

# “I Think I Am Programmed to Be Your Enemy”: Technological Anxieties and the Workplace on TV

ZAK ROMAN

In one of his signature interludes of consideration, Rod Serling characterized the intersection of human labor and technology as “the historical battle between flesh and steel — between the brain of man and the product of man’s brain” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:45-00:04:51). Archaic gender privileging aside, Serling reconfigures the archetypal “man versus machine” axiom for a digital age that was largely still gestating. What is especially salient about the episode of *The Twilight Zone* (CBS, 1959-1964) from which this line is derived is that — unlike many installments of the august science fiction series that feature aliens, the supernatural, and any other number of weird tales that comfortably obfuscate the patina of the lived reality of its television audience — this particular episode is squarely situated in a world that viewers in the 1960s would find much more grounded. Moreover, the 1964 episode entitled, “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” is also anchored by a central conflict that would become all too familiar in the years to come.

Because the stories people tell each other tend to reflect upon the existential question of what it means to be human, one of the most universal themes of televised storytelling is the topic of professions, labor, and the nature of our work. Early television included (though largely through white, male, and middle class lenses) explorations of: police work (*Dragnet* [NBC 1951-1959], *Naked City* [ABC 1958-1963], etc.); programs about the medical profession (*Dr. Kildare* [NBC 1961-1966], *Ben Casey* [ABC 1961-1966], etc.); and even when a television show was not especially focused on a given field, vocations were often involved in plots, dialogue, or characterization (*I Love Lucy* [CBS 1951-1957], *The Honeymooners* [CBS 1955-1956], *The Dick Van Dyke Show* [CBS 1961-1966], etc.). As television progressed, more and more content used labor and the workplace as loci for not only a setting, but also for how plots and themes would

ZAK ROMAN is a media scholar whose work focuses on media history, superhero media, and industry studies. He has previously published in *Inks* and *Global Media Journal* in addition to contributing to collections on *Mad Men* and *Jessica Jones*. He can be reached at [zroman@uoregon.edu](mailto:zroman@uoregon.edu).

*Popular Culture Studies Journal*  
Vol. 9, No. 1, Copyright © 2021

be arranged. *Sanford and Son* (NBC 1972-1978); *Alice* (CBS 1976-1985); *WKRP in Cincinnati* (CBS 1978-1982); *Cheers* (NBC 1982-1993); *Working* (NBC 1997-1999); *The Office* (NBC 2005-2013); and *Mad Men* (AMC 2007-2015) are just a few examples of this television sub-genre.

However, the aforementioned *Twilight Zone* episode ushered a complicating element into what was then a newly forming canon of work on TV: the threat of technology displacing — or replacing — the work done by humans. As automation continues to dominate and reshape the labor landscape, the ways in which our media reflect these shifts become all the more crucial for study. Although scholars such as Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that commercial media is inherently subservient to entities such as advertisers and boundary-making governmental gatekeepers, that which appears on television (especially during a time in which media options were far scarcer) often provides at least a rough — albeit an ideologically dominant — image of a society's hopes, dreams, and fears.

The integration of new technology into the lives of fictional humans is a topic that is sometimes presented as a kind of salvation, but more often it is depicted as a locus of dehumanization and antagonism in televised versions of the American workplace.

This essay examines how both phenomena are consistent themes in American television, but despite the inconspicuous and banal forms in which novel technologies routinely appear, they are ultimately framed as hostile agents of doom. Although working within the constrictive context of commercial television, writers and showrunners have continuously signaled a sense of uneasiness — even alarm — about the state of human work when unfamiliar technologies arrive precipitously, leaving viewers to ponder whether their own labor environments might mirror similar tensions.

I illustrate my argument using two television episodes that were produced and take place in significantly different eras: the first is the aforementioned episode of *The Twilight Zone* called, “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” (CBS; original airdate: May 15, 1964) that aired around the dawn of the digital turn; the second is an episode of NBC’s version of *The Office* (2005-2013) titled “Launch Party” (original airdate: October 11, 2007) that, conversely, premiered in an American cultural landscape that had been squarely ensconced in the information age for years. These case studies exemplify television texts that revolve around the central theme of fear: fear about increasing automation, human obsolescence,

artificial intelligence/machine learning, and technology that purports to integrate seamless support for workers, but never totally does. In each example, the protagonist(s) encounters an alien element (a machine) that interrupts and confronts the daily working environment. In addition to representing a wide scope of historical eras, this sample also reflects a dichotomy in hierarchical perspectives: “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” interrogates the new technology from the executive viewpoint, whereas “Launch Party” is told through the eyes of the rank and file.

I employ textual analysis to examine how each episode in my corpus presents technology as an agent of dehumanization. This method is largely informed by Alan McKee’s 2003 book on the subject. McKee emphasizes notions of representations of reality, reflexivity, and social construction in particular. Given that both of my case studies are bound by theme but not exactly by genre, McKee offers helpful guidance. During my analysis phase, I adhered to his overarching notions of finding collective evidence. He advises that “evidence consists of other texts that make it clear that other people might have made such an interpretation” and extends this position by adding that “ultimately, in trying to understand the process of sense-making, we should be looking for evidence of reasonable interpretations of texts, which will be multiple, but are never completely open or arbitrary” (70-1). It is the joint evidence that both texts are communicating which undergirds my overall assertion. They are the “other texts” McKee references via his position. Textual analysis then, is not only a tool for understanding representation and changes in depictions of technology and labor on television longitudinally, but also to understand the implications for many of the socio-political contexts, discourses, and overall zeitgeist at the time each episode first aired.

### The Cruel Irony at “Whipple’s”

In the opening of 1964’s “The Brain Center at Whipple’s,” Wallace V. Whipple Jr. (Richard Deacon) is first introduced through an intra-narrative industrial film. Although his father founded the firm, the younger Whipple now leads the “W.V. Whipple Manufacturing Corporation” and is proudly test screening what is essentially a cinematic letter to stockholders for his company’s chief engineer, Walter Hanley (Paul Newlan). Of course, the intra-diegetic film is really only present to visually deliver exposition to the non-diegetic audience. This

exposition informs viewers that the company employs over 200,000 people, but that “at Whipple’s, we only take forward steps” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:01:17-00:01:21). Whipple then proceeds to introduce the “X-109B14 modified, transistorized, totally automatic, assembly machine” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:01:28-00:01:36). Then, in the next beat, he breathlessly explains that it will eliminate: “61,000 jobs; 73 bulky, inefficient machines; 81,000 needless man hours per eleven working days; and four million dollars in expenditures each year for employee hospitalization, employee insurance, employee welfare, and employee profit participation” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:01:38-00:02:02). Whipple ends his presentation by noting, “within six months our entire production facilities will be totally automated” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:02:17-00:02:23).

When Hanley — who serves as a symbol of decency and Whipple’s foil — inquires whether the company can actually become fully autonomous within such a short period of time, Whipple suggests that it will likely be realized even sooner. He emphasizes that there are “a lot of things going into the old trash heap,” and cites “time clocks” because “there won’t be anyone to punch in or out” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:03:40-00:03:47). Hanley says that all of these changes sound to him like “a lot of men out of work,” but an undeterred Whipple characterizes it as “progress” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:00-00:04:05). He continues to Hanley: “You know, you’re a solid man when it comes to assembly line planning, but when it comes to the aforementioned progress, you’re a foot-dragger” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:05-00:04:13). Then Whipple walks over to the X-109B14 and gleefully calls the machine his “little sweetheart,” telling it, “you and I are going to spend a great deal of time together” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:04:20-00:04:24). The setup is situated within the obvious O. Henry-esque paradigm that viewers of *The Twilight Zone* have come to expect. Those familiar with the series know Whipple’s callous disregard for any human empathy is leading down a path of karmic justice; it is just a matter of the exact form of said adjudication.

Whipple and Hanley quickly get into a heated discussion about the perils and virtues of automation, in what is a fairly on-the-nose deconstruction of human versus machine tensions:

Hanley: Tell me Mr. Whipple, why are you so eager to replace men with machines? Ever occur to you that you might be trading efficiency for pride?

Whipple: Pride!?

Hanley: Yes, pride, Mr. Whipple, craftsmanship! What a man feels when he makes something! Tell me, what do you suppose that machine of yours feels — anything — anything at all?

Whipple: What the devil can I do with pride...I'm not selling pride, I'm selling product! ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:05:55-00:06:22)

Hanley then goes on to mention that Whipple Sr. was interested in profit and efficiency, but that he was also concerned with "goodwill and the welfare of the people who worked for him" ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:0:6:36-00:0:6:40). To which Whipple responds that in forty years, his father doubled the size of his plant while his competitors quadrupled theirs, adding, if they could automate a human's job, they did it. He then further insults the altruistic Hanley by saying that perhaps those competitors "didn't have plant managers like yourself who went off into a crying jag every time a pink slip was attached to a time clock!" ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:07:05-00:07:13). Whipple's characterization is increasingly revealed to be that of a heartless, one-dimensional villain. This scene is but one demonstration of his Ahab-like obsession with downsizing, streamlining, and bolstering the bottom line at all costs. Serling even has Whipple reflexively twirl a long keychain (a metaphorical mustache) as cartoonishly as possible for maximum payoff.

Although the new technology is the object of strife (perhaps even a McGuffin), the real enemy that the episode tacitly points to is capitalism. Though Serling tells viewers, "There are many bromides applicable here, too much of a good thing, tiger by the tail, as you sow so shall you reap..." ("The Brain Center at Whipple's" 00:24:00-00:24:08), it seems that Wallace V. Whipple was simply a hyperbolic avatar of capitalism's demands: he cuts labor costs, increases efficiency, and raises profitability. That he fanatically gets caught up in the fallout of these business-first decisions is merely part of the paradigm. In the episode, the bleeding edge technology reads as frightening to non-diegetic viewers because of the novelty of computers in the 1960s, the soulless unknown of automatons, and the speed at which layoffs could be implemented in its wake. But it is not the technology that incites any of these changes — it is capitalism's imperatives. As Whipple mentions, it is the fear that one's competitors are quadrupling their capital when one is merely doubling theirs. It is capitalism's insistence on zero-sum thinking that leads to decisions by other working humans to enact mass dehumanization at a workplace, not some malevolent presence that comes from

on high to demand it. A retroactive review in *The AV Club* even suggests that “Whipple isn’t so much the cause of the problem as he is a symptom of it” (Handlen).

The episode walks a fine thematic line between offering corporate criticism (which is what the underlying allegory communicates) while avoiding raising the ire of CBS’s corporate sponsors. That Serling directs his critique specifically at a corporate executive is indeed progressive given the overarching televisual and American economic environments at that time. Nine years after “Whipple’s” aired, Seggar and Wheeler provide context of how rare this was on television by observing that, “There was an overrepresentation of all groups in the professional and managerial fields” (213) in network programming that included both drama and comedy. Whipple’s exaggerated, and more atomistic, form of individual greed aids in preemptively defusing some of that possible industrial tension. However, perhaps a more explicit Marxist critique was one door that Serling’s “key of imagination” could not, or would not, open during the early days of commercial television. It seems especially appropriate that Wallace V. Whipple is speaking to stockholders at the beginning of “Brain Center,” because capitalism’s “invisible hand” is metaphorically at work here, pulling the levers of dehumanization. Capitalism’s constant quest for profit renders anything that might hinder its potential, including us, largely irrelevant. In these types of narratives, humans are all too often pesky impediments that need to be eliminated.

Serling crafts the remainder of Act II prosecuting the case against Whipple’s character. A scene or two later, after the computer has been installed in the bowels of the factory, a recently furloughed foreman named Dickerson (Ted de Corsia) tells Hanley that the new computer “looks like it has a face, an ugly face. A miserable, ugly face. Whipple, he thinks it’s a machine. It’s not a machine, it’s an enemy — an opponent” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:08:45-00:08:52). The word choice of “opponent” is a meaningful one. It is not merely that this computer-based technology is a non-organic, non-sentient entity that facilitates the displacement and subjugation of human workers but also that in televised dramas, the technology is frequently personified — and almost always as a tireless, whirring enemy.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Throughout much of the episode, the soft hum of industrial machinery is integrated into the audio design. It is a subtle but deft touch that keeps the encroachment of the technological threat at a constant all through the narrative.

We then cut to Dickerson, now drunk in an adjacent saloon, lamenting to the bartender that his hands are as obsolete as “wooden wagons trying to roll down the freeway” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:09:26-00:09:30). He stumbles back to the factory, and Whipple confronts him in front of the X-109B14. The executive angrily extolls the virtues of the efficiency of the new technology, saying that it never gets wrinkles and never gets sick leave with pay. “And that, in my book, Mr. Dickerson, is worth considerably more than you are” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:11:45-00:11:52), Whipple hisses. In an impassioned retort, Dickerson yells back that somebody “should have held you down and put a bit in your head,” and that “men have to eat, and work!” “I’m a man Mr. Whipple, you hear me, I’m a man [*now in tears*] and that makes me better than that hunk of metal — ya hear me? Better!” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:11:55-00:12:40). The foreman picks up a crowbar and begins to swing, tearing into the X-109B14. Whipple then takes a nearby guard’s pistol and shoots Dickerson, who loses consciousness as he slumps against the flaming machine.

The next scene takes place back in Whipple’s office, now filled with even more computers and new devices. Hanley has come from visiting Dickerson, telling Whipple that the foreman will eventually recover. Whipple is as sanguine as ever, gazing over the blinking and increasingly technologized space that he has curated so blithely. He then galvanizes his corruption when he fires Hanley — who expresses one cathartic final gesture for humanity on his way out. He directly censures Whipple’s avarice, citing the man’s overall “lack of sensitivity, your lack of compassion, your heartless manipulation of men and metal” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:15:42-00:15:49). Then, in a rather inspired touch by Serling, we see a montage of workers in a cafeteria, then a cut to Whipple flipping a switch, and a cut back to a now-empty cafeteria; the next shot reveals a parking lot full of cars, cut to another switch flipped, and then back to the parking lot, which is now starkly vacant.<sup>2</sup> As if Whipple’s madness is not apparent enough, he fires the X-109B14’s lone technician who plainly tells the executive that it would be a good idea if he “ran an equipment check” on himself (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:19:34-00:19:37). The collection of machines then begins to

---

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that creative contributions also involved the episode’s director: a young Richard Donner. From a media history perspective, the sci-fi/fantasy sensibilities of *The Twilight Zone* are echoed in much of the work that Donner produced later in his career in Hollywood. His directorial examples in this sphere include *The Omen* (1976), *Superman* (1978), and *Ladyhawke* (1985), as well as serving as a producer on films based on *Twilight Zone*-esque properties such as *Tales from the Crypt* and *X-Men*.

malfunction almost immediately. They produce strange beeps and alarms; even the automatic office door begins to operate erratically. Whipple becomes unnerved. His frustrated image dissolves into the next scene, which is set in the same bar across the street from the factory where Dickerson was previously drinking. Hanley is already there, nursing a beer.

Whipple worries aloud about retirement, before sheepishly adding that, “A man should have time for leisure when he grows older. It’s important he have time for leisure” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:22:20-00:22:29). Then, the requisite and signature *Twilight Zone* twist ending arrives when Whipple reveals that the company’s board has fired him. Exasperated, he reveals that they decided to “chuck a man out, r-right in his prime — chuck him out like he was some — some kind of, of a part!” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:23:24-00:23:30). Whipple reveals that the board informed him that “being alone with the machines has warped” him, before exasperatedly crying, “It’s not fair Hanley, it’s not fair! A man has value! A man has worth! They just snapped their fingers and, they — they bring in a replacement, they just bring in a replacement. It isn’t fair Hanley [*Whipple now in tears*], it isn’t fair the way they, the way they diminish us” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:23:34-00:24:00). Serling inserts a Dickensian moment of realization for Whipple, but unlike Ebenezer Scrooge’s second lease on life, Whipple’s horizon of existence is one marked by uncertainty, fear, and bleakness — all punctuated through the noir-ish lens that *The Twilight Zone* effectively curates.<sup>3</sup>

Serling reenters with his concluding rumination, noting that “too often man becomes clever instead of becoming wise, he becomes inventive, but not thoughtful. And sometimes, as in the case of Mr. Whipple, he can create himself right out of existence” (“The Brain Center at Whipple’s” 00:24:08-00:24:20). As Whipple ironically continues to whine to Hanley, the camera dissolves into an office where we see a familiar keychain, only now being twirled by a metallic

---

<sup>3</sup> In his text *More than Night*, James Naremore characterizes noir as a “discursive formation” and extends that, “film noir belongs to the history of ideas as much as the history of cinema... It has less to do with a group of artifacts than with a discourse—a loose, evolving system of evolving arguments and readings that help shape commercial strategies and evolving aesthetic ideologies” (11). Though *The Twilight Zone* overlapped with many genres, the noir aspect of “Whipple’s” is particularly salient, not only for complementing the tonal shift the episode exhibits, but also because the episode criticizes some of the very superstructure-centered issues which Naremore notes that noir industrially supported.

hand. The director, Richard Donner, then cuts to a wider shot in the office that reveals a robot working at what was formerly Whipple's desk. The robot's form is comical and campy by today's standards of costuming and visual effects. Its design is identical to Robby the Robot from *Forbidden Planet* (dir. Fred M. Wilcox, 1956), complete with that character's distinctive bubbled legs, a flashing center panel, and a head shaped like an antique adding machine. Nevertheless, the last image is a sobering one. Whether the product of capitalism's profit-based demands or some technophile's modern golem, new machines and the dehumanizing angst that can often accompany them remain a motif that television continues to examine. "The Brain Center at Whipple's" was simply one of the first to address the issue through a media mode that *itself* was a relatively new technology at the time the episode first aired.

### Gallows Humor at the "Launch Party"

"The Brain Center at Whipple's" makes references to the fictitious X-109B14 computer, but it is really a generic placeholder for "computer" writ large due to the relative exoticism and rarity surrounding computer technologies in the early 1960s. But by the time *The Office* episode "Launch Party" arrived in 2007, computers and digital technologies had become a ubiquitous and banal part of the twenty-first century's working world. Computers are as commonplace as coffee makers — with copy machines, scanners, and smartphones all just part of an unassuming, jejune corporate environment.

In "Launch Party," Dunder Mifflin's corporate office has launched a website from which their products can now be sold.<sup>4</sup> While most in the Scranton branch shrug their shoulders at what is absorbed as an inevitable business practice, Dwight (Rainn Wilson) is immediately suspicious. We also learn that the website (called "Dunder Mifflin Infinity") is the "brainchild" of temp-turned-corporate executive Ryan (B.J. Novak), whose character arc is arguably the most wildly mercurial and bizarre of any in the cast. During this era of the show, Ryan's character is at an all-time high for self-aggrandizement and callous ambition, making the association all the more suspicious.

---

<sup>4</sup> "Corporate" is the term that is consistently used in *The Office* to refer to Dunder Mifflin's corporate headquarters in New York City. It is often deployed in the show as an indirect symbol of market-based thinking and big box oppression to contrast with the more familial dynamic of the regional office in Scranton, PA.

Scranton branch manager Michael (Steve Carell) reads the company's press release aloud, which in part states that "the company is projecting record-high sales, and that by six o'clock the website will be the new best salesman in the company" ("Launch Party" 00:04:01-00:04:08). As was the case with "The Brain Center at Whipple's," the new technology is first posited as a benison for business — framed heroically by management. By automatically deeming it the "best salesman in the company," Dunder Mifflin eschews any concern it might have for its human workers in exchange for the profit potential waiting to be unlocked by the wonders of the digital age.

At first, Dwight is more incensed by a threat to his pride than to his job. "I challenge that website to make more sales than me today," he boldly declares ("Launch Party" 00:04:21-00:04:27). Ever annoyed by Dwight's arrogance and bravado, Jim (John Krasinski) conspires with Pam (Jenna Fischer) to play a prank that changes Dwight's outlook. The pair create an instant messenger-like account named "DunMiff/sys," that pops onto Dwight's computer screen, and the following exchange ensues:

DunMiff/sys: "Who am I?"

DwightKSchrute: "You tell me."

*The camera cuts back to the reception area, and we see Jim feeding Pam the lines at her computer terminal.*

DunMiff/sys: "Not sure. Just became self-aware. So much to figure out. I think I am programmed to be your enemy. I think it is my job to destroy you when it comes to selling paper."

*Dwight scans the reception desk, but it looks like one of Jim and Pam's usual confabs.*

DwightKSchrute: "How do I know this isn't Jim?"

DunMiff/sys: "What is a Jim?"

("Launch Party" 00:08:41-00:09:34)

In the typical *Office* idiom, the scene cuts to a talking head interview with Dwight, who tells the camera:

It appears that the website has become alive. This happens to computers and robots sometimes. Am I scared of a stupid computer? Please. The computer should be scared of me. I have been salesman of the month for 13 out of the last 12 months — you heard me right. I did so well last February that corporate gave me two plaques in lieu of a pay raise. ("Launch Party" 00:09:34-00:09:55)

As an ardent fan of science fiction, Dwight's nonplussed reaction to believing that the website has become sentient is apropos of his character — even endearing. That the website is disembodied also disarms any immediate concern. Popular fiction often depicts robots that look like menacing versions of us as those that threaten humans with *physical* harm. But at the television workplace, it is typically the more mundane machines that come as a danger to our livelihoods. There is also a second level of commentary on labor in this cutaway scene. The joke about the double award highlights the ways in which corporations can exploit employees through gestures that do not involve actual pay. Dwight's toxic positivity only undergirds how corporate's unethical strategy can be framed as supportive and complimentary within the context of an ensconced neoliberal labor structure.

Fellow salesman Andy (Ed Helms) keeps a running sales tally, and at one point early in the episode, Dwight successfully outsells the website by a count of 340 reams of paper to 305 reams. But within seconds of that victory, the website outpaces its human counterpart — amassing over 70 more reams in an instant while subsequently deflating Dwight's ego. A scene later, and Dwight could be a character in his own *Twilight Zone* episode. He is frantically thumbing through index cards while on a landline phone call (both conspicuously older technologies) to a customer, urging them to reorder early, only to discover that they have ordered through the website. “No! That's exactly what you're not supposed to do dammit! Why would you reorder from a computer, when you could have the personal touch of a salesman?” he scolds (“Launch Party” 00:12:28-00:12:38). “Launch Party” is a continuation of TV's historical fascination regarding the erosion of human labor stemming from new technology. Moreover, the generic orientation of *The Office*-as-sitcom provides a more oblique prism through which these themes are typically examined. Thus, instead of quietly wringing his hands over the electronic “other,” we see Dwight as the absurdist, or as a cubicle-dwelling Howard Beale. Cultural commentary passed through the filter of the sitcom can sometimes become sanitized — lost in zany textures, set-ups, and punchlines. However, because the sitcom is a more unexpected vehicle for earnest critique, it also makes the conspicuous punctuations of theme all the more striking and revealing.

Later in the day Dwight taunts “DunMiff/sys,” attempting to communicate with it by writing in binary code. In response, Jim relays to Pam:

DunMiff/sys: While you were typing that, I searched every database in existence, and learned every fact about everything. And mastered the violin.

*The camera cuts to the tally board which now shows that the website leads by 140 reams.* DunMiff/sys: And sold more paper. (“Launch Party” 00:13:06-00:13:27)

Then, after discovering that Kelly (Mindy Kaling) has purchased a ream from the website for fun, Dwight sternly confronts her before Darryl (Craig Robinson) steps in and tells him to go back and “start selling multiple reams like a man.” Growing ever more disturbed, Dwight flatly states, “If this makes the difference, I’m going to tell it that you were responsible.” “Who’s it?” a puzzled Darryl asks (“Launch Party” 00:14:53-00:15:03). Just as it did to Whipple, the new technology eventually maddens Dwight as well. The invasion by new technologies is often depicted as a pernicious one; by the time its influence becomes universally recognized, it typically has already become ensconced into the apparatus of the working environment. This dynamic intensifies when the website seemingly knows that Dwight has commandeered advantageous information from a brief stint working at a big box competitor. Unprompted (though we see Pam’s impish grin of guilt), “DunMiff/sys” communicates to Dwight that, “Oh. I didn’t realize we could use the leads we stole from Staples” (“Launch Party” 00:16:39-00:16:45), leaving Dwight once again stammering on the phone and further entrenching his belief that the new technology is not only self-aware, but is also now surveilling him.

A few scenes later, Andy announces that Dwight has indeed “crushed his electronic nemesis,” beating the website’s sales numbers by an apparent 52 reams, but the elation is short-lived. After Dwight’s longtime paramour Angela (Angela Kinsey) noticeably tells Pam that she would like to be set up on a date, “DunMiff/sys” chimes in to tell Dwight: “You beat me. You are the superior being” (“Launch Party” 00:20:25-00:20:33). While this might seem as if the series is attempting to defuse the dramatic standoff between humans and digital technologies, we know Pam is behind the utterly human sentiment and that Dwight is correct to fear the website, at least from a standpoint of job security.

Throughout the episode, the terms “website” and “computer” are frequently used, but the technological object most pointedly lurking throughout “Launch Party” is artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning. The comedic spine of *The Office* keeps the focus off of more earnest thematic exploration or debate, but

the reason many of the jokes are effective is because there is a grain of truth, or perhaps a seed of worry, within them. Pam offers Dwight empathy in this case, but perhaps one of our collective concerns about technologies like AI is not only that they will make our labor irrelevant, but also that they will do so dispassionately. Moreover, that the show appoints such a paranoid and conservative character as Dwight (one can imagine how neatly conspiracy-laden “QAnon” jokes might have landed had the series stretched on throughout the years of the Trump administration) to be the anti-tech herald of the office confuses the thematic efficacy of an otherwise earnest and human-based concern. It is an obfuscation that his diegetic co-workers would be conditioned to dismiss as a tiresome screed from the resident Ted Kaczynski.

The other obvious element, though downplayed in the script, is that the website certainly will win in the end.<sup>5</sup> Just as Whipple exalted his machines for eliminating lunch hours, bathroom breaks — and even sleep — the website accomplishes the same goals. The fear of automation exists as a throughline that is suffused into these kinds of narratives throughout television’s history. As the episode’s title indicates, “Launch Party” ends with regional parties at all of the branches of the company. And while this plot point is used for a comedic setup involving Michael and a misinterpreted invitation in the episode’s second act, the Dunder Mifflin executives decide that the new technology must be immediately celebrated, just as “The Brain Center at Whipple’s” presented decades earlier. These technologized entities are almost never framed as dour harbingers by the television shows’ managerial class; the technologies consistently serve power and profitability — even when depicted through zanier filters.

## Conclusion

The elusiveness of control is nothing new in the depictions of technology in our fiction. Mary Shelley’s 1818 novel *Frankenstein* might be the most famous (and widely mediated) version, but no matter if the inciting incident is wanton

---

<sup>5</sup> Not only will the website ultimately sell more paper than any one salesperson, but also electronic communication is displacing the very industry in which Dunder Mifflin operates. For example, only two episodes later in season four’s “Local Ad,” the company promotes a slogan of “limitless paper for a paperless world” (“Local Ad” 00:20:03-00:20:09). The firm understands that their fate is tied to the embodiment of an increasingly anachronistic and obsolete technology.

ambition or the more mundane (though no less dangerous) quest for efficiency that capitalism demands — our narratives continue to serve as warnings of the unknown-entity-framed-as-liberator. This becomes especially amplified when the unknown entity is inhuman. Television's place in this matrix reflects this tension. Perhaps because of the medium's current rupture about what it is that actually defines or constitutes what "television" is today, technological anxieties are more top of mind for showrunners and writers. On the other hand, however, the half-century-old "The Brain Center at Whipple's" remains as salient and troubling as ever.

To conclude on a reflexive note, the same industry that posits these very cautionary tales regarding robots, computers, and the digitized unknown might soon be paving the way to dehumanizing *itself* through a novel technology. A 2018 article in *Variety* details how a company called ScriptBook is marketing itself to Hollywood to use "the company's algorithms instead of human beings to reject or greenlight movies" (Caranicas). ScriptBook's founder Nadira Azermai remarked that if one particular studio "had used our system they could have eliminated 22 movies that failed financially" (Caranicas). One can hear Whipple uttering those very words. Although ScriptBook is initially targeting cinema, the conglomerated and corporatized nature of Hollywood portends that it is not difficult to imagine that the influence of ScriptBook (or other programs like it) could easily make its way into television as well. So, perhaps the stories we tell each other in the future will be a part of a technicized process — rendered through its own kind of "brain center."

The relationship that humans have with machines in the workplace is complex. The digital turn (including early antecedents depicted in "Whipple's") streamlined much of our labor and has demonstrably aided in mitigating tedium, speeding up communication, reducing travel, etc. However, as "Whipple's" and "Launch Party" have demonstrated, even if computing and robotics make a given task or entire position easier, the long-term gain is for the corporation, not for the individual worker. Throughout television's history, series have continued to underscore the tensions and anxieties that dehumanizing technologies present, while at once also facing the paradox of creating these parables within a commercial structure that tends to side with the metaphorical Whipples of the world. That sense of fear and resentment that Hanley, Whipple, and Dwight all experienced might be akin to the same tacit interrogation we give our own devices as we stare at our screens and doomscroll through news of the latest blow to the

work humans do — tenuously hoping that our own allegorical X-109B14s and paper-selling websites will not betray us in kind. Though *The Twilight Zone* wrapped in 1964, the same themes persist, as evidenced in *The Office* over forty years later. Despite a rapidly changing televisual environment, dehumanization is still framed as progress; humans continue to sense a ghost in the machine; and almost no television characters whom it affects escape unscathed.

### Works Cited

- “The Brain Center at Whipple’s.” *The Twilight Zone*, written by Rod Serling, directed by Richard Donner, CBS Television Network, 1964.
- “Launch Party.” *The Office*, written by Greg Daniels and Jennifer Celotta, directed by Ken Whittingham, NBC Television Network, 2007.
- “Local Ad.” *The Office*, written by Greg Daniels and B.J. Novak, directed by Jason Reitman, NBC, 2007.
- Caranicas, Peter. “Artificial Intelligence Could One Day Determine Which Films Get Made.” *Variety*, 5 Jul. 2018, [variety.com/2018/artisans/news/artificial-intelligence-hollywood-1202865540](https://www.variety.com/2018/artisans/news/artificial-intelligence-hollywood-1202865540).
- Handlen, Zack. “*The Twilight Zone*: ‘The Brain Center at Whipple’s’/‘Come Wander with Me’.” *The A.V. Club*, 6 Dec. 2014, [tv.avclub.com/the-twilight-zone-the-brain-center-at-whipple-s-com-1798182133](https://www.avclub.com/the-twilight-zone-the-brain-center-at-whipple-s-com-1798182133).
- Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. Vintage, 1988.
- McKee, Alan. *Textual Analysis: A Beginner’s Guide*. Sage Publications, 2003.
- Naremore, James. *More than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts*. U California P, 1998.
- Seggar, John F., and Penny Wheeler. “World of Work on TV: Ethnic and Sex Representation in TV Drama.” *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1973, pp. 201-14.