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'A deeply troubled organization':

Organizational satire in the BBC's *W1A* comedy series¹

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Abstract

This paper analyses the ways in which a media organization implicated in a series of reputational scandals represents its own management in a comedy series. The organization in question is the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) and the comedy series is *W1A*, a mockumentary commissioned and screened by the BBC in 2014–17. Firstly, I discuss the ways in which *W1A* as a 'text' uses satirical devices to ridicule its own management as well as management fads and fashions. Secondly, I analyse *W1A* as the 'intertext', and consider the satirical representations of management in *W1A* against the backdrop of the BBC's reputational scandals. I put forward an interpretation that the intertextual references in the comedy series break down the distance between 'us' and 'the troubled organization'. I also argue that intertextual reading of the series (e.g. the analysis of allusions, cameo appearances, and parallels with the real BBC) throws an entirely different light on organizational wrongdoing, opening new possibilities for organizational reintegration and the repair of broken trust. Not only does the reading of *W1A* change when the audience considers what is

¹ The author would like to acknowledge the kind assistance of the *Private Eye* editorial team in accessing archival material. The images in the article have been used with permission from the BBC.

happening in the real BBC, but also our interpretation of what is happening in the BBC may change when we watch *W1A*.

Keywords: BBC, intertextuality, media management, organizational satire, satirical devices, trust, trust repair.

Introduction

Organizational scandals and subsequent attempts to repair damaged trust are no laughing matter, but one organization pursued the unusual strategy of using humour to restore positive relationships with its stakeholders. The organization in question is the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation), one of the best-known media organizations in the world. This ‘deeply troubled organization’ has, in recent years, suffered a number of reputational scandals that are said to have damaged the trust of both its employees and viewers (BBC, 2015). In the midst of the bad publicity triggered by these scandals, the BBC (in 2015) produced a TV comedy series, entitled *W1A*, about its own management. When read ‘as text’ *W1A* is a highly entertaining comedy series that captivates viewers’ attention through a sarcastic sense of situational humour. However, when read ‘as intertext’, i.e. when analysed against the backdrop of the media reports of events and situations in the ‘real’ BBC, the series takes on a very different meaning.

I use the theoretical lens of intertextuality to frame my analysis and consider its devices, such as allusions, cameo appearances, and parallels with the real BBC, to explore how the satirical rendering of the BBC may affect viewers’ evaluations of the organization and the ongoing string of scandals it is implicated in.

Firstly, I discuss the ways in which *W1A* as a 'text' uses satirical devices to ridicule its own management as well as management fads and fashions. Secondly, I analyse *W1A* and the 'intertext', and consider the satirical representations of management in *W1A* against the backdrop of the BBC's reputational scandals. I put forward an interpretation that the intertextual references in the comedy series break down the distance between 'us' and 'the troubled organization'. I also argue that intertextual reading of the series (e.g. the analysis of allusions, cameo appearances, and parallels with the real BBC) throws an entirely different light on organizational wrongdoing, opening new possibilities for organizational reintegration and the repair of broken trust.

I start by discussing briefly the representations of management in the media, with a particular focus on their satirical aspects, and then outline the theoretical approach of intertextuality as a framework for analysis.

Organizational satire

The representations of management in popular cinema and TV dramas have been studied by many scholars (Bell, 2008; Hassard and Holliday, 1998; Panayiotou, 2010; Rhodes and Parker, 2008; Rhodes and Westwood, 2008; Sloane, 2001). The various aspects of management represented in the films and TV programmes and studied by researchers include the cultural logic of organizations in *The Simpsons* (Rhodes, 2001), new public management in *The Bill* (O'Sullivan and Sheridan, 2005), gender performativity in *The Office* (Tyler and Cohen, 2008), and macho management in *Wall Street* (Panayiotou, 2010). More recently researchers studied illegal management practices in *The Firm* (Panayiotou, 2012), constructions of leadership in *Rawhide* (Watson, 2013),

mentoring in *Mad Men* (Buzzanell & D'Enbeau, 2014), political correctness (Westwood and Johnston, 2012) and the interface between politics and management in *The Wire* (Holt and Zundel, 2014; Whiteman, Zundel and Holt, 2017). These analyses are based on the assumption that popular culture teaches practices and offers interpretive templates for management that are at times more influential than the actual practice (Czarniawska and Rhodes, 2006).

Management has also been the subject of satire in different forms of media, including films, TV series, comedy shows and cartoons. Satire is a powerful literary device that can be traced back to Horace in Ancient Rome. It has been defined as a literary work 'in which vice, follies, stupidities and abuses, etc. are held up to ridicule and contempt' (Webster's New World Dictionary). Griffin (1994) characterized satire as a highly rhetorical and moral art designed to attack vice or folly by means of wit or ridicule. It originates from a state of mind that is critical of the absurdity of human behaviour (Hodgart, 1969) and involves systematic cynicism, mimicry and mockery to expose the foolishness of the target (Głowiński, Okopień-Sławińska, & Sławiński, 1991). By comical exaggeration of human vices, satire ridicules human behaviour but does not usually offer any positive solutions. In doing so, satire uses a range of devices such as irony, invective, parody, grotesque or diminution. It also often uses 'the character', a device most closely connected with 'typing', to depict the weaknesses of human personality and errors in social behaviour (Hodgart, 1969).

Among the most notable British and American examples of organizational satire are Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times* (1936), *Fawlty Towers* (1975–79), *Are You Being Served?* (1972–85), *Dilbert* (1989–) and, more recently, *The Office* (2005–13), *Futurama* (1999–2003) and *Up in the Air* (2009). These humorous

images of management were highly entertaining but, because they were directed at lampooning people or practices, they were also imbued with criticism of management practices of the time. Most of these films, cartoons and TV shows satirize the management of organizations other than the media – hotels, department stores, Fordist-type factories, or airports. Before taking a closer look at satirical representations of the BBC management in the *W1A* series, I outline my theoretical approach to analysis.

Intertextuality as a frame for analysis

I conduct my analysis through the theoretical lens of intertextuality. The concept of intertextuality has its origins in linguistics, particularly in the works by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, and the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Although the concept was extensively discussed by Bakhtin, the term intertextuality was allegedly first coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s. Kristeva (1967) combined De Saussure's ideas on linguistics, and Bakhtinian dialogic theories of language, and produced the first articulation of the theory of intertextuality. Intertextuality implies that the act of reading depends on a network of textual relations, and, in turn, the act of interpreting texts involves tracing those relations (Worton and Still, 1990; Orr, 2003; Bazerman, 2008). In this conception the text becomes an 'intertext', and an intertextual reading of a text becomes a process of moving between this text and the others that it alludes to or evokes. The relationship between one text and other texts must not be construed as unilinear causality, and instead should be seen as forming a web of associations (Frow, 1990). Poststructuralists used intertextuality to disrupt the

notions of stable meaning and objective interpretation (Allen 2011), suggesting that the meaning changes depending on the reader's reading of other texts.

Adding an intertextual perspective to the interpretative task coincided with, and to a certain extent incited, a change in the understanding of the authorial figure of the text. According to this new notion, the author was no longer in charge of the text's meaning, but gave way to the reader, who produced meaning on the basis of, among others, textual relations (Barthes 1977; Riffaterre, 1993). In this conception, there was never a single correct way to read a text, because the reader brought to the party his/her own prior experiences of reading other texts, which affected his/her interpretations.

Lavik (2012) identified two strands in theorizing intertextuality. The radical strand, espoused by Barthes and Kristeva, considers the general ways in which 'prior codes and conventions inescapably infiltrate textuality' (Lavik, 2012: 56). This approach is philosophical and political in nature, and is informed by semiotics, psychoanalysis and Marxism. The traditional strand, by contrast, is more restricted, and defines intertextuality as 'a deliberate textual strategy, seeking to detect meaning rather than to disperse it' (p. 56), in other words, it is more concerned with interpretation of the text and the textual references within it. More recent theory, such as that formulated by Caselli (2005), sees intertextuality as a production within texts, rather than connections and relationships between different texts.

Moving beyond simple cross-echoing of texts, and in line with the approach espoused by Barthes and Kristeva, Allen (2011: 5) argued that intertextuality foregrounded 'notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life'. This is why the overall cultural context within which texts

are produced is significant. Grant and Hardy (2003: 7) summed-up this idea by saying that ‘intertextual analyses thus attempt to link particular discourses (how their meanings are constructed and the effects they produce) to the context in which they arise’.

Before proceeding with my discussion of the series, I will now outline the context of the reputational scandals that the BBC suffered in the years and months preceding the screening of *W1A*.

(Dis)trust in the BBC

Trust in the BBC is said to make this broadcasting company one of the most respected British institutions (Aitken 2007; 2013). The BBC is part-funded by a licence fee system, thus its trustworthiness is a strategic imperative. Aitken (2013), in his book *Can We Still Trust the BBC?*, refers to the special place that the BBC has as a national institution:

The British have a deep reverence for institutions and take comfort in the notion that the nation is built upon solid institutional foundations. There is the monarchy, parliament, the armed services, the Church of England, and so on; and there is also the British Broadcasting Corporation... (Aitken, 2013: xv)

Surveys of trust in the BBC are conducted on a regular basis and both BBC management and other commentators scrutinize the results (Aitken, 2007; 2013). The 2012 survey results published by *The Guardian* suggested that the corporation remained the most trusted news provider in the UK, way ahead of any other broadcaster. Thirty-nine per cent of people in 2012 described the BBC as a

‘national treasure’, and the majority claimed that the loss of the BBC would be disastrous. This is what led *The Guardian* (2012) to state that, ‘Overtaken by the NHS and Armed Forces, the BBC earns much higher levels of respect than both the Church of England and Parliament.’ In 2017, in comparison with other news providers, the BBC remained by far the most trusted source of news in the UK with 57 per cent of respondents claiming that they would turn to the BBC for the news that they trust the most.

Nevertheless, reputational scandals severely dented trust in the BBC. The biggest dip in trust scores was recorded in 2012 (the Jimmy Saville child sex abuse scandal) and although the 2015 and 2017 surveys suggest that the public’s trust in the BBC has shown some recovery, it still remains lower than early 2012 levels. This is unsurprising as some of the scandals in the corporation were very serious: the alleged role of the BBC in Dr Kelly’s suicide over the weapons of mass destruction dossier in 2003 and the Jimmy Saville child sex abuse scandal, which spanned decades of the presenter’s career and was only brought to the media’s attention in 2012. Other controversies are less tragic but nonetheless very embarrassing. In 2007 the BBC was found to have faked two live broadcasts of a children’s programme, *Blue Peter*, involving members of the public; in 2008 the BBC was involved in a row over a prank phone call from *The Russell Brand Show* to a celebrity; and between 2011 and 2013 the *Top Gear* programme was criticized for insulting comments made by Jeremy Clarkson, the main presenter. Among other fiascos was the initiative to outsource IT solutions to Siemens (2004–11), which turned out to be a grossly inefficient use of resources. There was also a host of accusations such as ‘tokenism’, associated with the requirement for at least one woman to be included on each panel show (2009–14); ageism and sexism, after a

number of middle-aged women were dismissed from popular programmes (2007–11); lack of parity of pay between men and women (2017); and excessive executive payoffs (2013). These scandals attracted commentaries in other media, some of which were more antagonistic to the BBC than others (Daily Mail, 2017; The Daily Telegraph, 2013; Private Eye, 2014, 2017). The BBC recognized that in order to remain one of the key British institutions it needed to repair trust (BBC, 2015). As the scandals mounted, the BBC engaged numerous initiatives to restore trust in the corporation – both from its own employees and the public in general. Gillespie and Dietz (2012) provided an insightful analysis of the strategies employed by the BBC following the phone-in rigging scandal in 2007. These strategies included: prompt acknowledgement of the trust violation, apology, sincere regret, external investigations, and an announcement of an investigation led by a credible senior manager. These actions were followed by reforming interventions from the BBC management: policy changes, scrutiny of telephony contracts, temporary suspension of phone-in competitions, and financial compensation to callers. In line with the literature on trust repair (Gillespie and Dietz, 2009; Dirks et al, 2009; Bachmann et al 2015), the BBC engaged in both symbolic and substantive actions to restore its own trustworthiness, though it is hard to speculate how effective these strategies were.

In the spirit of intertextuality, I now analyse *W1A* as the ‘intertext’ and consider the satirical representations of management in *W1A* against the backdrop of the BBC’s reputational scandals. Specifically, I focus on satirical rendering of three broad management issues: the use of technology, the design of organizational spaces, and equality and diversity management.

Organizational satire: *W1A*

The title, *W1A*, is the postal code of the London BBC headquarters in London, and imitates the broadcaster's three-letter logo. The series, which consisted of fourteen half-hour episodes screened over three seasons, was made in the 'mockumentary' style – a parody of a TV documentary with a voice-over narration, an all seeing eye in the corporation.

W1A is primarily a comedy of characters. The characters are all middle managers 'of obscure purpose and large pay packet' (Higgins, 2015b) caught up in their own careers and driven by a desire to 'get on' in the BBC. They are threatened by each other, and to stay ahead of others they pursue promotion opportunities before anyone else does. Their job titles are very similar to those we are familiar with in real life, but they are somewhat distorted, drawing on neologisms, and this proximity to reality is a source of humour. Thus, we have the Director of Strategic Governance, the Head of Daytime Factualities, the Head of Outputs, 'an extremely senior' Director of Better (Better than what, the viewers never find out), and the Director of Humane Resources (Table 1). *W1A* also has room for the organization 'fool' – Will the Intern – who fails to carry out the simplest and most menial tasks, but who, contrary to expectations in the final episode, heroically saves the day (or even the whole BBC).

The characters are types and rarely step out of their roles. Their actions are entirely predictable, and so are their lines. No matter how absurd a situation is, the Director of Strategic Governance always responds enthusiastically by saying 'Brilliant!', which is followed by the Head of Values who states *ad nauseam*, 'So it's all good'. In contrast to the Director of Better who disagrees with any suggestion

for change, echoing the Current Controller of the News who always retorts 'Bull***t!'.

Throughout the programme the spotlight is mainly on middle managers, and senior managers appear only in name (except for a brief cameo appearance of the real Director General, Tony Hall). The Director's general approval or disapproval is crucial to the characters and since all characters are in pursuit of promotion or on the lookout for a new exciting job opportunity within the BBC, even a 'smiley' in an email from him is enough to make their day. The hopes for new promotion opportunities are eventually crushed with a major senior management 'simplification programme' which 'follows the pattern of encouraging more staff to apply for fewer jobs by abolishing the ones they have already got'. As a result of this programme, the posts of the Director of Better, the Head of Values and the Head of Outputs are to be replaced by the single new post of the Director of Purpose.

W1A contains numerous examples of situational comedy, relying on entertaining viewers by an accumulation of unfortunate and improbable incidents. *W1A* characters get trapped in locked rooms, put letters in the wrong envelopes, or compete with each other over who can fold up their 'folding bicycle' the fastest. The situations in which the main characters find themselves are funny too, and represent the inner workings of the BBC management. The meetings of the Way Ahead task force are an endless source of humour and the managers' exchanges are like a fast game of table tennis, with meaningless sound bites masking a lack of ideas on how to solve any of the problems. Unable to communicate with each other and completely ineffective, the managers never

reach any decisions, but, despite the lack of decisions, the chair of the meeting invariably concludes with an affirmative, 'So it's all good'.

Management speak is also a target for criticism, and through the use of irony *W1A* challenges the discourse of managerialism. Similar to the job titles of the BBC managers in the series, the language they use is 'almost' normal, that is it resonates with real management terms but at times is deliberately distorted. So, for example, equality and diversity and social inclusion policies are referred to as 'inclusivity' policies; BAME, which denotes Black Asian and Minority Ethnic, is a distorted version of the real term BME (Black and Minority Ethnic), well known to HR managers in most British organizations. The pursuit of 'distinctivity', echoing the pursuit of uniqueness in real organizations, is about 'the ways in which what the BBC does is different'. The interplay of 'better' and 'different', the two ideas said to give the BBC a competitive advantage, reveals the meaninglessness of these terms. The Director of Better, Anna Rampton in constant pursuit of quality enhancement, is cast as someone 'looking for something different but also for something better than different', and 'identifying what we do best and finding more ways of doing less of it better'.

This use of linguistic humour in the examples I discussed is largely independent of the context and equally applicable to other organizations. However, there are also aspects of *W1A* that require the audience to mobilize their wider knowledge of the real BBC and the issues it faces. I will now analyse some of these intertextual references.

The 'intuitive' technology

The new 'intelligent' technology in the building is a cause of constant frustration for the characters, and an inexhaustible source of humour for viewers. It was designed to be 'more intelligent than the people who work with it', and, although it comes pre-loaded in the building itself, it never appears to work when needed. Security systems lock doors automatically trapping people in rooms, and fail to unlock even when the Royals visit the BBC. The SyncopatiSpace booking system, which is meant to be 'a fail-safe to prevent anything going wrong', appears to cause confusion. It works on the basis that the door to any meeting room opens only when the person who has booked the room comes within range with their pass. This makes rooms virtually unusable. Frustrated with this automatic and intuitive technology, one of the characters questions the new technology: 'Why does everything have to be so *intelligent* all the time?'

The parallels between the intuitive technology in *W1A* and the introduction of the new IT system designed by Siemens in 2014 are inescapable. Indeed, the BBC (2014) on its news website reported the failure of their IT system:

The BBC was 'far too complacent' in its handling of a failed IT project that cost licence fee payers £98.4m. The Digital Media Initiative (DMI) was intended to move the BBC away from using and storing video tape. But it was scrapped, with almost no results, after five years of development. After investigating the demise of the project, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has branded the programme 'a complete failure'.

SyncopatiPrint technology in *W1A* is even more disruptive, as it 'brings people closer together' in a queue outside the printer room. The system is so flexible that it allows employees to send their documents to any printer in the

building, but it does not make clear which printer exactly, adding further confusion in the BBC headquarters. Although presented as a communal benefit, this innovation is actually introduced to benefit the managers.

New interactive technology is an object of ridicule throughout the programme. Underpinned by the values of participation and sharing is a new 'digital handshake' – SyncopatiPair. The system, designed to 'change the game, integrate the world', syncs to 'everyone and everything around', inadvertently transferring important confidential files between the devices of people within a physical proximity of each other 'whether they realize it or not'. This share facility has the disastrous effect of leaking information constantly between computers, which is only preventable by technologies introduced to those employees who attended the subsequent parts of the training programme. In the third series the automatic subtitling software, which once introduced cannot be switched off, disastrously misspells names of people and places that nearly results in a diplomatic crisis.

The Building

The building housing the BBC is more than an innocent background to the events – it is integral to the story and is a character in itself (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2003; Czarniawska, 2004; Dale & Burrell, 2008; Hatch, 2013). The Broadcasting House in *W1A*, which 'was designed and built literally from the ground upwards', is described as incomprehensible, a view that resonates with the media reports of the real new Broadcasting House in London opened in 2013. Ijeh (2011), on the webpages of *Building* (a website on architectural innovations), asked with a hint of sarcasm, 'is it a feat of architectural elegance and practicality, or just another

prime-time flop?' Similarly, in one of the early reviews of the building a reporter from *The Guardian* commented:

This is a daunting, vaulting space. I am standing in the News Room of the BBC's gleaming and much-talked-about new building. With its vast pillars, spiralling staircases, and towering lift shafts painted red and orange, this cavernous, boldly modern space seems more like a submarine dock, the sort of place you might expect a James Bond shoot-out to take place. (...) 'Is it worth £1bn'?

The Broadcasting House in *W1A* also has this daunting presence. One of the BBC reporters commented that it's the 'highly secretive, some might say frankly incomprehensible building behind me'. The key innovations in the building – open plan offices, creative spaces (Images 1 and 2) and novel seating arrangements (Image 3) – are clearly a nuisance for the BBC employees, though they are heralded by the senior management as mechanisms to facilitate communication, unlock creativity and promote transparency.

The ridicule of the building is at its harshest in the scene where a group of managers try to find a meeting space and end up in the 'shared innovation space'. 'As it happens there is no sharing or innovation taking place today', so the managers take up the space and hold their meeting while sitting on big stuffed toy animals. The Head of Values invites hesitant colleagues to 'Have a seat or something', and then himself proceeds to sit on a hay bale.

The 'possibilities' offered by the open plan work environment in the New Broadcasting House lead to the characters wandering endlessly to find a quiet

space to talk or work, what *W1A* refers to as an 'inspiration zone'. Similarly, hot-desking 'keeps the company on its toes', almost literally, as several characters are unable to find a free desk to sit at. This highly satirical perspective on hot-desking is evident in the frustration of the Head of Values who would like to settle in the organization and metaphorically put his feet under his desk, but protests that he can't find 'a desk to put [his] feet under'. Finally, he finds a desk 'that isn't already too hot to work at'. As soon as managers reach any level of seniority they set out to organize their working space and separate themselves from others by stacking boxes, putting up bookshelves or hanging posters. The characters in *W1A* are constantly searching for privacy, but the building and the technology in it prevent this relentlessly. Any success at securing the luxury of 'private space' is met with the envy of colleagues. The management's pursuit to remove individual identities and create communal culture is bound to fail.

'Inclusivity' targets

W1A mobilizes intertextual references in its handling of social inclusion and diversity targets, which in the comedy series are exposed to particularly severe criticism. The *W1A* representations of discrimination allude indirectly to real events in the BBC's troubled life. For example, in 2011 Miriam O'Reilly won her Employment Tribunal case against the BBC for dismissal from *Countryfile* on the grounds of ageism. *The Guardian* (2011) reported the case: 'In the course of her evidence to the central London tribunal O'Reilly claimed a *Countryfile* director had warned her "to be careful with those wrinkles when high definition comes in" nine months before she was axed.'

The underrepresentation of women on BBC panel shows was commented on by *The Guardian* (2016):

The most comprehensive analysis ever carried out of comedy panel shows has found that only once in the history of British TV and radio has a programme had an all-female lineup. Of more than 4,700 individual episodes examined by data scientist Stuart Lowe, 1,488 programmes since 1967 have been made up solely of men.

This is despite earlier assurances by the BBC (2014):

Panel shows such as *QI* and *Mock the Week* will no longer have all-male line-ups, the BBC's director of TV has said. 'We're not going to have panel shows on any more with no women on them,' Danny Cohen told the *Observer*. 'You can't do that. It's not acceptable.' His comments come two months after the BBC Trust was reported to have told executives there was 'no excuse' for not having more female panelists. Mr Cohen also said the BBC needed to get more older women on screen. 'We're getting better,' he told the *Observer*, citing the example of historian Mary Beard. 'But we need to get better.'

These controversies found their way into *W1A*, though in a somewhat distorted form. 'Inclusivity' (in itself a neologism, a distortion of 'inclusion') is one of the core values of the BBC in *W1A*. The managers want to ensure the sections within their remit follow externally imposed directives, especially with regards to BAME (which stands for Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) and LGBT ('which stands for something different altogether'). Thus, since 12 per cent of British

society is BAME, this would mean that 12 per cent of newsreaders would have to be drawn from this group. However, the absurdity of this decision is pointed out when the Current Controller of the News notes that he will have to fire half of the ethnic minority newsreaders, because there are many more employed in the BBC than the proposed 12 per cent quota.

The managers also come under fire from their staff for discriminatory practices, particularly their 'institutional anti-West Country bias'. A complaint is filed with the BBC that there are not enough Cornish voices (a regional accent that sometimes contrasts markedly with the traditional received pronunciation of typical BBC employees) and that Cornish issues are not properly discussed. The irony of this complaint is that it is from a female presenter who is neither Cornish nor speaks with a West Country accent. Similarly, the search for Cornish issues to report (which causes the Current Controller of the News to ask in his usual fashion, 'what the f*** are the Cornish issues?') yields only one answer – a discussion about badgers, a local animal not normally considered news worthy on a national TV programme.

Discrimination on the grounds of gender and age also appear in the programme, echoing the recent controversies in British organizational practices. One of the broadcasters complains: 'If you are a woman and you work for the BBC you might as well pack up and go home.' On another occasion the managers are desperately looking for older presenters so that they can fulfil their age quota (again another issue that mirrors a real-world complaint against the BBC). When they finally manage to secure participation from two more experienced presenters, one manager comments with satisfaction, 'In terms of the age issue –

if we could pull that off, this would give them a combined on-screen presenting age of something north of 120 years old, which is a very exciting thought.'

The BBC: 'A deeply troubled organization'

The signs of trouble in the corporation are evident throughout the programme. *W1A*'s Head of Values gets into trouble with the press because he earns twice as much as the Prime Minister, an earnings benchmark that has become widely used to criticize public sector managers' pay. To appease the TV licence payer, he is forced to take a pay cut. Consequently, we learn that 'what makes the BBC different from just about every other broadcasting organization in the world is that it pays its key talent less than anyone else'. The Current Controller of the News keeps apologizing for misreporting a political crisis, while the Senior Communications Officer is always on the lookout for new ways of dealing with various discrimination charges encountered by the management team. One of the TV presenters is accused of wearing clothes that are 'inappropriately watchable', leading to an increasing 'sexualization of the news', according to BBC critics. The issues surrounding the intern's 'employment' with the BBC (i.e. his long-term *unpaid* work, which falls foul of the corporation's own internship policies) is a constant problem for people who use Will's (the intern's) help for menial tasks. Jeremy Clarkson, one of the BBC presenters, gets the organization into trouble for using the word 'tosser' (a derogatory and salacious term used to describe incompetent or nasty individuals who claim to be superior).

Like the real BBC, the BBC in *W1A* faces 'learning opportunities' and these are discussed during the daily 'damage limitation meetings'. In fact, the BBC itself is 'damage limitation', according to one of the characters. Undoubtedly, this last

point is central to the programme and while watching the series we get a sense that the BBC is an organization in trouble. The characters are painfully aware of the problems, but they are also aware of the special role the BBC has as a national institution. The Head of News says, 'We are sitting in, like, the best-known news organization in the world', and this sense of greatness makes us, the viewers, realize that this is why reputational scandals are such 'a blow to [the organization's] BBC-ness'.

Through its intertextual references *W1A* breaks down the distance between us and the institution and appears to ask: why should the BBC be trusted more than any other media organization in the UK? A similar sarcastic tone is evident in the hesitant statement by the newly appointed Head of Values: 'You are aware that you are in the centre of something genuinely exciting and important, and the really exciting thing is that my job is going to establish what that centre is, and what it's in the middle of.'

In light of the troubles that the BBC faced, the question 'What is the BBC for?', as raised throughout the programme, becomes even more sarcastic as the 'BBC-ness' of the BBC is questioned. The banal commentaries by the narrator create a grotesque effect, for example when ridiculing the corporation's sense of superiority: 'It's Tuesday, another in a long line of Tuesdays in the BBC headquarters in Central London.'

The references to 'BBC-ness' need to be discussed in the context of the special role that the BBC plays as a British institution. The juxtaposition of the trustworthiness of the BBC and its serious role as a British institution, with the ridiculousness of the 'scandals' that the organization is responsible for, throws a different light on the BBC and the alleged erosion of trust. The self-deprecating

tone of *W1A* allows the characters to burst the BBC's bubble of greatness and pose the question: should the BBC be among the most trusted British institutions? The answer, according to one of the characters, is not really – 'we get it wrong from time to time'. The Current Controller of the News echoes this question when he says, 'People trust us. God knows why but they do.'

Discussion and conclusions

My discussion is organized around two themes. Firstly, I discuss *W1A* as an example of a 'text' in which management mocks itself, inviting us to ponder on the absurdity of organizational life. Secondly, I consider *W1A* as an 'intertext', i.e. I put forward an interpretation that the intertextual references in the comedy series break down the distance between us and the troubled organization.

Organizational satire of management fads and fashions

Satire in literature spans many genres and literary forms, and it has a clear didactic role – to educate us by ridiculing the foibles and weaknesses of individuals and communities. In line with classical satire that has as its perennial topic the human condition itself (Hodgart, 1969), *W1A* criticizes human and social vice, and makes fun of general foibles rather than specific people. Seen in this way, *W1A* is an example of abstract (Głowinski, et al. 1991) or universal satire as it does not belong to a particular time and place.

W1A makes us laugh at the characters, mainly middle managers not dissimilar to the ones we know from other organizations. The BBC represented in the series is populated by people who seek promotion, who trip up their colleagues and want to 'do better' than their competitors. We laugh at their pursuit

of promotion, constant yearning for the approval of senior management, and inappropriate verbal responses. *W1A* evokes similarity to the characters we know from our working lives and research literature (Collinson, 1988; Rodrigues and Collinson, 1995; Fleming and Sewell, 2002), which suggests that the dynamics lampooned in the BBC are well known in actual empirical settings. For example, Collinson (1988) studied a tightly controlled organization of production on the shop floor in a lorry factory where the division between 'us and them' in relations between employees and management was reinforced by frivolity and laughter. Similarly, Rodrigues and Collinson (1995) identified humour as a safety valve for employees who resisted the introduction of corporate culture and the discrepancies between managers' espoused liberal values and their autocratic practices in relation to the employees. Bolton and Houlihan (2009) analysed the use of workplace humour as one of the ways of promoting employee engagement, while Fleming and Sewell (2002) identified a phenomenon called 'svejkism', i.e. the use of subtle forms of subversion that are invariably invisible to the superiors, and which undermine power relationships and reveal the absurdities of organizational life. The echoes of these empirical studies in *W1A* are clearly noticeable.

Another way in which *W1A* resonates with the literature on organizations is in its critique of management fads and fashions. There is no doubt that the BBC lampooned in *W1A* is an organization eager to jump on the bandwagon of management fashions to keep abreast of the latest developments, probably for fear of being left behind in the race to be seen as a modern institution. Examples of these fashions include promoting transparency through a no-closed-door policy, enhancing creativity through the use of organizational spaces, reduction of

costs through hot-desking, automation of the workplace through the use of mobile devices, or enabling communication through cloud technologies. Like in Marchington et al.'s study (1993: 570), new initiatives in *W1A* are seen as 'a magic carpet ride to a bigger and better job'. These innovations are introduced by managers and 'sold' to managers by means of the rhetoric of participation and communal benefit, but at times work against their interests (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2000). The BBC comes under criticism in *W1A* as the initiatives adopted by the corporation seem to have the opposite effect to what was intended: instead of transparency, there is secrecy, instead of a culture of creativity, there is frustration over inability to find space to work, and instead of enabling efficiency, the new technology wastes people's time. From this perspective, *W1A* is an expression of dissent and protest against these new fashionable initiatives.

As for fads and fashions, the motivations behind these are also a well-researched phenomenon in management and organization literature. For example, Abrahamson (1991; 1996), Marchington et al. (1993) and Huczynski (1993) identified the desire of managers to be noticed as the main motivation for constant introduction of new initiatives and schemes. Watson in his 1994 ethnographic study discussed some examples of these fashions: building of a 'winning' culture, total quality management, continuous improvement, team working, empowerment of employees, customer focus and the unitary 'commitment from all'.

Parallels between these empirical studies and *W1A* suggest that lampooning managers and mockery of management fashions are hardly new. The fads and fashions of management are seen as equally ridiculous in other studies and so are the managers' foibles. *W1A* may be a distorted mirror of contemporary

management but, when considered against these empirical studies, it is not that distorted. However, what makes this case of organizational satire in *W1A* different is that rather than employees mocking management, management is mocking itself. In other words, where management and organization literature uses satire as employees' counterculture within the corporation (Parker, 2006; Strömberg and Karlsson, 2009; Karlson and Villadsen, 2015), in *W1A* it is managers who create a counterculture against their own management.

An intertextual reading of *W1A*

When discussing intertextuality, Barthes (1977) evoked the metaphor of weaving – he saw a text as an 'intertext', as already woven into what had already been written (Allen, 2011). In other words, Barthes claimed that every text has its meaning in relation to other texts. In the same vein, Keenoy and Oswick (2003: 136) argued that 'a piece of text is a processual permutation of the implicated texts contained within it'.

When seen in the context of the intercontextual references to readily available cultural and political texts, *W1A* is no longer 'abstract' and it belongs to a particular time and place – the BBC in the last 15 years, and the vast body of commentaries about it. *W1A* is mobilizing the intertextual references to evince an ambiguous relationship with the real BBC. The permutations of situations and events in the BBC as reported in the media are embedded in allusions, cameo appearances, parallels and quotations. The echoes in *W1A* of the reported BBC scandals are obvious: accusations of age discrimination, sexism, tokenism, social inclusion, excessive executive pay, high-tech solutions that do not work, and misreporting of the national news. These scandals and issues underpin the

breaches of trust that the real BBC is accused of in media reports, and they may be interpreted as particularly important in light of the BBC's handling of reputational scandals. This is where the intertextual analysis accentuates the ambiguous relationship between the text (the TV series) and the public debates about the BBC. So how might one *interpret* these allusions in *W1A*?

I put forward an interpretation that the satirical rendering of the intertextual references is a potential counterweight to the serious problems that the BBC faces, and reduces distance between us and the BBC. By reducing this distance, *W1A* bridges the gap between the public's expectations of the BBC as the most trustworthy media organization and the real BBC – an organization like any other. So when watching *W1A* we are laughing *at* the BBC, but at a more serious level we are also laughing *with* the BBC at the issues that it is accused of.

Could satirical devices be seen as a 'less serious' strategy for repairing trust? As in interpersonal conflicts where humour often helps mend relationships, the BBC uses humour to repair its relationships with the licence payers. It is difficult to bear a grudge against a lifelong friend who exposes their foibles and invites us to join them in warm-hearted laughter. Psychologists have often observed that the positive emotions evoked by shared laughter may serve as a way of reinforcing positive attitudes, promoting good relationships and instilling trust among individuals (Hampes, 1999; Martin, 2007). Similarly, it is difficult to distrust an organization that parodies its own managers, exposes its own inadequacy, and questions its own role as a national institution. In *W1A* the BBC as an organization demonstrates that it is reflexive enough to engage in self-mockery and self-deprecating humour, and invites us to laugh at its failures as a mature, self-critical organization. However, the gentleness of the satire in *W1A*

incited disbelief from some of the viewers. One commentator from the *Daily Mail* (2017) asked with sarcasm how *WIA* can be ‘expected to compete for absurdity with the real thing?’, especially as the real BBC is ‘setting the stupidity bar almost impossibly high’ in its application of political correctness. The reviewer of *WIA* in *Private Eye* (2017: 14) noted that employees of the BBC found the programme impossible to watch ‘as the truth is so much more shocking’ and wondered why ‘the BBC’s acknowledgement of the idiocy of its chiefs and the procedures involves making a sitcom about them, rather than sacking them and replacing them with fewer and better’.

So, on the one hand, by ridiculing characters and distorting situations *WIA* speaks truth to power, but, on the other hand, the seriousness of the problems in the real BBC looms large over the programme. Arguably, victims of sexual abuse by Jimmy Saville or employees subjected to gender discrimination may not see the humour in *WIA* as an effective way to repair damaged trust. The real victims of the BBC might not be laughing.

We will never find out about the intentions of the film director, the Controller of the BBC who commissioned the programme, or the producer. We can only speculate how much of the programme was changed through the BBC’s own commissioning process. Was the satirical rendering of political correctness subject to the BBC’s own policies on political correctness? Was the criticism of management in *WIA* sanitized by the BBC’s own management? How much artistic freedom did John Morton, the director, have in creating representations of his employer? Indeed, the *Private Eye* reviewer argued that *WIA* ‘is a bit like state-sanctioned satirists in Soviet Russia, it is careful not to go very far’.

In the spirit of Kristeva and Barthes, I leave the questions of authorial intentions aside and attribute agency to *W1A*'s audience, not to the authors of the series. The audience is in charge of the series' meaning and this meaning is constituted vis-à-vis the audience's knowledge of the BBC's milieu.

The intertextuality approach suggests that the meaning changes depending on the reader's reading of other texts. In this case, the arrow is pointing both ways, not only does the reading of *W1A* change when the audience considers what is happening in the real BBC, but also our interpretation of what is happening in the BBC may change when we watch *W1A*. Bakhtin in his writing put an emphasis on carnival and 'the power of laughter to destroy a hierarchical distance' (Still and Worton, p. 16). Similarly, I argue that the laughter elicited by *W1A* does exactly that – it destroys distance and brings the BBC closer to us so that it is no longer seen as an institution like the army or the navy, the church or the parliament. The BBC is an organization like any other with its weaknesses and foibles. Although I focused on one TV series that may be considered 'typically British', I believe that the intertextual analysis is helpful in identifying a possible alternative approach to organizational analysis. I believe that my analysis allowed me to point out the subversive aspect of intertextuality, as it challenges official codes by means of mockery and parody. There might be a lesson here for other organizations that have violated trust: satire may come some way, but not all the way, towards organizational reintegration.

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