inclusion of industry practices are not surprising, and in fact, expected for any television program to be successful.

Greene (2008) explains the cultural industries as "a systematic process of standardizing culture while purging it of any critical capabilities; creating immediately recognizable cultural commodities to maximize their consumption by audiences" (p. 31-32). The cultural industries produce recognizable commodities such as the television sitcom genre, a familiar form to most audiences. Also, these commodities standardize culture and cultural practices, especially within television. But as *30 Rock* and many other television programs over the years have shown, these commodities *do* have critical capabilities. Assuming that the audience is aware of the parodies and the satirized targets, *30 Rock* presents a critical view of corporate control and the workings of the television industry. Yet, since this critique is presented within a popular media commodity—the

primetime television show—the critical edge to the comedy and the representations become sanitized.

Given an aware audience, then at least the humor in *30 Rock* may function as the "social release valve" as theorized by Bergson. The humor in this show requires an amount of social capital (amassed knowledge) and cultural references. To understand that the show is in part a satire on the television industry, the viewer needs to be aware that NBC Universal is owned by GE, that Tina Fey was the head writer for a number of years at *Saturday Night Live* (thus drawing experience from there), and somewhat familiar with how the industry works, such as television ratings driven (as portrayed in the pilot episode) and the prevalence of product integration into creative content.

One of the greatest jokes in the series that demonstrate the specific knowledge necessary for an aware audience can be found in the "Greenzo" episode. When Greenzo goes off message, criticizing "two-face corporate fat cats," Jack tells him, "you either get on board or you're going to wake up on that island with Phil Donahue and the electric car." This line is said quickly in the middle of an exchange and is only funny if one is aware of the underlying references—that Phil Donahue's program on MSNBC program was canceled possibly due to his critical stance of the Bush administration and that there is speculation that corporations colluded to slow the production of the electric car.

When *30 Rock* takes liberties at insinuating that GE influences television content, it is not only nothing new in terms of comedy content (David Letterman would poke fun at NBC and GE when he had his late night show), but it is also loosely based on real situations. For example, it is documented that NBC News has been influenced by GE,

whether in terms of more "entertaining" content, as in ratings-driven content, or in terms of influencing news coverage of GE. Arthur Kent, a former NBC news correspondent writes about the "forcing of entertainment values onto news managers," particularly pointing to GE executive decisions to sign talk show hosts (attempts at Jerry Springer and successfully signing Geraldo Rivera) as news correspondents (Kent, 1998, p. 29). On the issue of influencing news coverage, Kent notes that GE fostered self-censoring about GE's environmental liabilities. As an illustration of self-censorship, in 1989 a Chicago NBC affiliate reported on the poor quality of GE manufactured bolts. Then the story was picked up by *The Today Show* but with all the GE references removed (Kellner, 1990). As recently as April 2009, word spread that the GE CEO and NBC Universal President had a "top secret meeting" with some people from CNBC concerning the issue of CNBC becoming too critical of President Obama and too conservative overall ("CNBC," 2009). Indeed, this is by no means conclusive evidence of corporate intervention into television content. However, it does suggest some history of GE influencing news content. Perhaps assumptions can be made about the representation of corporate influence on creative content given Fey's extensive history as head writer for *SNL* that may suggest she has had to at least deal with corporate directives and potential influence.

A Sanctioned Space for Critical Humor

The overarching question that lurks in the shadows of this show is how can *30 Rock* get away with mocking, parodying, satirizing, and targeting GE, NBC, and other institutions associated with the industry? Are they not presenting a poor image of GE when Liz lampoons the Six Sigma corporate retreat? Was there a backlash from GE when

there were a string of episodes that featured a faux GE subsidiary and "owner" of NBC,

the Sheinhardt Wig Company, as the perpetrators accused of polluting rivers and turning

children orange? (Interesting side note, the Sheinhardt t-shirt is a popular commodity at

the NBC store). In a special feature of the second season DVD, Tina Fey, Alec Baldwin,

a few of the writers, and Lorne Michaels appear in a special interview with Brian

Williams (conveniently also a part of the NBC family and occasional cameos on the

show). In the interview, as well as others, Fey says that GE never intervenes with the

development of episodes. Michaels also claims that the GE executives he knows actually

love the show and find the material quite comical. According to a business-oriented

source, when asked about *30 Rock* at a GE party, the GE CEO, Jeff Immelt, said "It adds

to the humanity of the company" and another GE executive said "30 Rock is a way for us

to poke fun at big corporate culture and not be defensive about it" ("Laugh," 2009).

Bakhtin provides a useful framework for reconciling the inherent contradictions

found in *30 Rock's* content. As a program with a rather critical edge and interpretation of

the television industry, it is still a product of the industry. The humor in the show

provides a space to explore the "unofficial truth" (as described by Bahktin's notion of

parody) of the television industry. Though it may satirize product integration, it includes

it, as evidenced by the Snapple case or a more recent case of a SoyJoy product placement.

There may be instances of mocking GE's corporate structure and practices, but these

practices and hierarchies are still reinforced. Consider Bakhtin's carnival: a space and

time where laughter, bodily functions, materiality, gluttony, excess, grotesqueness,

parody, and so on prevail despite an era of rigid control of official doctrine. The Church

sanctioned the low humor of folk culture. Similarly, the television industry sanctions and allows room for mockery, ridicule, and satire of the very practices and doctrines they uphold. However, the television industry is rooted in the drive for profit, through advertising, commodification, and targeted appeal to desirable audience. Thus, if an "intelligent" television product, such as *30 Rock*, which features wit and satire concerning the industry proves successful in garnering an audience (and a quality one, as in higher incomes), then why not allow such a product to continue and thrive?

Television resides in a realm between official and popular cultures—adhering to doctrines of official culture yet operating as carnivalesque entertainment. A cultural work such as *30 Rock* plays well to both instances and embraces the paradox between critical humor (including parody and satire) and the television show commodity. Through the conservative mechanisms of the sitcom's narrative arc (where equilibrium is usually reached at the end of the episode or reset by the next one), *30 Rock* neutralizes any real conflicts that may occur within the workplace environment and the impact of media conglomerates on the creative process. The humor is sanctioned by GE; evidenced by a continued renewal of the show and anecdotal approval from corporate executives. Perhaps it also reflects well on GE to have a sense of humor about its image and actions.

While neutralizing conflict and standardizing conceptions of the industry, the content of the show highlights issues that arise in the television industry (as well as in critical media studies) such as the audience commodity, product placement, and corporate control over creative content. These issues present great opportunities for humor, as evidenced by the prevalence of parody, satire, and ironic self-reflexivity. But at the same

time, *30 Rock's* satire as critique is not a means to challenge the television industry or the culture industry. While the show's writers may genuinely develop satirical plots and characterizations, the humor appears as just another industry strategy to generate a successful cultural commodity.

The show is part of a wider context, an ever-evolving media landscape. Audiences are changing in sophistication and expectations. And with that change comes changes in how we are entertained and advertised to (two intricately linked facets in television programming). As aware audiences, media content (particularly advertising), seems to be getting more and more self-reflexive and self-referential through the use of parody and satire. Humor has long been used to attract audiences, whether in entertainment or in advertising, but this intertextual and self-aware type of humor appears to be a growing trend, perhaps even a "brand" of humor with targeted audiences.

If we can laugh at ourselves, then so can corporations. Humor pulls back the curtain that veils anything from how television production may work to how advertisers know that we know that we are being advertised to. In this sense, the prevalence of self-reflexive humor is an indication of sophisticated audiences. The willingness of GE to be the butt of jokes on primetime television also indicates an awareness that this sort of humor is humanizing. However, the question still remains about the critical side of humor. Thus far, it appears that the critical edge of *30 Rock*'s humor is softened by at least three factors: one, GE's approval, two, the persistence of industry practices, and three, a move away from storylines about the television industry in an effort to attract broader audiences, as evidenced by the decrease in industry storylines in the third season.

APPENDIX

30 ROCK REFERENCE TABLES

Table 1: *30 Rock* Reoccurring Characters Referenced in Analysis

Character Name	Actor Name	Brief description of Character
Liz Lemon	Tina Fey	Head writer for "The Girlie Show" (TGS); main liaison between TGS and network executive
Jack Donaghy	Alec Baldwin	Network executive with the title: Executive Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming; hopes to be CEO of General Electric
Jenna Maroney	Jane Krakowski	The star of "TGS"
Tracy Jordan	Tracy Morgan	Also the star of "TGS"; a "wild and unpredictable movie star"*
Kenneth	Jack McBrayer	"The over-eager NBC page—a highly-sought-after entry level position with the network."*
Pete Hornberger	Scott Adsit	Producer for "TGS"
Frank	Judah Friedlander	Writer for "TGS"; described as "wisecracking"*
Toofer	Keith Powell	Writer for "TGS": "a straight-laced, Harvard grad.... his character brings a sophisticated, yet sarcastic style to the writers' table."*
Lutz	John Lutz	Writer for "TGS", does not appear as often as Frank and Toofer
Cerie	Katrina Bowden	Liz Lemon's "flighty assistant"*
Josh	Lonny Ross	Actor on "TGS", minor roles as an impressionist
Jonathan	Maulik Pancholy	Jack's executive assistant
Don Guise	Rip Torn	CEO of General Electric
Devon Banks	Will Arnett	Jack's nemesis; also a contender for the CEO position

* quotes are from the official *30 Rock* Web site, in the bios section. Retrieved April 30, 2009, from http://www.nbc.com/30_Rock/bios/

Table 2: Episodes Used in Analysis

Episode Name	Season	Episode #	Original Air Date	Credited Writer (s)	Episode Plotlines*
"Pilot"	1	1	10/11/2006	Tina Fey	Liz Lemon is head writer for The Girlie Show, a live comedy show filmed in New York City's 30 Rockefeller Plaza. Things start to get complicated when her new boss, Jack Donaghy, insists that wild movie star Tracy Jordan join the cast.
"Jack-the-Writer"	1	4	11/1/2006	Robert Carlock	Jack decides to join Liz and her staff in the writers' room, but his lack of writing ability becomes all too evident and his presence ends up stifling the others' creativity.
"Jack-tor"	1	5	11/16/2006	Robert Carlock	Forced by Jack to plug General Electric products into the show, Liz integrates Jack himself into a self-referential sketch about product placement.
"Rosemary's Baby"	2	4	10/25/2007	Jack Burditt	Liz meets her childhood idol, comedy writer Rosemary Howard (Carrie Fisher), only to discover that Rosemary is a lonely woman still clinging onto a 1970s mindset.
"Greenzo"	2	5	11/8/2007	Jon Pollack	Jack introduces NBC's environmental mascot, Greenzo (David Schwimmer). Greenzo's eco-friendly preaching gets out of hand around the TGS offices, as well as on The Today Show.
"Succession"	2	13	4/24/2008	Andrew Guest & John Riggi	Don Geiss names Jack the new GE chairman over Jack's rival, Devon Banks. Jack then names Liz as his successor, as "Vice President of East Coast Television and Microwave Oven Programming," because she "always has his back." While Liz attempts to adjust to corporate life, Geiss' health puts Jack's promotion in jeopardy.
"Retreat to Move Forward"	3	9	1/22/2009	Tami Sagher	Nervous about his performance at a corporate retreat following his Bush administration and CEO debacles, Jack invites Liz for support.

* Episode information retrieved May 2, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_30_Rock_episodes

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