"Dilbert": A rhetorical reflection of contemporary organizational communication

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“DILBERT”: A RHETORICAL REFLECTION OF CONTEMPORARY ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

by

Beverly Ann Jedlinski

Bachelor of Arts
The George Washington University
1987

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

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ABSTRACT

"Dilbert": A Rhetorical Reflection of Contemporary Organizational Communication

by

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The comic strip "Dilbert," created by Scott Adams, was analyzed to evaluate its accuracy and effectiveness in mirroring contemporary organizational communication. This historical case study utilized the methods proposed by Kathleen J. Turner (1977) to provide a rhetorical perspective of "Dilbert" and to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between the comic and society. A three-pronged approach was applied to examine:

1) Precedents in comic strips and organizational communication; 2) Subject matter and dialogue; and 3) Character composition and artistic style. Conclusions indicate that Adams has astutely captured the dysfunctional nature of workplace communication in a unique form of discourse embraced by a worldwide audience. "Dilbert" is a representative sign of its times that has powerful rhetorical significance within popular culture.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

It’s not a comic strip – it’s a documentary – it provides the best window into the reality of corporate life that I’ve ever seen.

—Michael Hammer, Author of Reengineering the Corporation, Newsweek

There are only two kinds of companies. Those that recognize they’re just like “Dilbert,” and those that are also like “Dilbert” but don’t know it yet.

—Guy Kawasaki, Apple Computer Management Expert, Newsweek

Amidst the rubble caused by corporate downsizing, densification, efficiencies, layoffs, repositioning, restructuring, and any myriad of other terms representative of life in the contemporary workplace, a new working-class hero has emerged: Dilbert. This nerdy, bespectacled character with peculiar hair, short-sleeved shirt and turned-up necktie, “has become the most pinned-up character in offices nationwide” (Jaros, 1996, p. 112).

Representing the dissatisfaction of office workers everywhere, Dilbert is “the Kafka of restructuring and mission statements, the Orwell of pointless meetings and middle-management idiocy” (“Dilbert: A beleagured nerd,” 1996, p. 74).

The brainchild of creator Scott Adams, the “Dilbert” comic strip is syndicated in more than 1,900 newspapers in 57 countries and 19 languages, with a daily readership of over 150 million (United Media, 1998, p. 1). In 1997, Adams received both the National Cartoonists Society’s Reuben Award for Outstanding Cartoonist of the Year and Best

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Newspaper Comic Strip. Nicknamed “the Oscar of Cartooning,” the Reuben Award is the most prestigious honor a cartoonist can receive (United Feature Syndicate, 1998, p. 2).

In addition to the daily strip, Adams has authored a series of fifteen best-selling books. Humorously titled, these works include The Dilbert Principle: A Cubicle’s-Eye View of Bosses, Meetings, Management Fads and Other Workplace Afflictions, Dogbert’s Top-Secret Management Handbook, The Dilbert Future: Thriving on Stupidity in the 21st Century, The Joy of Work: Dilbert’s Guide to Finding Happiness at the Expense of Your Co-workers, Always Postpone Meetings with Time-Wasting Morons, Bring Me the Head of Willy the Mailboy, Build a Better Life by Stealing Office Supplies, Casual Day Has Gone Too Far, Dogbert’s Clues for the Clueless, Fugitive from the Cubicle Police, It’s Obvious You Won’t Survive by Your Wits Alone, Journey to Cubeville, Seven Years of Highly Defective People: Scott Adams’ Guided Tour of the Evolution of Dilbert, Shave the Whales and Still Pumped from Using the Mouse.

New technology has propelled “Dilbert” to even greater popularity. In 1993, Scott Adams made history as the first syndicated cartoonist ever to publish his e-mail address (ScottAdams@aol.com) within his comic strip (United Feature Syndicate, 1998, p. 2). “Dilbert” readers were quick to respond and Adams now receives “between 300 and 800 messages every day, from all over the globe” (p. 2). In turn, Adams frequently uses reader ideas communicated via e-mail to develop topical material and situations for “Dilbert.” United Media’s World Wide Web site includes “The Dilbert Zone” (www.dilbert.com), one of the most popular sites on the Internet generating 1.5 million hits a day. “Dilbert’s” on-line newsletter, also available in a “snail mail” paper version, is published several times annually and is estimated to reach more than a quarter of a million people (p. 2).
A true success story, the ironic hero has spawned a marketing, advertising and promotional gold mine. Along with his sarcastic sidekick Dogbert, Dilbert serves as the spokesperson for Office Depot’s national advertising campaign, hawking office products to the very objects of his satire. He and his witty cohorts are featured in a line of Hallmark cards, on t-shirts, calendars, coffee mugs, computer mouse pads, pillows, stuffed toys, ties, and a multi-faceted roster of ancillary products. Ben & Jerry’s have even named their newest ice cream flavor after him, a butter almond and nut variety called “Dilbert’s World: Totally Nuts” (“People in the news,” 1998, p. 2A).

Dilbert has graced the covers of many national magazines, including Fortune, Inc., Life, Newsweek, People and TV Guide, been the subject of countless editorial features, and was named one of People’s “25 Most Intriguing People of the Year” in 1996. Beginning in January of 1999, America’s favorite nerd debuted with his own prime time television sitcom on the UPN network, designed to “explore the surreal subculture of the ’90s workplace” (United Media, 1998, p. 6). The character also has inspired a new lingo in the business world, where being “Dilberted” is “to be exploited and/or oppressed by the boss” (“People in the news,” 1998, April 2, p. 2A).

It all began with a former corporate employee and cubicle-dweller, Scott Adams, who developed Dilbert over a three-year period as a result of doodling during business meetings. Growing up as a frustrated cartoonist, Adams earned a B.A. in economics from Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York in 1979, and an M.B.A. from the University of California at Berkeley in 1986. Employed by Crocker National Bank in San Francisco, Adams describes his days of working “in a number of humiliating and low paying jobs” (United Media, 1998, p. 1) from 1979 to 1986.
Moving on, he served as an applications engineer from 1986 to 1995 with Pacific Bell in San Ramon, California, where he performed “a number of jobs that defy description” (United Media, 1998, p. 1). With ample opportunity to observe the workplace dynamics he and his cubicle-domiciled co-workers experienced, Adams discovered that, “I have a grudge against idiots. Unfortunately, the world is full of them, and a disproportionate number are promoted to management” (“Dilbert: A beleagured nerd,” 1996, p. 75). Adams considers the Dilbert character “a composite of my co-workers over the years” (United Media, 1998, p. 1).

Incorporating Dilbert into his business presentations, Adams received extremely enthusiastic responses. With the encouragement of his associates, he developed his doodles of the Dilbert character into a comic strip format that was syndicated by United Media in 1989. To expand Dilbert’s daily repertoire, Adams surrounded his star with a cast of colorful supporting characters. Dogbert, The Boss, Catbert, Ratbert, Wally, Alice, The Dinosaurs (Bob, Dawn and Rex), The Elbonians, Tina the Tech Writer, Liz (Dilbert’s girlfriend), Phil (The Prince of Insufficient Light), Asok the Intern, The World’s Smartest Garbage Man and Dilbert’s Mom became strip regulars, each with their own unique personalities and idiosyncrasies.

The newly successful cartoonist kept his day job and completed the “Dilbert” comic strip after-hours for nearly six years. In 1995, a new boss at Pacific Bell took Adams up on his “offer to resign if management felt his costs exceeded his benefit” (Locke, 1997, p. 3D) and “Dilbert” became his full-time career. It does not appear that “Dilbert” had anything to do with his boss’s decision, and for Adams, it seems to have been a lucky
break. Soon thereafter, the comic strip “suddenly won its own promotion from cult status to mass phenomenon” (Levy, 1996, p. 52).

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to analyze the “Dilbert” comic strip and its significance as a rhetorical reflection of contemporary organizational communication. This in-depth study will include examinations of the comic strip’s development, its worldwide popularity and its uncanny accuracy in mirroring today’s workplace. The intent of this investigation is to develop an understanding of “Dilbert” as a manifestation of the contemporary corporate environment, to comprehend its ability in effectively communicating with the masses, and to assess its appeal in flourishing commercially. A systematic analysis will hopefully demonstrate that “Dilbert” provides a unique discourse that originated as a function of its surroundings, and expertly captures and communicates symbolic messages to qualify as a viable form of contemporary rhetoric.

This study will be an historical examination and case study chronicling elements of both comics and organizational communication. Developments in both areas are significant in understanding the rhetorical significance represented by “Dilbert.” Research presented will examine the genesis of cartoons as rhetoric, their acceptance as a valid message medium, and the primary factors that distinguish a successful comic strip. Further research will identify historical developments in organizational communication, major trends in this area, and attitudes and perceptions contributing to the current environment. More specifically, this study will examine the evolution of “Dilbert” in
relation to these two areas, its ability to convey societal rhetoric, its effectiveness in doing so, and its potential effects on society.

According to Robert Harvey (1979), "A comic strip must not only continue an established tradition and meet the highest standard of it, it must expand that tradition or create a new one" (p. 645). Certainly, "Dilbert" has created a new tradition. Concurrent with the retirements of "The Far Side" creator Gary Larson and "Calvin and Hobbes" creator Bill Watterson, "Dilbert" has emerged as today's most popular comic strip. What is important now is to discover how "Dilbert" became America's most-loved comic strip, and why office workers everywhere turn to him for their daily dose of humor.

Adams believes that "by disseminating workers' horror stories, his comic strip provides a service" (Zaslow, 1997, p. 18). Others believe that the "secret to Adams' success" is that "he's extraordinarily skillful at tapping the kind of dissatisfaction and stupidity that most American workers experience in the workplace" according to University of California-Berkeley business professor Robert E. Cole (Locke, 1997, p. 1D). Inc. Editor-in-Chief George Gendron asserts that, "I've always found him to be one of the country's most astute commentators on management practices in the Fortune 500" (1996, July, p. 9). It is evident that Adams has perfected a formula for his "Dilbert" comic strip that works. This study will attempt to take a closer examination of the "Dilbert" phenomenon to identify its true appeal and potential significance as a contemporary rhetorical form.
Justification

There are several causative factors that warrant the study of "Dilbert" as a rhetorical reflection of the modern workplace. First and foremost is its incredible popularity as the world’s fastest-growing comic strip. As Kathleen J. Turner (1977) states, “basic to the potential rhetorical significance of comic strips is the vast number of people reached every day by this message form” (p. 25). Sheer audience circulation is staggering through newspaper reach, and becomes even more impressive when compounded by the additional reach of the Dilbert books, web site and numerous ancillary products.

Helping to establish Dilbert’s success, yet intriguing as a separate factor, is the overwhelming attention the comic strip character has received in the press. It is almost as if Dilbert is a real person in the spotlight of fame. Public interest in the character and his creator, Scott Adams, is clearly considerable in order to generate such intense editorial coverage. While these editorial features certainly contribute to furthering Dilbert’s popularity, the primary cause-effect relationship is that press coverage is devoted to the character because society is interested.

Another area of investigation is in identifying just how “Dilbert” so accurately captures the dysfunctional bureaucracy that is corporate America, and the strip’s subsequent impact on the very object of its satire. According to Eisner (1994), “The impact of comics on literacy or the process of reading is worth examining” (p. 4). He proposes that, “Because of their intelligent conventions and flexible structure, they are a valid reading vehicle in the traditional sense” and that comics require “a certain contract between the reader and author” (p. 5). This concept goes hand-in-hand with the need for the reader to identify with comic strip characters or situations in order for them to capture
their interest and provide entertainment value. In “Dilbert,” there seems to be a quality with which everyone can identify, and this is crucial to the strip’s success.

Furthermore, Turner (1977) suggests that, “The newspaper comic strip continues to present fantasies which may contribute substantially to society's rhetorical visions, and which consequently are deserving of the rhetorical scholar’s attention” (p. 35). While “Dilbert” is fantasy, the picture of reality it presents appears to be strikingly real. The comic makes a strong contribution to the body of contemporary rhetoric on organizational communication or, more astutely, the lack thereof.

A survey conducted by Newsweek (1996) shows that “workers indeed are living in ‘Dilbert’s’ world,” (p. 55) with more than 70 percent of the respondents citing job stress. Although the survey did not isolate the exact reasons for this job stress, there is little doubt that seemingly endless changes in the corporate world, and the threatening trends produced by them, have put enormous pressure on workers. Employees who live with potential downsizing, trivial or non-existent raises, long hours and few rewards on a daily basis inevitably experience ill effects.

Consequently, loyalty, job satisfaction and productivity have been replaced by bitterness, cynicism, and low self-esteem. In her book, Management Would Be Easy...If It Weren’t For The People, Patricia J. Addesso, Ph.D. (as cited in Liebeskind, 1996, p. 60) “reviews personality, motivation and other psychological topics that are extremely relevant to the workplace, where productivity is often hampered by management’s inability to deal with them.” If these factors are being callously disregarded in the overall work scheme, as it is apparent they are, then the ramifications are only just beginning.
One might reason that the corporate philosophy of running “lean-and-mean” has had devastating effects. When Newsweek’s August 12, 1996 cover touted, “Work Is Hell - Why Dilbert Is No Joke,” it became clear that “Dilbert” had something to say about the corporate workplace and, more importantly, that people were listening. “Real life...or ‘Dilbert’? Hard to say. The only difference is that with ‘Dilbert,’ it doesn’t hurt so much when you laugh,” (Levy, 1996, p. 57). Drawn to the character’s mocking treatment of their everyday battles, people seem to find a cathartic release in this imaginary hero.

**Review of Literature**

For the purpose of this study, three relevant areas of literature were reviewed:

1) Studies concerning comics and comic strips; 2) Studies focusing on aspects of organizational communication; and 3) Popular materials directly relating to Dilbert and creator Scott Adams. This examination combines an historical case study approach with critical analysis of the subject, and thus necessitates a literature review in all three areas.

**Comic Strip Literature**

The beginnings of the comics can be traced to 1895, when “The Yellow Kid” debuted in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World* and became an instant sensation (Turner, 1977, p. 25). Since then, cartoon collections have become “remarkably rich and comprehensive” (Katz & Duke, 1994, p. 30), and have gained increasing popularity as entertaining and effective ways of communicating a message to the public. In fact, it can be said that, “The comics, that long underrated and misunderstood art form, has emerged from its literary closet as a ‘third’ reading medium and it is here to stay” (Eisner, 1994, p. 3). In relation
to the current study, the literature revealed several studies in communication and popular culture worthy of mention in terms of their emphasis on comics as a mirror of society and as a powerful rhetorical medium.

Research conducted by Kathleen J. Turner (1977) focuses on "the interaction of medium and audience, viewing comic strip messages as both reflecting and influencing the society from which they grow and to which they are addressed," (p. 24). Turner suggests that, "what comic strip creators present to their readers both reflects and affects society" (p. 28), and that, "comic strips, even more than other fictive forms, must draw their subjects from the readers' experiences" (pp. 27-28). Overall, Turner believes that comic strips have evolved over time, "reflecting and affecting the changing rhetorical visions of the American public" (p. 35).

Given that Adams experienced the "cubicle life" personally and that "80 percent of his material comes from readers" (Schultz, p. 36), the content within "Dilbert" is reflective of actual readers' experiences. Adams' 1993 efforts to have his e-mail address published within his strip enabled him to receive more reader feedback, a valuable aid to his work. When he discovered that the more business-oriented strips were the most popular and were being clipped and posted on bulletin boards and water coolers, he "switched emphasis to 80 percent business and technology, and that's when it took off" (Levy, 1996, p. 55).

In the field of popular culture, a study conducted by Christopher L. Lamb (1990) looks at "Doonesbury" and determines it to be "perhaps a truer indicator of our culture than any other comic strip" (p. 113). Lamb examines Garry Trudeau's long-running satirical strip as commentary on society and finds it to be an accurate depiction of societal
issues that consistently changed with the times. The landmark success of “Doonesbury” is said to have spawned future comic strips including “Bloom County,” “Shoe” and “Kudzu,” and most recently, “Dilbert.” Lamb concludes that “Doonesbury” did mirror society in a timely manner and that, “Because of this, it represents a valid barometer for measuring what a society is doing or thinking about at a particular time. This is one reason for the strip’s success; another is that its characters are realistic” (p. 127). The same can be said of Dilbert with its reflective societal and workplace issues, timeliness and characters.

Other studies in popular culture included Earle J. Coleman’s (1985) exploration of comics, film, and their respective aesthetics. Coleman believes in the power of comics but says, “Undoubtedly, the very widespread popularity of the comics, their ‘appeal to the masses,’ has retarded their acceptance as an art form” (p. 89). Coleman points to the significance of comics in influencing other art forms, as with the “Peanuts” animated shows, and the “Flash Gordon” live-action film series. Perhaps most significant was his statement that, “Comic strips which appear in our daily newspapers are as emphatically contemporary as are the news stories of the day” (p. 98).

Lawrence L. Abbott’s (1986) study of visual-verbal relationships in comic art treats “the comic art panel as a kind of ‘found object’ with important cultural ramifications” (p. 155). He examines the illustrative and narrative components of this simplistic art form and determines that, “Comic art does possess the potential for the most serious and sophisticated literary and artistic expression” (p. 176). Ronald Schmitt’s (1992) study of comics as a deconstructive medium describes them as being an important, powerful and unique form of twentieth century media (p. 155).
Kalman Goldstein's (1992) study of Al Capp and Walt Kelly examines and compares the works of these popular cartoonists as political and social commentators. Goldstein asserts that, "During their lifetime Capp and Kelly contributed mightily to our popular culture" (p. 81), and that the two comic pioneers had a profound effect on the next generation of cartoonists. Further, Goldstein refers to cartoons as having "total media control of public opinion through simplistic imagery" (p. 83).

It is intriguing that comics can provide such a powerful rhetorical form, and yet be strikingly simple in their basic composition. Little more than drawn lines and written words, comics are a unique medium for quickly and effectively communicating a message, with minimal effort required on the part of the reader. However, it can be said that creating a viable message in such a simplistic form is no easy task, and those who succeed are indeed astute communicators.

Organizational Communication Literature

Academic studies of organizational communication are plentiful, and address a vast array of areas within the discipline. While many different types of articles were reviewed, several key studies are worthy of further discussion in relation to this thesis.

Michael E. Pacanowsky and Nick O'Donnell-Trujillo (1982) suggest a variance from the traditional approach to the more communication-based organizational culture approach (p. 116). They propose that while employees do generally complete the job, there are many other activities occurring in the workplace that should be considered (p. 116). In order to assess the role of communication within organizations, the researchers examine factors including relevant constructs, facts, practices, vocabulary, metaphors,
stories and rites and rituals to determine that all serve a purpose and that. “The organizational culture approach can go a long way to putting us in touch” (p. 130).

Loyd S. Pettegrew’s (1982) study of communication within nonprofit health and human services organizations determines that there is a great disparity between theoretical perspectives and the real world (p. 179). Pettegrew coins an alternative framework as “The S.O.B. Theory of Management,” stating that, “The force of being a decision-maker within this particular organizational context makes one an S.O.B. to the majority of interest groups in such organizations” (p. 180).

In his essay, H. Lloyd Goodall, Jr. (1984) provides the results of a year-long study of more than 3,000 published articles and books in organizational communication (p. 133). From that study, he develops what he terms “six promising directions” in the field, including: 1) Power and influence management across hierarchies, however defined; 2) Manager/employee job perceptions; 3) Social distribution of knowledge/information in organizations; 4) Idiographic approaches to organizational behavior; 5) Interpersonal analysis of organizational behavior; and 6) Phenomenological/interpretive approaches to organizational study (pp. 139-140).

Another study by Nick Trujillo (1985) suggests the metaphor of “performance” in understanding organizational communication, particularly from a managerial perspective (p. 201). As he states, “Conventional wisdom now suggests that management and communication are interrelated processes” (p. 201), impacted by such factors as symbolism, storytelling and culture impact (p. 221).

In a particularly relevant study, George Cheney and Craig Carroll (1997) posit that people are treated as little more than objects in many corporate or organizational
structures (p. 593). They introduce their article as focusing "on the dark side of the
current push toward greater efficiency, competitiveness, and so-called customer
responsiveness in the world of work" (p. 593). In illustrating their point, they examine
organizational activity in five categories: organizational operations, labor and employment,
marketing and customer service, corporate governance and investor relations, and
competition and market globalization (pp. 602-620). To conclude, Cheney and Carroll
suggest that individual interests be considered, as "To do less would be to deny the very
resources that provide the basis for all of our institutions – that is, people" (p. 624).
Nonetheless, these are the very same people who are being de-personalized within many
contemporary organizations today.

Related studies include "An Integrated Model of Communication, Stress, and
Burnout in the Workplace" (Miller, Ellis, Zook & Lyles, 1990), "Critical Organizational
Communication Studies: The Next 10 Years" (Mumby, 1993), "When the Links Become
Chains: Considering Dysfunctions of Supportive Communication in the Workplace" (Ray,
1993), "Creating a Culture: A Longitudinal Examination of the Influence of Management
and Employee Values on Communication Rule Stability and Emergence" (Schockley-
Zalabak & Morley, 1994) and "A Study and Extended Theory of the Structuration of
Climate" (Bastien, McPhee & Bolton, 1995).

Many news-oriented features and popular magazine articles on organizational
communication were also reviewed. Lance Morrow’s (1993) "The Temping of America"
(1993) suggests that the changing business climate is resulting in a widespread temporary
workforce of "throwaway" workers (p. 41). According to Morrow, "As stable jobs
disappear, Americans are being forced to adjust to a fragile and frightening new order"
(p. 40), which may have devastating effects on society.

Similarly, Janice Castro’s (1993) feature entitled “Disposable Workers” examines this phenomenon in greater detail. While “America’s growing reliance on temporary staffers is shattering a tradition in which loyalty was valued and workers were vital parts of the companies they served” (p. 43), employees are struggling to comprehend the new challenges facing them now.

Newsweek’s Allan Sloan (1996) addresses the issue from an even harsher stance. In “The Hit Men,” the author examines the disturbing trend toward massive corporate firings and questions Wall Street’s support. These actions have helped companies improve their bottom line, at least in the short-term, “But the layoffs have scared the pants off the public and stirred a political backlash” (Sloan, p. 44). Further, Sloan (1996) offers that greedy CEOs allowed their payrolls to become bloated, and thus have to “offer up human sacrifices” (p. 44) in an effort to recoup their losses.

In Alan M. Webber’s (1998) “Danger: Toxic Company,” he presents concepts developed by Jeffrey Pfeffer, Thomas D. Dee Professor of Organizational Behavior at Stanford’s Graduate School of Business. According to Pfeffer, many companies today are poisonous in their treatment of employees and thus “get exactly what they deserve” in return (Webber, 1998, p. 152).

Susan Caminiti’s (1998) “The Big Business of Burnout” suggests that the condition, although only recently popularized, has likely existed since the beginning of time. As she states, “The proof may be hard to come by, but it’s a good bet that even cavemen suffered from burnout” (p. 51). In “Your Next Job: How Careers Will Change in the 21st Century,” Daniel McGinn and John McCormick (1999) propose that fear has irreparably
altered the corporate landscape and resulted in "a newly emboldened American work force" (p. 44). As workers create their own opportunities, develop freelance businesses, become independent contractors or permanent temporaries, these changing roles will continue to "reveal the kind of deft maneuvering we'll all be asked to make in the new world of work" (p. 45).

**Dilbert-Centered Literature**

Central to this study is literature centered on Dilbert, which can be divided into two primary areas: 1) Literature produced by Dilbert's creator, Scott Adams, and his syndication company, United Feature Syndicate, a division of United Media; and 2) Literature devoted to Dilbert from an editorial perspective.

Since 1989, Scott Adams has produced daily comic strips syndicated by United Media, thus providing a large body of comic works for study. He has authored fifteen books, many of which are "Dilbert" comic strip reprint compilations assembled in humorously titled volumes and featuring an introduction by Adams. Four of his works take the format of "business books" written in text and complemented by comic strip examples because Adams (1996a) felt that he could "no longer restrict himself to a single artistic medium" (front flap).


Another effort, Seven Years of Highly Defective People: Scott Adams’ Guided Tour of the Evolution of Dilbert (1997) takes readers behind-the-scenes. The book is marketed as a special collection and includes early samples of “Dilbert” comics, detailing how the strip developed over time. More interestingly, it features handwritten notes by Scott Adams throughout the text. These notes include background information and his personal thoughts on particular strips, characters, plots and offers explanations and anecdotal information.

Another notable publication is *The Trouble with Dilbert: How Corporate Culture Gets the Last Laugh*, written by Norman Solomon (1997). Primarily a negative effort, the book questions the true motives of Scott Adams and attacks the corporate embrace of Dilbert as being suspect. In such chapters as “Laughing All the Way to the Bank,” “It’s just a cartoon...” and “Maybe your odds are a matter of your control,” Solomon (1997) voices a critical perspective of Adams and his work. Opinions expressed in Solomon's text will be incorporated and addressed within the thesis.

**Summary of Literature**

Much of the remaining literature in all three areas was drawn from more contemporary forms of publication, including mainstream consumer magazines and the Internet. While the topic for this study is contemporary in nature, there is an adequate base of scholarly research and academic studies from which to draw for historical background and theoretical foundation. Complemented with the more recent preponderance of press coverage on “Dilbert” and creator Scott Adams, the overall literature is well-rounded in representation. Strong availability of literature in all three areas underscores the potential importance of “Dilbert” as a viable rhetorical form worthy of further study.

**Methodology**

The method employed in this study encompasses both an historical, critical approach and a case study complete with a review of content and character elements. While this study will not seek to follow or advance a specific critical theory, it will intertwine several
areas of related research to examine, evaluate and prove the viability of "Dilbert" as a rhetorical form. Specifically, it will utilize the methods proposed by Kathleen J. Turner (1977) coupled with various methods of organizational communication to clearly establish the environmental aspects that led to the creative development and mass acceptance of "Dilbert."

In order to fully illustrate the relationship between comic strips, organizational communication and "Dilbert," a wide array of information sources will be applied. These sources will include academic studies, pop culture journals, mainstream consumer magazine features, Internet components, press and publicity information, and publications authored by Scott Adams. The method will also include an in-depth interview with Adams for insight and commentary on the research findings.

This combined analysis will be accomplished through a three-pronged approach incorporating: 1) A historical perspective of both the development of comic strips and contemporary organizational communication issues from which it can be shown that "Dilbert" is a direct offspring; 2) A review of significant topical matter and issues presented within "Dilbert" as they mirror conditions in the modern workplace; and 3) A character analysis profiling the individual characters featured in "Dilbert" and relating them to their suggested real-life counterparts. Each of these areas will function as a chapter within this thesis.

The first chapter will provide a thorough historical overview of comic strips, from their early beginnings, to their mainstream acceptance, to their widespread popularity today. This will establish the framework of comics as a viable rhetorical form, thus enabling the concept of "Dilbert" to emerge and succeed. The chapter will then present a
review of contemporary organizational communication issues facing workers today and leading to a seemingly universal feeling of discontentment. By utilizing this combined approach, it will be established that developments in both comic strips and organizational communication were integral in setting the groundwork for “Dilbert.”

The second chapter will examine “Dilbert’s” message, by reviewing topical matter and issues featured within the comic strip, as well as those that are not, and paralleling them with contemporary corporate concerns. This will be accomplished by juxtaposing two primary perspectives, along with commentary from creator Scott Adams. First, journalist Steven Levy (1996), in his Newsweek feature “Working in Dilbert’s World,” identifies seven key areas of subject content which are effectively depicted within the comic strip. Second, author Herbert Solomon (1997), in his book The Trouble With Dilbert: How Corporate Culture Gets the Last Laugh, proposes a contrasting viewpoint. Third, an interview with Dilbert cartoonist Scott Adams (1999) will attempt to derive his strategy in regard to the comic strip’s content and subsequent popularity. By comparing and contrasting these content reviews with current workplace issues, the study will evaluate “Dilbert’s” accuracy as a mouthpiece of the times.

The third chapter will focus on the characterization of Dilbert and his supporting cast. Main characters are key to the success of an ongoing comic strip, and thus it is important to examine, analyze and determine the factors involved. Scott Adams (1997b) has developed a unique assemblage of characters designed to convey the modern workplace, which he perceives to be full of interesting “Induhviduals” (p. 1) that everyone seems to recognize. Some characters in “Dilbert” seem intended to represent real-life employees (The Boss), while others are an amalgamation of many (Dilbert), and still others are
humorous metaphorical devices (The Dinosaurs). Each character contributes to the comic strip's story line and continues to diversify its overall appeal. This chapter will also look at the cartoonist's artistic style in relation to the comic's success.

By examining each of these three areas in-depth, this study will attempt to prove that "Dilbert" is indeed a sign of the times, a symbolic representation of combined developments in comic strips and organizational communication. Research collected and presented will clearly illustrate the reasons for the comic's success on a global basis, its ability to mirror the contemporary workplace and its effectiveness as a viable form of rhetoric. Further, the study will attempt to assess "Dilbert's" potential impact on society, and to offer observations on whether the comic strip will be successful in effecting changes in the workplace of the future.

General Observations

"Dilbert's" incredible success shows that it is "hitting a chord among America's employed, from CEOs to secretaries" (Schultz, 1997, p. 35). "Dilbert" represents the American workplace—and all that is wrong with it. Scott Adams has shown an uncanny ability to turn those office-based trials and tribulations into a witty, sarcastic, ironic picture of corporate life with which workers worldwide can identify. The comic's phenomenal popularity suggests a powerful form of rhetorical communication that may have measurable effects on society. In fact, the cartoonist hopes that his comic strip "may actually change the problems that he satirizes" (Levy, 1996, p. 57).

Adams has further contended that, "I always expect everything I do to change the world, not just because there's something special about me but because everything in the
world was changed by one person, if you think about it” (“Dilbert: Working class hero,” 1997, p. 59). Evidently, there is indeed something special about Scott Adams and about Dilbert. With some companies now instituting “Dilbertization committees” to target problems that could end up as material for “Dilbert,” indications are strong that Adams is making an impact.

The historical, case study approach utilized in this study should advance examinations of “Dilbert” as a powerful rhetorical vehicle. Implementation of a combined research method should lead to a clear understanding of how and why “Dilbert” originated and the factors related to its continued success. Further, the examiner hopes to draw primary conclusions concerning the comic strip’s ability to affect changes in the world that it satirizes, its long-term development, and what the future may hold for “Dilbert.”
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

As with other forms of popular culture, comic strips were designed to attract massive attention from the beginning.
—Kathleen J. Turner, Central States Speech Journal

In short, since 1985, there have been fundamental changes in perceptions about the relationships between organizations and their workers.
—Charles Conrad and Marshall Scott Poole, Communication Research

—Steven Levy, Newsweek

As one of the most popular comic strips ever created, “Dilbert” has succeeded in attracting a great deal of attention and a worldwide audience. Like other popular media forms, it is important to understand the underlying factors contributing to its mass success. In “Dilbert’s” case, it can be shown that two primary areas of historical precedence set the foundation from which the comic strip subsequently emerged.

Thus, this historical perspective examines these two causative areas in detail: first, in terms of the evolution of comic strips; and second, in terms of significant issues in organizational communication. This dual analysis will establish that developments in both areas were crucial factors in establishing the cultural environment from which “Dilbert”
was a natural and timely manifestation. As historical antecedents, trends in the fields of comics and organizational communication combined to provide a framework for “Dilbert’s” creative development, mass appeal and widespread acceptance.

Comic Strips

The origins of comics, in their most rudimentary form, can be traced back to the Stone Age when primitive man created line drawings upon cave walls (Coleman, 1985, p. 90). In fact, “What links cave art with the comics is a universal desire to capture what is fundamental with a minimum number of lines” (p. 90). These stick figures quickly became a popular way for early men and women to illustrate, educate, and entertain one another. Moreover, “Primitive images evolved into a symbol-code alphabet which ultimately became written language” (Eisner, 1994, p. 4).

Others attribute the roots of comics to colonial times, when artists combined words and pictures to depict political and social satire. Indeed, “Political cartooning has been a part of American culture since Benjamin Franklin published his famous drawing ‘Join, or Die,’ in 1754” (Medhurst & DeSousa, 1981, p. 198). American artists including Paul Revere and Amos Doolittle, as well as many more around the world, continued this tradition (Katz & Duke, 1994, p. 30).

Beginning in the late 1800’s, the comic strip format debuted in America. From that point forth, comic strips have enjoyed a rich and colorful history ingrained within the fabric of contemporary popular culture.

Since 1895, when a bald, gap-toothed urchin dubbed “The Yellow Kid” splashed his expansive, caption-filled nightshirt across the pages of Joseph Pulitzer’s New York
World to entice readers away from William Randolph Hearst’s rival New York Morning Journal, comics have been a circulation booster for newspapers, aimed at capturing the dollars and devotion of the public. (Turner, 1977, p. 25)

Hearst’s Journal responded with the “first complete comic supplement to appear in America—or elsewhere” (Turner, 1977, p. 25), and the competition for control of the funny had begun. As printing technologies advanced, more and more newspapers were printed and comic strips enjoyed an ever-increasing circulation. From those early days to today, comics have come a long way.

For more than a century, the Library of Congress has acquired cartoon-related collections that are “extensive and diverse” (Katz & Duke, 1994, p. 36). From drawings, caricatures and cartoons, to social satires, comic strips and comic books, these collections chronicle an impressive history in the evolution of the genre. They are also evidence of the scholarly and cultural significance of comics and related works.

The Library of Congress’ prestigious Cabinet of American Illustration was created in 1932. William Patten, former Harper’s Magazine art editor in the 1880s and 1890s, proposed “a national collection of original works of art documenting what he and others considered the golden age of American illustration that took place from the 1880s until the outbreak of World War I” (Katz & Duke, 1994, p. 36). Working in conjunction with Librarian of Congress Dr. Herbert Putnam, the two “agreed that such a collection would be a great asset to the nation” (Katz & Duke, 1994, p. 36).

In 1960, the Library’s Prints and Photographs Division sought to broaden its collections of images having “social significance” (Katz & Duke, p. 36) by requesting original cartoon submissions from artists featured in The New Yorker. From the works
received by thirty artists, "Interpretations of social significance varied, but many of the
cartoons deal with such events as the Depression, World War II, politics, and space travel.
Other images deal with more general issues, such as relations between married couples or
children and adults" (Katz & Duke, p. 36). By this time, comics had become as much a
part of Americana as baseball and apple pie. They were effective vehicles for chronicling
subjects that were humorous, as well as those that were not, within a changing society.

Considered pioneers in the field, Al Capp and Walt Kelly successfully incorporated
political and social satire into comic efforts beginning in the 1930s and 1940s and
continuing through the 1960s (Goldstein, 1992, p. 91). Their respective works, "Li'l
Abner" and "Pogo," "have become part of the pantheon of classic comic strips" (p. 91).
Capp and Kelly are credited with influencing generations of cartoonists to come, including
"Doonesbury" creator Garry Trudeau (p. 91).

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, no caricaturist or cartoonist has captured our
society or chronicled its change better than the "Doonesbury" strip drawn by Garry
Trudeau. By satirizing that person, place, fancy or thing that people are talking about
or doing on a daily basis, as he does, a Trudeau strip can tell a reader what the politics
and fads of America are at any given time. (Lamb, 1990, p. 113)
In turn, "Doonesbury" inspired editorially-focused comic strips including "Bloom
County," "Kudzu" and "Shoe."

Through the years, a number of diverse comics have enjoyed great success. From
"Dick Tracy," "Little Orphan Annie," "Beattle Bailey," "Broomhilda" and "Prince
Valiant," to "Blondie," "Apartment 3-G," "Mary Worth," "Peanuts," "Bloom County" and
"Calvin and Hobbes," comics have left an indelible impression on culture. In many cases,
these cartoons have become treasured classics, destined to live on long after their heydays.

At the same time, comic creators, including Burke Breathed (“Bloom County”), Gary Larson (“The Far Side”), Charles Schulz (“Peanuts”), Garry Trudeau (“Doonesbury”) and Bill Waterson (“Calvin & Hobbes”) have attained status as cultural icons. These comic strips astutely depicted their respective eras, thus providing an important rhetorical reflection of popular culture.

As comics continued to evolve, they took on more difficult topics, achieving a greater sense of “social realism” (Coleman, 1985, p. 96). Comic strips began to keenly reflect reality and “Thus, the very word comics became a patent misnomer during the second half of this century as the comics took up such themes as rape, racial prejudice, murder, the Viet Nam conflict, the drug problem romantic predicaments, poverty, mental healthy, alienation, and death” (p. 96). The funnies, it would seem, had become much more than just entertainment—they had become important social mouthpieces for the times.

Comic strips have not traditionally been top-of-mind in discussions about art, entertainment and culture. In her study of comic strips, Kathleen J. Turner (1977) refers to them as “a medium which is at once among the most mundane and the most widely accepted of the popular arts” (p. 24). In fact, no other category of popular culture captures as large a percentage of consumers (p. 25). Comics may be so widely followed because, “Far from being a watered-down, inferior substitute of ‘high’ cultural art, they are distinct, alternative visions which reveal more about the fears, neuroses and power struggles of the populous than high art does” (Schmitt, 1992, p. 155).

While comics might not have achieved recognition as a substantive literary form in the beginning, much has changed to propel them to a greater level of respect. In Eisner’s
(1994) words, "Reading was mugged on its way to the twenty-first century" (p. 3). Eisner posits that television, film and video have superseded reading as the preferred sources of information (p. 3). If "Evidence shows that television-watching has increased as literacy has decreased" (p. 3), then "A partnership of words with imagery has become the logical permutation. The resulting configuration is called the comics and it fills the gap between print and film" (p. 4). Similarly, Coleman (1985) suggests that the comic strip, "with its series of panels, is a kind of visual pun on the film or celluloid strip with its succession of frames" (p. 90).

It is clear that comics have been embraced by the masses who may not be entirely conscious, if at all, of the medium's potential effects. As comics have become increasingly ingrained in popular culture, their rhetorical influence has expanded. For the majority of readers, it is likely that "The central fact of the art – that cartooning is a form of persuasive communication" (Medhurst and De Sousa, 1981, p. 198) goes unnoticed.

What once detracted from the acceptance of comics as a viable literary form, that being their entertaining nature, is actually one of the key factors in their popular success. As Turner (1977) asserts,

Because the audience's perception of the comic strip coincides more with our conception of poetic than of rhetoric—i.e., concerned with the imitative rather than the real, consummatory and pleasing in and of itself, expressing and entertaining rather than persuading—comic strips are seen as enjoyable rather than manipulative, and greater influence can occur. These effects are further accentuated by the persistence of comic strip reading as a part of everyday life. The comic strip,
therefore, with its graphics of imagination and its image of entertainment, is a medium with significant potential for pervasive, subconscious persuasion. (p. 27)

Simply put, thefunnies are fun. They have the power to capture and entertainreaders, all the while in a seemingly innocuous way.

Perhaps more importantly, “The graphics of the comic strip place the message in the realm of fantasy. Regardless of its storyline, the comic’s visual techniques type it as an artistic, imaginative venture” (Turner, 1977, p. 26). This basis in fantasy gives comics the ability to take on serious or controversial issues in an almost innocent manner. Yet, it cannot be overlooked that comics have evolved from light-hearted entertainment to important social commentary. Further, the strong popularity of comic strips is proof of their potential persuasive effects.

While “the amount and regularity of audience exposure in themselves suggests the persuasive potential of comic strips” (Turner, p. 26), their aesthetic attributes are likewise quite important in their effectiveness. According to Eisner (1994),

Comics are admittedly a mutant based on the earliest form of written communication. Their mix of text and image neatly satisfies the current reader’s need for accelerated acquisition of information. They are capable of dealing with both instruction and storytelling. (p. 4)

These aesthetic qualities also enable them to bypass geographic boundaries and appeal to an international audience. It has been said of comics that, “Because of their intelligent conventions and flexible structure, they are a valid reading vehicle in the traditional sense, and with the addition of their universal visual ingredient, they become a cross cultural medium that transcends language barriers” (Eisner, 1994, p. 4).
While "Comics are a disciplined arrangement of words and images which require reader participation and involvement" (Eisner, 1994, p. 4), that demand is minimal in nature. Further, "Comic art is a form of impressionism. It relies on images that are reduced to extreme simplicity" (p. 5). In a typical weekday column, cartoonists must communicate their message in a space measuring approximately two inches high by seven inches wide (Turner, 1977, p. 27). While some comic strips are more complex than others, "The medium's extreme brevity allows neither the time nor the space to develop elaborate fictional structures of plot of character" (p. 27).

Comics differ from illustrated text in that "the imagery in comics is intrinsic to narrative content and employs analogous images in sequence as a language" (Eisner, 1994, p. 4). "The comics feature sequentially arranged panels which contain pictures and balloons or captions for their mutual reinforcement in the presentation of a narrative" (Coleman, 1985, p. 93). Together, drawings and text combine to convey a powerful message in a strikingly simplistic design.

In essence, comics can have a far greater rhetorical effect on readers than might an editorial feature on a similar topic. As Turner (1977) states, "It remains axiomatic that the unreceived message cannot persuade" (p. 25). While newspapers might be received by an immense audience base, thus providing strong rhetorical potential, not all recipients read every section. The message that is not read cannot truly be received; and, it follows, that message cannot persuade.

Because comics must convey their message briefly and succinctly, they often do so in a far more influential manner than a lengthier piece on a comparable topic. Comics provide a quick and precise read to their audience, thereby increasing their potential of
being read. Both style and message are important, as “Comic strip audiences, it seems clear, respond to both the form and the content of the medium” (Turner, p. 26).

Ultimately, “The comic artist must be a story-teller in words and pictures, but a story-teller above all, because the medium is a narrative one, in which the pictorial is perhaps best thought of as the para-literary” (Abbott, 1986, p. 176). While daily comics are designed to be able to stand-alone, strips often continue an ongoing theme, or several themes, throughout their lifetimes.

In order to achieve mass success, “Comics must choose topical subject matter of interest to the broad range of comic strip readers—a criterion which forces reality into the funnies” (Turner, 1977, p. 28). Comic strips not only provide a daily chuckle for the reader, but a source of interpersonal communication. Comics are routinely shared with family members, friends and co-workers. They are clipped out, passed around, tacked to bulletin boards and taped on water coolers. They provide a unified means of social commentary for individuals and groups, who laugh with one another all too knowingly. Again and again, “Comic strips still capture the hearts, the minds, and the imagination of their readers in a gentle, yet consistent manner” (Turner, 1977, p. 35).

Today, comic strips as a medium enjoy their greatest potential ever, with an almost unlimited reach. Their expansive possibilities are likely to continue as, “On the whole, the medium seems healthier and more open to experimentation than ever before” (Abbott, 1986, p. 175). Never before have comics and their characters diversified their appeal so completely from their home base on the pages of a newspaper. New media such as the Internet provide comics with a cutting-edge forum, as do a variety of other opportunities ranging from licensed products to corporate endorsements.
Both current and classic comics live on, compiled by publishers into "collector's edition" volumes which often achieve best-seller status. Yesterday's comic may be old news, "But the 'times they are a'changin'," for anthologies which reprint comic strips are now flourishing and thereby redeeming strips which would otherwise be consigned to oblivion" (Coleman, 1985, p. 89). The current publishing and technological climates provide comics, old and new, with a plethora of ways to distribute their creative messages to the masses.

Since their inception, comics have mirrored the cultures which create them, from primitive cave men to contemporary audiences. Popular comics serve as a sign of the times and keenly reflect their respective environments. By appealing to audience concerns and incorporating societal issues, comics have gradually earned recognition as a unique medium of rhetorical significance. In that "Today comics attempt to deal with sophisticated subject matter" (Eisner, 1994, p. 4), it is likely that the comic strips of the future will continue to have important cultural implications.

To achieve great prominence, comic strips must strike a common chord with readers in a timely manner. The most successful comic strip in contemporary culture, "Dilbert," has mastered this strategy by addressing a commonplace concern: "Work is Hell." Organizational communication, it would seem, is a topic with which almost everyone can relate. "Dilbert" astutely captures the foibles of the corporate world in a comic strip that uniquely appeals to readers around the globe—but disturbing trends in organizational communication provided the impetus.
Organizational Communication

In today's corporate world, "business as usual" appears to be an oxymoron. By traditional norms, business is anything but usual for the millions of workers trying to adjust to a bewildering array of changes in the workplace. Significant trends in business and organizational communication during the last two decades have irretrievably altered the corporate landscape. Indeed, "There's something different in the air these days when it comes to people's jobs" (Sloan, 1996, p. 44).

For some, there are nostalgic memories of the "good old days," when stable employment was more commonplace. For others, the American dream has become a nightmare. Consider the following scenario:

Almost overnight, companies are shedding a system of mutual obligations and expectations built up since the Great Depression, a tradition of labor that said performance was rewarded, loyalty was valued and workers were a vital part of the enterprises they served. In this chilly new world of global competition, they are often viewed merely as expenses. Long-term commitments of all kinds are anathema to the modern corporation. For the growing ranks of contingent workers, that means no more pensions, health insurance or paid vacations. No more promises or promotions or costly training programs....As the underpinnings of mutual commitment crumble, time-honored notions of fairness are cast aside for millions of workers. (Castro, 1993, pp. 43-44)

Whether labeled as firings, layoffs, downsizing, rightsizing, cutbacks, reductions in force or any number of newly-coined terms, the results are the same: workers are losing their jobs.
Yet, "There is an active intention behind discussing painful organizational transformations in euphemistic ways as if there were no people involved" (Cheney & Carroll, 1997, p. 608). Notably, "While layoffs have traditionally been part of blue-collar life, the '90s is the first time white-collar workers have been slaughtered en masse" (Sloan, 1996, p. 46). According to former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, "The anxiety level is very high, regardless of the kind of job you hold. Nobody is safe" (Castro, 1993, p. 46).

Evidently, a transformation both "merciless and profound is occurring in the American workplace. These are the great corporate clearances of the '90s, the ruthless, restructuring efficiencies. The American work force is being downsized and atomized" (Morrow, 1993, p. 40). As a result, "America has entered the age of the contingent or temporary worker, of the consultant and subcontractor, of the just-in-time work force—fluid, flexible, disposable. This is the future. Its message is this: You are on your own" (pp. 40-41).

Hearing that message loud and clear, many workers are left feeling unappreciated, helpless and just plain mad. The de-humanized, throwaway worker is a symbolic representation of modern corporate times. As Conrad & Poole (1997) note, "Since 1985, the United States has entered a new era, one largely defined by the disposability of the workforce" (p. 581). Moreover, "This 'disposable' work force is the most important trend in business today, and it is fundamentally changing the relationship between Americans and their jobs" (Castro, 1993, p. 43).

While executives lament that there is no loyalty on the part of employees, Jeffrey Pfeffer, the Thomas D. Dee Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, retorts "Companies killed loyalty—by becoming toxic.
places to work!” (Webber, 1998, p. 153). Pfeffer refers to a toxic company as one that “requires people to choose between having a life and having a career” (p. 154) and that “treats its people as if they were a factor of production” (p. 155). Too many companies place an over-emphasis on productivity, losing sight of the bigger picture.

As Cheney and Carrol (1997) point out, this “romance with efficiency has become an end in itself, leading to a side effect of ultimate inefficiencies, jeopardizing the long-term effectiveness of a strategy, larger organizational goals, the well-being of the people who carry it out, and their happiness” (p. 603). In most corporate structures, Pfeffer explains, “When they look at their people, they see costs, they see salaries, they see benefits, they see overhead. Very few companies look at their people and see assets” (Webber, 1998, p. 157). Yet, people are the heart and soul of the working machination, and should be valued as such.

As Conrad & Poole (1997) suggest, communication plays an important role “in the day-to-day work lives of disposable workers and in the construction of disposability” (p. 588). While participation in communication processes has been shown to increase satisfaction and awareness of workers within organizations (Shockley-Zalabak & Morely, 1994, p. 353), it is doubtful that disposable workers receive any benefits of this involvement. Their access to communication at the corporate level is limited at best. More tellingly, “What really matters is that although unemployment is relatively low and the economy is still cranking out new jobs, millions of Americans believe they’re being screwed by corporate America and Wall Street” (Sloan, 1996, p. 45).

In turn, workers have a serious case of burnout, a term introduced to the workplace in the 1980s by Herbert J. Freudenberger, a New York psychologist and author (Caminiti,
1998, p. 52). Burnout, more specifically, can be defined as “a process of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and diminished accomplishment, with low job satisfaction and a reduced sense of competence” (p. 52). Its effects can be felt reverberating throughout the workplace, and the damage may be more far more devastating in the long-term.

In fact, “Stress and burnout are ubiquitous in today’s organizations, and the costs of these phenomena cut across all levels of society” (Miller, Elliz. Zook & Lyles, 1990, p. 300). Experts suggest that the symptoms of burnout have long existed, yet it more recently became a mainstream concern. Caminiti (1998) explains, “When the greedy late 1980s rolled into the recession-racked, downsized early 90s, Americans discovered that the unwritten employment contract promising security and fair pay wasn’t worth the paper it wasn’t written on” (p. 53).

Another contributing factor is the communication climate within companies. Bastien, McPhee & Bolton (1995) offer that “Climate is an important and observable aspect of organizational life. It has considerable influence both on how individuals behave in organizations and on what an organization is able to achieve” (p. 108). Communication climate actually “becomes an enduring organizational attribute that controls the behavior of individuals” (Putnam, 1982, p. 196). Similarly, that workplace climate is then depicted in popular media, which further perpetuates and reinforces it as reality within society. As Goodall (1984) implies, “Our symbolic representations attain the quality of powerful, literal truths” (p. 133).

Not surprisingly, communication between managers and subordinates is also key. Because “Conventional wisdom now suggests that management and communication are
interrelated processes,” (Trujillo, 1985, p. 201), it follows that managers greatly effect organizational communication. While “The concept of managerial ‘rationality’ traditionally has been used to describe the logic of decision-making processes in organizational life,” (p. 204) the current poor status of manager-employee relations has weakened this concept.

Of course, “managerial communication inevitably must deal with issues of ‘power’ and ‘authority,’” (Trujillo, 1985, p. 208), which help to establish the chain of command. While most companies have defined hierarchies in place, they are not always respected by superiors or subordinates, who may choose to defy the proper organizational chain by “going around” the appropriate contact. While this might allow a worker to accomplish a more immediate goal, the action usually backfires when the impropriety is discovered.

In most workplace scenarios, bosses and executives are frequently viewed as villains, whereas workers are seen “as inevitable victims of necessary and successful managerial actions” (Conrad & Poole, 1997, p. 585). This dichotomy between management and workers, however, is not likely to change. As Pettegrew (1982) proposes with “The S.O.B. Theory of Management,” when one is positioned as a decision-maker, that person becomes an S.O.B. to all non-decision-makers (p. 180). Some executives, it would seem, even relish their reputations as S.O.B.s (p. 187).

Within organizational communication, much occurs within the office environment that is not related to work. As Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) observe, “more things are going on in organizations than getting the job done” (p. 116). In a typical work day, “People in organizations also gossip, joke, knife one another, initiate romantic
involvements, cue new employees to ways of doing the least amount of work that still avoids hassles from a supervisor, talk sports, arrange picnics” (p. 116).

Additionally, workers indulge in a form of interpersonal communication labeled as “‘bitching’ together” (Trujillo, 1985, p. 216). This communal “‘bitching’ usually presents itself as a social performance because it allows organizational members a vehicle for complaining, perhaps venting, in a relatively harmless way” (p. 216). One must keep in mind that “It often is very easy to complain about organizational woes and when individuals ‘bitch’ together they sometimes escalate the list of woes in an effort to ‘outbitch’ each other” (pp. 216-217).

These days, workers seem to have plenty to complain about, and most blame big business. However, “It’s unfair to blame every job cut in America on Big Business and Wall Street. The world is changing, and no matter how big and rich a company is, it has to adapt or die” (Sloan, 1996, p. 45). Al Dunlap, widely known as “Chain Saw Al” for the budget cuts he made while CEO of Scott Paper, says “Don’t blame today’s executives who are having to face up to the tough decisions—blame the executives who created bloated corporations that are noncompetitive” (“Villains?,” 1996, February 26).

Other factors, including new technology, globalization, and the preponderence of non-traditional family structures have also had their effects. For many, “The Information Revolution is pulling us apart. The ability to work at home, day or night, gives us more flexible careers but also blurs the line between company and family life” (McGinn & McCormick, 1999, p. 43). A “ruthless global market” (Morrow, 1993, p. 41) has spurred a highly competitive and more volatile market. For dual-career families, single parents and
many others, “customized work arrangements—which help employees balance careers and family life—will be the key to managing the modern work force” (Huppke, 1999, p. 6C).

While studies of organizational communication have increased in recent years, communications scholars agree that these studies are limited in number and scope (see Conrad & Poole, 1997; Mumby, 1993; Pacanowsky & O-Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Ray, 1993; Shockley-Zalabak & Morley, 1994; Trujillo, 1985). With continuing changes in the contemporary workplace, the need for further research in many areas of organizational communication will intensify. At present, the status of organizations and workers is in a precarious situation requiring further study.

As Castro (1993) states, “One by one, the tangible and intangible bonds that once defined work in America are giving way” (p. 43). While “Employers defend their new labor practices as plain and simple survival tactics” (p. 44), workers are scared and defensive. Experts have long warned that the backlash of the American worker may be on its way, and with good reason. In Morrow’s (1993) view,

There are some good economic reasons for a current restructuring, long overdue, of the American workplace. But the human costs are enormous. Some profound betrayal of the American dynamic itself (work hard, obey the rules, succeed) runs through this process like a computer virus. (p. 41)

In looking toward the future, workers may find it to be brighter than the past. McGinn and McCormick (1999) offer the challenge, “Workers of the world, untie: Get ready for the new American career” (p. 43). With the corporate world undergoing extensive and continuing change, both individuals and companies must adapt to a different business climate. For “the taken-for-granted permanently employed” (Conrad & Poole,
new opportunities may be on their horizon. With their confidence in organizations eroded, some workers have already taken control of their lives. Job-hopping for more rewarding opportunities has become a sign of the times, while others have joined the ranks of the self-employed, with current estimates indicating that “25 million Americans are now flying solo” (Pedersen, 1999, p. 47).

While change can be threatening, stagnation can be far more destructive and regression is not an option. As Sloan (1996) expresses, “We can’t go back to the days of the 1950s and ‘60s, when big companies offered lifetime employment. Any company that tries that these days will be like an elephant in a piranha pond” (p. 48). Conversely, “People are going to have to create their own lives, their own careers and their own successes” (Castro, 1993, p. 47).

In summary, the corporate landscape has radically changed over the past two decades. The evolving dynamics of the corporate world have resulted in significant trends in organizational communication, which have subsequently caused widespread feelings of fear and discontentment. The myriad issues presented have provided a commonplace set of concerns, with universal implications. Clearly, these changes have had a profound effect on the way business is done, and subsequently on the surrounding rhetoric in popular culture.

In the future, organizations and workers will need to be more flexible, more diverse than ever before. But for both parties, the corporate world may need to make the first move and,

Let business act as if cares about employees. Who knows? Business may even rediscover what many executives once knew but seem to have forgotten: that
doing the right thing for your people is often the best thing you can do for your business. (Sloan, 1996, p. 48)

Those that do not might quickly find themselves the subject of humor in the panels of “Dilbert,” the comic strip that takes aim at all that is dysfunctional in corporate business.

It is understandable that modern workers need an outlet for these cumulative frustrations, and their woes are vividly seen throughout media in popular culture. As Putnam (1982) states, “Symbolic meanings, then, reflect but do not create an organization’s culture” (p. 199). Yet, as that culture’s reflection is mirrored through popular media, the image can further perpetuate and reinforce existing stereotypes of dysfunctional office dynamics.

Through its “new-found appreciation of the symbolic aspects of organizational life” (Trujillo, 1985, p. 221), the comic strip “Dilbert” can be said to be one of the most accurate symbolic representations ever created of the working world. In acknowledging the media coverage given to labor and employment, Cheney and Carroll (1997) state, “We could also highlight the success of the syndicated newspaper cartoon Dilbert by Scott Adams” (p. 608). Organizational communication, and all that is wrong with it, has found a home in the funny pages.

“Dilbert”

From a historical perspective, it has been shown that comics are a viable rhetorical reflection of their cultures and times. Further, it has been demonstrated that significant shifts in contemporary organizational communication have provided a commonplace concern worldwide. By successfully combining these two areas, Scott Adams has

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developed a socially poignant comic strip with the motto “Work is Hell.” Dilbert knows it, and so do 150 million readers around the globe. Clearly, “comic strips draw heavily from the experiences of the society which produces them. Moreover, what is drawn from society and the way in which it is portrayed becomes in some measure culturally significant” (Turner, 1977, p. 28). Without question, “Dilbert” is leaving its mark on contemporary culture.

“Dilbert’s” creator, Scott Adams, was greatly influenced by both comic strips and organizational communication. As Adams says, “I didn’t want to be President,” but instead, “I wanted to be Charles Schulz” (“Dilbert: A beleaguered nerd,” 1996, p. 74). A former cubicle dweller himself, Adams knows all too well the issues that he chronicles. After “Dilbert” was syndicated, the cartoonist realized that the business-oriented strips were by far the most popular. Appealing to audience demand, Adams subsequently focused primarily on business, technology and office life, and the comic strip flourished. Now, he has created his own cartoon legacy and, in the process, has become somewhat of a cultural icon himself.

As Coleman (1985) suggests, “Comic strips which appear in our daily newspapers are as emphatically contemporary as are the news stories of the day” (p. 98). The influence of comics also extends beyond the United States, as “Like our films, American comics sometimes furnish other countries with their primary introduction to American culture” (p. 90). However, given “Dilbert’s” syndication in 57 countries and 19 languages, it is clear that the situations presented in the comic strip are, in fact, representative of a worldwide phenomenon. Outside of the United States, Adams indicates that “Dilbert” is most
popular in, “In no particular order, Canada, Great Britain, Sweden, Australia and Brazil” (personal communication, March 22, 1999).

Something funny happened on the way to the 1990s, but workers were not laughing. That is, until “Dilbert” gave them an opportunity. Workers might feel like crying, but “Dilbert” gives them a reason to laugh. More reassuringly, the comic conveys that they are not alone in their misery. “Dilbert” provides readers with a much needed outlet for their work-related frustrations and a healthy cathartic experience. “Dilbert” is “an antidote to corporate mindlessness” (Levy, 1996, p. 57).

As long as people work, it is likely to be the subject of satire. In “Dilbert,” Scott Adams has created a natural manifestation of the changing corporate world in a viable rhetorical form. Hence, Time (1996) proclaims, “The Trojan war had Homer. The Spanish-American war had William Randolph Hearst. Every calamity has its bard, and downsizing’s is Scott Adams” (Van Biema, p. 82). Inevitably, the ever-evolving business world will continue to provide comic fodder for the strip. For millions of readers around the globe, “Dilbert” delivers. With a daily dose of humor on all that is wrong with work, “Dilbert” is a sign of the times that is all too real.
CHAPTER 3

THE MESSAGE

Hailed as the “new management messiah,” Dilbert creator Scott Adams uncannily depicts the ignorant managers and clueless co-workers of the typical office through a satirical comic strip belaboring the hellhole that is the 1990’s workplace.

—Jane R. Schultz, Editor, Executive Update

In strip after strip, Dilbert takes potshots at despots and grills the sacred cows of business to a crisp.

—Michelle Locke, Associated Press, Las Vegas Sun

Few would argue with “Dilbert’s” success as the most popular comic strip in the world today. While the comic is clearly the industry leader in its genre, it is not just the medium, but the message that must be further examined. Research by Kathleen Turner (1977) indicates that comic strips form an interactive relationship between medium and audience, and that their messages are both reflective of and influential upon society (p. 24). Given the brevity of the medium, Turner posits that it is essential that comic strips “provide a message which is at once simple and interesting” (p. 27). In order to be effective, Turner suggests that comics have a greater obligation than other fictional forms to obtain their subject matter from the experiences of readers (pp. 27-28).

Similarly, Christopher Lamb (1990) shows the correlation between culture and comic strips in his study of “Doonesbury” (p. 113). Lamb (1990) concludes that “Doonesbury”
"mirrors the society it serves by personalizing it—and mocking it" (p. 127). In his essay, Earle J. Coleman (1985) points to the ability of comics to convey social realism (p. 96) in a timely manner comparable to the daily news (p. 98). Lawrence L. Abbott (1986) acknowledges the narrative significance of comics and the inherent need for the cartoonist to be a strong storyteller (p. 176). Finally, Kalman Goldstein proposes the profound impact of Al Capp and Walt Kelly in capturing social commentary within their comics.

Each of these researchers has greatly contributed to the study of comic strips and their messages. While the comic form represents a union of words and pictures, previous works suggest that the message is the more dominant factor. Communication researchers also agree that there is a need for further study relating to contemporary comic strips and the nature of their discourse. Thus, in evaluating the popular success and rhetorical significance of “Dilbert,” it is crucial to examine the comic strip’s thematic content and message composition.

In “Dilbert,” Scott Adams has succeeded in attracting a global audience of loyal readers who follow his hapless cast of characters through an endless array of excruciating experiences. In order to understand how “Dilbert” so effectively appeals to its audience, it is important to review the topical matter and issues presented in the comic, as well as those that are not, and their relationship to contemporary concerns. Specifically, content can be evaluated through a juxtaposition of counter viewpoints as proposed by journalist Steven Levy and author Norman Solomon. Complementing this appraisal are background information on the evolution of the comic, commentary from creator Scott Adams, and examples from the “Dilbert” strip and books.
As Newsweek (1996) proclaims, “Work is hell in corporate America. Wages are flat, hours are up, bosses are morons and everyone’s stuffed into a cubicle—if he’s lucky enough to have a job. Is this the comic strip ‘Dilbert’? No, it’s real life” (Levy, p. 3). For Scott Adams, real life was indeed the driving force behind “Dilbert.” As a former corporate employee, Adams had plenty of time to both observe and endure the trials and tribulations of the workplace. As he states, “I’m the first cartoonist to write about business from the inside, from the perspective of 17 years in cubicle hell” (“Making them work,” 1996, p. 50).

In the beginning stages of the comic strip, its primary emphasis was on the relationship between Dilbert, a struggling engineer, and Dogbert, his sarcastic canine sidekick. The comic chronicled the pair as they encountered everyday situations including personal grooming, dating blunders, social faux pas and, occasionally, office life. From those early days, “The strip limped along for several years until Adams zeroed in on the workplace and solicited ideas on-line. ‘Dilbert’ took off, a rocket fueled by worker bile” (McNichol, 1995, p. D1).

The “Dilbert” success story truly began in 1993, after Adams inserted his e-mail address into the strip and readers fervently responded with their own tales of workplace woe along with constructive input for the comic. The cartoonist discovered that there were millions of workers enduring similar experiences, “All going home and not being able to talk about it because they assumed that it could not be this bad anywhere else” (Van Biema, 1996, p. 82). Subsequently, he focused the comic almost entirely on business situations and the familiar frustrations facing office workers everywhere.
Timing was also an important issue in "Dilbert’s" rise to fame. As Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) points out, "If you listed the top things that made a difference in the ‘Dilbert’ world, the retirements of [“Calvin and Hobbes” creator Bill] Watterson and [“The Far Side” creator Gary] Larson would be at the top.” The cartoonist continues, “And [“Bloom County” creator Burke] Breathed—that allowed me to get into the Boston Globe, which was my first major metro newspaper.”

Combining his personal knowledge with reader feedback, Adams developed a keen understanding of the workplace gone wrong and how to satirize it effectively. With his marketing background, he was also skillful in capitalizing on the comic void left by the retirement of three major cartoonists. As Adams began to interact regularly with readers, certain issues received nearly unanimous support and quickly became primary sources of regular fodder for the strip. "Dilbert" had become a collaborative effort between the cartoonist and his audience.

The “Close to Real Life” Perspective

In Newsweek, noted journalist Steven Levy (1996) identifies seven areas of "phenomena where the comic strip is uncomfortably close to real life" (p. 56). According to Levy (1996), "Dilbert" is most accurate in lampooning the topics of: 1) Cubicles; 2) Bad Bosses; 3) Management Fads; 4) Out-of-Control Technology; 5) Too Much Time at Work; 6) Downsizing; and 7) Corporate Double Talk (pp. 56-57).

Cubicles

For many employees, the days of plush offices are long-gone and thoughts of office doors are only wistful dreams. The comfortable environs of a home-away-from-home in
which to perform their career roles are but a distant memory. Most workers today spend their business days confined to barren cube-like structures that are anything but homey. Appropriately, “Scott Adams has made Dilbert’s dinky domain a prime symbol of workplace humiliation” (Levy, 1996, p. 56).

Several prominent companies have even re-structured so that everyone in the organization works out of a cubicle, including the top executives. Some continue to reduce cubicle size to accommodate for such needs as additional storage space. If Adams is correct, cubicles will continue to diminish in size, “until they fit snugly around workers’ heads” (Zaslow, 1998, p. 18).

Many employees liken cubicles to prison cells, and the connection is clearly illustrated in “Dilbert.” One strip captured this particularly well, as The Boss asks Dilbert, “Why is everybody putting signs on their cubicles?” and Dilbert responds, “We thought it would be classy to name our cubicles the same way we name conference rooms.” In typical bewilderment, The Boss muses to himself, “I know there’s a catch...but what?” as he examines signs posted on cubicles reading “Menendez Rooms” and “O. J. Room” (Adams, 1997a, p. 45). If cubicles continue to make workers feel like they are in jail, it is likely that the end of the business day will be analogous to being out on bail.

Moreover, the net effects on employee productivity and morale may be devastating in that, “Dispatching someone to one of those pasteboard waffle holes is a public, self-fulfilling prophecy of subpar performance” (Levy, 1996, p. 56). Certainly, the depersonalized cubicle greatly contributes to the perception of the dehumanized worker, and its sterile surroundings provide meager motivation and trivial recognition.
Bad Bosses

In the chain of command, it is not likely that boss-subordinate relationships will ever be without tension. Bad bosses, however, seem to have multiplied and intensified in business over the last decade. In Levy’s view, “While boss-hating is an honored tradition, in the ‘90s there’s more reason for it than ever” (1996, p. 56).

Bad bosses are a prime target in the comic strip and in The Dilbert Principle, Adams’ first book and one of the best-selling business books of all time. As the author explains, “The basic concept of the Dilbert Principle is that the most ineffective workers are systematically moved to the place where they can do the least damage: management” (Adams, 1996a, p. 14). Within this philosophy, the incompetent rise to the top of the corporate ranks, and the competent are left to suffer at the bottom.

In many instances, these bad bosses gain reputations for taunting employees and enjoying the process. One installment of “Dilbert” shows The Boss enthusiastically announcing that, “I just realized I can double your workload and there’s nothing you can do about it.” Obviously disgruntled, Dilbert, Alice and Wally respond, “But at least our hard work will lead to promotion opportunities” while The Boss sarcastically retorts, “You’re so cute. I wish I had a camera right now” (Adams, 1996a, p. 91).

While “Dilbert” chronicles the blunders of bad bosses, it appears to be relatively easy “to find real-life tales that top the transgressions in the comic strip” (Levy, 1996, p. 56). Yet, these very bosses seldom realize their impact on subordinates or the reverberating effects of their actions throughout organizations. Adams rationalizes that, “If bosses could recognize their flaws, they wouldn’t have so many. There must be some kind of cognitive camouflage you get when you become a manager” (Gendron, 1996, p. 11).
Management Fads

Through the years, myriad management fads have come and gone. In general, these fads are initiated by a purported industry expert, embraced by overzealous executives, and rapidly gain momentum and acceptance until the bandwagon is overflowing with impassioned supporters. Often, the followers abandon the program just as quickly when the fad does not result in an immediate and miraculous change.

As "Dilbert" demonstrates, The Boss is frequently influenced by management fads. In one strip, he declares that "Companies must learn to embrace change" while Dilbert, Alice and Wally think, "Uh-oh, it's another management fad." The employees wonder, "Will it pass quickly or linger like the stench of a dead woodchuck under the porch?" and when The Boss suggests a "change" newsletter, they all think, "Woodchuck" (Adams, 1996a, p. 196).

In another installment, he announces, "I'm starting an interdisciplinary task force to study our decision-making process" and Dilbert counters, "So, you're using a bad decision-making process to decide how to fix our bad-decision making process?" Perplexed, The Boss says, "I don't know how else we could find the source of our problem" while Dilbert sardonically offers, "X-ray your skull?" (Adams, 1996a, p. 272).

Indeed, one of the key obstacles with such trendy programs is that although they initially appear to be attractive, they inevitably come "under the control of idiots. Mishandled and forced upon workers, these schemes now succeed only in making workers more cynical—and less productive" (Levy, 1996, p. 56).
Out-of-Control Technology

With technology, inequities in equipment distribution and training abound. As Levy (1996) wryly observes, “Technology does enhance the workplace: it boosts productivity, it distributes all-important information around the company, it enables workers to play solitaire without shuffling cards. It also makes bosses look even more clueless than usual” (p. 56). While technology is definitely changing the workplace, many employees wonder if these developments are for better or worse.

Ironically, those in greater positions of authority and control often receive the least amount of technical training, while those in support roles typically receive the lion’s share. A particularly popular “Dilbert” strip portrays the boss asking for help with his laptop computer, at which point Dilbert and co-worker Wally “wonder if he’ll ever realize we gave him an ‘etch-a-sketch’” (Adams, 1996a, p. 11).

Too Much Time at Work

For most employees, lengthy hours at the office have become a harsh reality. Now that many companies “have figured out it’s good business to coax triple-time work out of single-salary employees” (Levy, 1996, p. 56), workers are in a constant state of overtime with no additional pay. These workers are considered “exempt” or “salary” employees, meaning they earn the same pay regardless of hours worked with no overtime benefits.

Subsequently, many are dismayed to discover that based on their salaries, their excessive hours result in a paltry per-hour wage that is often less than that earned by non-exempt employees at supposedly lower levels. As “Dilbert’s” highly skilled engineer Alice laments, “When you consider the hours I work, I make less per hour than the janitor!” (Adams, 1997c, p. 213). While in years past such dedication would typically pay off with
promotions along the corporate ladder, now “the ladder has been chopped up into little pieces and dumped in the garbage pile” (Fisher, 1997, p. 46). Today, Adams contends, “There is no correlation between the number of hours you work and your compensation or success” (Schultz, 1997, p. 34).

In *The Joy of Work: Dilbert’s Guide to Finding Happiness at the Expense of Your Co-Workers*, Adams (1998) suggests “Reverse Telecommuting” as the solution to the immense time constraints imposed by work (p. 47). In essence, “Reverse Telecommuting” refers to “the process of bringing your personal work into the office. It’s the perfect place for paying bills, playing games, checking on your stock investments, handling errands, calling friends and making copies. To the casual observer, those things look just like work” (p. 47). While Adams views it as one way to restore balance between the ever-increasing demands of personal and professional lives, it can be surmised that many employees have long been engaging in this process.

**Downsizing**

One of the most significant trends adopted by corporations during the last decade is downsizing, and it strikes fear into the hearts of employees everywhere. Indeed, “downsizing is the defining reality of the workplace today,” (Levy, 1996, p. 57). Everyone is scared, everyone is at risk, and no one is safe. In fact, if everybody were not so terrified about being downsized, “the absurdities of the workplace would be infinitely more tolerable—and the ‘Dilbert’ strip would be shorn of its sharpest edge” (p. 57).

In one widely disseminated strip, the boss announces his plans to incorporate the use of humor in the office. He jokes to an employee, “Knock-Knock,” and the employee asks, “Who’s There?” to which the boss gleefully retorts, “Not you anymore” (Adams, 1996a,
Along with many experts, Adams (1997b) predicts that, "In the future, the balance of employment power will change. We'll witness the revenge of the downsized" (p. 127). Indeed, many companies that have downsized to skeletal proportions will realize the ravaging consequences. To regain productivity, these same companies will need to offer handsome compensation packages in order to "upsize" with formerly downsized workers, who may then get the last laugh.

**Corporate Double Talk**

In terms of communication, it seems that many corporations and executives have invented their own language and it is one that few understand. As Levy (1996) asks, "Why don't managers say what they really mean? Because then you'd know" (p. 57). Keeping workers in the dark has become a widespread practice, which has in turn caused massive paranoia. Employees routinely attempt to analyze, scrutinize and decode messages that they receive only to discover that "business communication is purposely misleading" (p. 57).

A popular "Dilbert" strip shows The Boss announcing that he has developed a new group name. Proudly he declares, "From now on we're the 'Engineering Science Research Technology Systems Information Quality and Excellence Center.'" In turn, engineer Wally wryly suggests that "You should throw 'efficiency' in there too." while The Boss obliviously continues explaining that he designed the business cards himself (Adams, 1996a, p. 39).

Another strip shows an executive introducing his project as "a whole new paradigm" and Dilbert asks, "What's a paradigm?" Clearly, the engineer does not know, and neither does anyone else at the conference table, yet they all then declare their projects to be
"paradigms" (Adams, 1996a, p. 41). Workers may be fighting back with their own slang terms, as “To be ‘Dilberted’” is now a commonplace expression meaning “to be exploited or oppressed by the boss” (“Trends,” 1998, p. 1E).

The Critical View

“Dilbert” does have its critics, none more notable than media critic Norman Solomon, who was so irritated by the comic’s great success that he wrote a book devoted to the subject. In The Trouble with Dilbert: How Corporate Culture Gets the Last Laugh, Solomon (1997) presents a largely negative view of the comic and its cartoonist. The author begins by acknowledging, “Nobody can doubt that Dilbert is a smash hit—a genuine national phenomenon—a beloved icon for millions of downtrodden office workers (p. 7). Conversely, his viewpoint implies that “Dilbert is a fraud” (p. 8), and that Adams is, in essence, “laughing all the way to the bank” (p. 18).

Solomon (1997) admits that, “Dilbert is clever and witty at times. It speaks to some real problems and concerns. Many people appreciate its caustic relevance to their everyday work lives” (p. 12). However, he questions, “Most readers assume that Dilbert—and Scott Adams—is laughing with them. But is he actually laughing at them?” (p. 12). According to the author,

Dilbert is a contrived rorschach—a cultural product ambiguous enough to simultaneously delight the CEO and the office worker. Scott Adams has come up with a well-designed ink blob, endearing to the corporate elite as well as to many of those who despise that elite. (1997, p. 12)
Solomon (1997) further contends that “To crack the Dilbert code is to decipher how Dilbert—and much else in mass media—can expose easy truths and avoid tougher ones at the same time” (p. 12).

While “Dilbert” does lampoon many issues commonly encountered by workers, there are also subjects that are not discussed in the comic. Some of these issues include sexual harassment, discrimination (whether by age, race, gender, religious or sexual preference or other), employee disabilities, unfair labor practices and the like. Certainly, issues such as these are extremely important in the workplace and in contemporary society.

If Adams does touch on these topics, it is done in an unexpected and humorous manner. For instance, one strip shows Dogbert teaching a “diversity sensitivity” training session so employees “will learn to respect those who are different.” Dogbert’s idea of diversity categorizes people into four groups—“ugly smart,” “cute smart,” “cute stupid,” and “ugly stupid,” with the latter being the group to which the employees are naturally implied to belong (Adams, 1996b, section 4.5).

While workers may be enduring the cumulative weight of “easy truths” such as cubicles, bad bosses, and downsizing, these are not comparable to the “tougher truths” of harassment, discrimination and disability, which cause an altogether different type of suffering to employees. Satirizing such sensitive work-related topics in a comic format would run the risk of appearing to take very serious matters in much too light-hearted of a manner. At the very least, it would seem to show a callous disregard for their severity, and in all likelihood would be terribly offensive to most readers.

However, the cartoonist has a simpler rationale. As Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) explains, he does not focus on these more controversial issues for, “Two
reasons: One, those issues are so covered by the regular media that they’ve already been
done; and two, you can’t really explain yourself in a cartoon.” Adams continues to say
that, “I try to leave a lot of the cartoons with as many interpretations as possible . . . any
ambiguity is intentional,” which would be difficult to do with controversial topics.

Thus, most of the matters treated within “Dilbert” tend to be of a more harmless and
generalized nature or they are targeted issues, such as a referral to a particular type of
technology, that will be identified and embraced by a certain segment of the population.
Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999), affirms, “As long as I address a
situation that they recognize, those people will seek out the cartoon and they’ll bond with
it, they’ll have a little relationship with it. I call it ‘the honeymoon effect.’—if they like
one out of ten strips, they’ll think they liked the other nine too, and that’s not true.”

Moreover, Adams has no desire to make “Dilbert” into a social cause by taking on
controversial issues. He prefers to refrain from such matters and explains, “I like to make
plays on situations that could be tense, but I’m not too conservative or too liberal” (Jaros,
that if you take sides, they’ll hate everything you do from that day forward. I make sure
people can’t i.d. my political meanings.” Even so, audience members have at times found
material to be more inflammatory than intended. In fact, “Angry readers sometimes write
in to complain about what seems to be a strong statement in a particular strip” (p. 112).

Yet, Adams sees himself as “an equal-opportunity satirist, poking fun at an issue from
both sides” (Jaros, 1996, p. 112). Any topics covered by the cartoonist, thus, will likely
continue to stay within the frame of mainstream acceptance. Even if Adams chose to
incorporate more controversial subject matter within the strip, it is probable that United
Feature Syndicate would not distribute any installments of the comic that they considered objectionable in content. Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) has also learned from his experiences with readers and says of his syndicator, “There are fewer limitations now and I’m more likely to agree with them.” Given the strip’s popularity, Adams continues, “I can push the boundaries, which gives me a huge advantage on other comics.”

Solomon (1997) also suggests that “Dilbert’s” popularity with major executives is suspect, and that “it’s worth pondering that many in top management view Adams as an ally” (p. 9). The author’s explanation is that, “Dilbert is an attack on middle management. Adams avoids taking aim at the highest rungs of corporate ladders—where CEOs and owners carry on... unseen and unscathed” (p. 9). The comic’s success with executives, while somewhat unexpected, is solid. As Business Week’s David Leonhardt (1996) asserts, “There’s a fox in the corporate henhouse, and his name is Dilbert. The relentlessly mediocre comic-strip engineer, cult hero to millions of American workers, has insinuated himself into the corner office” (p. 46).

In reality, middle management is a far more likely target for Adams’ satire. “Dilbert” is part of mass media in popular culture, and to achieve success, must appeal to the interests of the general public. In most corporations, employees have very little, if any, contact with top executives, who are usually far removed from communication with all but those reporting directly to them. By and large, employees regularly interact with middle level managers on a wide array of day-to-day operations and activities within organizations, and to represent another scenario would not be realistic. Further, “Dilbert” is not necessarily anti-management or anti-employee; rather, it is anti-work.
In relation to big business' seeming embracement of the comic strip, Solomon (1997) contends that, "Dilbert mirrors the mass media's crocodile tears for working people—and echoes the ambient noises from Wall Street" (p. 23). While this statement would seem to suggest that "Dilbert" acts as propaganda on behalf of big business, this does not appear to be the case. It is not surprising, however, that "Dilbert" would be far more popular with big business than it would be with labor unions or blue-collar employees. "Dilbert" is based on and set in an office environment that is more typically white-collar in nature and thus would appeal to a similar audience who can better relate to the dynamics of the strip.

Solomon (1997) further offers that, "Scott Adams hasn't hesitated to align himself with immense corporations if they're willing to move large sums of money in his direction" (p. 32). Undeniably, "Dilbert" has achieved success in the world of big business. The character has been affiliated with such major companies as Intel and has served as a spokesperson for Office Depot. Many newspapers also feature "Dilbert" as the only cartoon within their business section, while others use the strip and its characters to illustrate career-oriented special editions.

In response to the commercialization of "Dilbert," Adams is forthcoming about his desire to earn money. He admits, "I knew I wanted to make as much money as I could, and I always figured I would make it by doing something entrepreneurial" (Gendron, 1996, p. 9). When asked about any fears of overexposure for the strip, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999), "You can't get to overexposure until you pass through filthy rich first. So I think overexposure is the goal." In that same conversation, Adams says, "For me, it seems like it's taken too long and isn't big enough yet. I'm constantly disappointed that Bill Gates is still ahead of me."
On the recognition he has received as a business guru, Adams responds, "The only business I’m in is making people laugh" ("Dilbert: A beleagured nerd," 1997, p. 75). However, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) the proliferation of his comic and explains, "Downsizing didn’t really have a spokesperson. In my wildest dreams, I wasn’t planning to be that—the media needed to put a face on that and ‘Dilbert’ became that.” Nor is Adams shy about his desire to have the number one comic strip. "To live big dreams, you must first visualize them,” says Adams, who “visualized himself as the nation’s top cartoonist” (Zaslow, 1997, p. 18).

Solomon (1997) also implies that while most readers think "Dilbert” is on their side, the opposite may be true. The author says that, “Dilbert does not skewer. It reinforces” (p. 27). By “Spoofing the foibles of the corporate monarchy with a manner of impish ingratiation, Scott Adams and his cartoonish alter egos set examples for those who ‘are Dilbert’” (p. 86). All things considered, it is not likely that anyone reads “Dilbert” and aspires to be any of the woebegone characters portrayed.

In fact, most readers recognize attributes of others they work with in the strip, but none seem to identify their own qualities being satirized. As Solomon (1997) also states, “What we laugh at tells us a lot about ourselves. Laughter is an involuntary response, one that doesn’t occur easily if you’re uncomfortable. Which means it’s a lot easier to get laughs by confirming existing perceptions than by challenging them” (p. 54). While “Dilbert” may reaffirm current perceptions and stereotypes, it also challenges them by bringing them into mainstream attention.

Solomon (1997) further contends that, “No wonder the people who read Dilbert feel powerless. The strip actually contributes directly and constantly to making them feel that
way” (p. 59). Similarly, he claims, “It’s a safe way to thumb your nose at the boss without actually taking real action that might jeopardize, or improve, your own position (p. 63).

On the other hand, many readers seem to feel empowered by reading the strip and realizing that others are experiencing the same difficulties. Even Solomon (1997) admits, “As one uneasy hectic day follows another, many workers yearn for a substantive remedy. *Dilbert* is a cynical placebo” (p. 36). While many employees may seek solace in the comic and take no action to change their situation, others may do both.

In several instances, the author refers to the comic strip’s cathartic qualities, such as this example:

In a time of rampant downsizing—with notable speed-up, longer hours and increased strain for employees who remain on the job—*Dilbert* is marvelous for letting off steam from workplace pressure cookers. There’s anger to burn, and not all of it can be stuffed, imploded or displaced. *Dilbert* to the rescue. (Solomon, 1997, p. 20)

He also contends that while the strip has redeeming qualities, its underlying message is almost so basic as to not be necessary, as in,

*Dilbert* does a good job of shedding satirical light on various, and sometimes vicious, absurdities in the workplace. A recurring them is chronic malfunction. What is implicit in the comic strip—and more explicit in *The Dilbert Principle* and *The Dilbert Future*—is a yearning for the system to function well. And this sounds like common sense. (Solomon, 1997, p. 22)

Although “Dilbert’s” basis may be in common sense, it is clear that what is occurring in organizations today is not at all sensible; if it were, “Dilbert” would not be so highly touted.
As Solomon (1997) puts it, “Created by a cartoonist with an M.B.A., Dilbert brilliantly melds irreverence and sycophancy in a corporate crucible” (p. 12). It is important to note that while Adams’ most vocal and prolific critic denounces the cartoonist for capitalizing on the “Dilbert” phenomenon, it is highly probable that Solomon seeks to profit from his book of criticism. Despite Solomon’s critique, the cartoonist maintains a sense of humor in response. In The Joy of Work: Dilbert’s Guide to Finding Happiness at the Expense of Your Co-workers, Adams (1998) addresses “The Trouble with Norman” and summarizes Solomon’s work as follows,

It was a scholarly analysis of the danger that the Dilbert comic strip poses to civilization. Special attention was given to a discussion of the author’s greed, cynicism, and hypocrisy. This hurt me, because in my heart I know I am only greedy and cynical. (p. 252)

Whatever Solomon’s intent, it cannot be overlooked that his book is an effort to capitalize on “Dilbert’s” fame. When asked about Solomon’s true motive, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) simply states, “Writers write and they do that to make money. That’s the motive of all writers including me.”

By maintaining wit and candor in his writing and interviews, the cartoonist succeeds in not adding fuel to the fire of criticism, and increases his appeal with readers even more so. Scott Adams, the cartoonist, creator, M.B.A., and businessman behind “Dilbert” has evolved the comic strip from simple doodles into a multimillion dollar enterprise of international prominence. In the process, Adams has become almost as popular as “Dilbert,” receiving immense press coverage and media attention.
Asked what fans find so intriguing about him, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) at first responds, “I’m not sure,” and then continues, “What’s interesting in my case is that I was willing to put myself out there and embrace it. The more people know about something, the more interesting it is to them.” It can be surmised that without Adams’ business background, fortitude, and marketing savvy, “Dilbert” would not exist today to provide both a daily laugh and a cathartic release to readers around the globe.

“Dilbert’s” Influence

It is not only what “Dilbert” says, but also what it does not say, which are key in the comic strip’s success. In “Dilbert,” Adams encapsulates the realities of the working world in a uniquely focused comic strip that accurately depicts the times. While the strip clearly represents real life scenarios, it also portrays farcical situations bordering on slapstick. As Turner (1977) suggests, “The comic strip thus emerges as a medium whose rhetorical potential lies in its blend of fantasy and reality. On the one hand, it is perceived as frivolous entertainment; on the other, it draws from and presents topical, realistic subjects” (p. 29). This combination of fantasy and reality is well demonstrated in “Dilbert,” and results in commentary that is both timely and entertaining.

In terms of the strip’s overall content, Adams focuses on lampooning the absurdities of the corporate world without becoming too controversial. “Dilbert’s” readers, it appears, prefer to receive messages that have mass recognition rather than a strong social theme. By maintaining subject matter that is more generalized, Scott Adams is able to perpetuate the strip’s worldwide appeal. The cartoonist has no desire to make “Dilbert” a
social statement, any more than it now does in its mocking satire of organizational life.

Adams also includes many specialized messages within the strip which might not have the potential for mass recognition, but attract a certain segment of the population that then becomes loyal to the strip.

Scott Adams does, however, have a desire to make a difference. As he offers, "Part of the solution to any problem is to clearly define it. Dilbert does that" (Zaslow, 1997, p. 18). Thus, the cartoonist believes he fulfills a need in society by showcasing workers' frustrations and that, little by little, the comic might change conditions in the contemporary business world. As Time (1997) suggests,

And that may just be the secret to Dilbert's influence. In that surreal purgatory where he wages a guerrilla war for survival against stapler misfirings and all-powerful, learning-impaired managers, Dilbert somehow believes he might just be able to start changing things—even if he doesn't really alter his work situation in the strip.

Nevertheless, we are rooting for him because he is our mouthpiece for the lessons we have accumulated—but are too afraid to express—in our effort to avoid cubicular homicide. (p. 59)

However, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) himself contends that "Dilbert" "won't be successful in changing the workplace to the point that it's not fodder for humor."

Is real life actually as bad as "Dilbert"? Unfortunately, it may be worse. According to Stephen Roach, chief economist for Morgan Stanley, "downsizing, wage stagnation and a shortsighted corporate efficiency mania have drastically changed the work environment to the detriment of the worker" (Levy, 1996, p. 55). Moreover, "It has certainly raised
questions of cynicism, loyalty, perceived sense of worth and career aspirations” (p. 55). These are not the best of times at “Dilbert’s unnamed yet universal employer” (p. 55), or for workers around the globe.

Unquestionably, “Many employees see themselves or their bosses depicted all too accurately in the three-panel-a-day commentary” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 2E). In The Dilbert Principle, Adams (1996) reveals that the comment he most frequently hears is, “That’s just like my company” (p. 1). Again and again, workers reading the strip wince with recognition. Yet, Adams (1996a) continues, “No matter how absurd I try to make the comic strip I can’t stay ahead of what people are experiencing in their own workplaces” (p. 1). Adams captures the foibles of corporate life so accurately that readers find it startling at times. His astute portrayals cause some to wonder if the cartoonist is a mind reader, if he has spies in their company, or exactly when he worked at their office.

Perhaps most importantly, “Adams’ creation has had a noticeable effect on the morale of workers” (McCarthy, 1998, p. 2E). George Gendron, editor-in-chief of Inc., confirms that, “Since 1989, Scott Adams’s Dilbert comic strip has given voice to people all over America who have just about had it with management fads and corporate jargon” (Inc., 1996, p. 9). Most feel comforted by reading “Dilbert” and realizing that they are not alone. Simply put, “Misery indeed loves company” (McNichol, 1995, p. D1), and “Dilbert” fans appear to have many others with which to commiserate.

These downcast workers “take solace in the dysfunctional workplace of Adams’ creation” (Schultz, 1997, p. 36). Adams adds (personal communication, March 22, 1999), “People use it for communication, for its shorthand value.” The cartoonist continues, “I don’t know anybody that has changed the world by using a ‘Dilbert’ cartoon. But its
existence enters the consciousness and causes change.” Adams also refers to the now commonplace office slang of “To be ‘Dilberted’” and continues, “Language changes the way you think, and therefore changes society, starting in subtle ways and magnifying.”

In “Dilbert,” readers find a unified source of employee discontentment with which they identify. The comic strip has a nearly universal appeal to “the suppressed rage of workers who tolerate abuses and absurdities in a marketplace skewed-and-meaned to Wall Street’s specifications” (Levy, 1996, p. 56). In fact,

Reading “Dilbert” allows them, in some small way, to strike back, or at least to experience a pleasant catharsis by identifying the nature of the beast: a general yet pervasive sense of idiocy in corporate America that is seldom dealt with by the captains of industry who have great hair and offices with doors. (Levy, 1996, p. 56)

While Dilbert is the hero of the working-class, his popularity extends all the way to the top of the corporate ladder. The strip’s cathartic qualities are acknowledged, as “Executives say Dilbert provides an escape valve—even for the targets of his criticism. And like all good humor, the strip makes serious criticism more palatable” (Leonhardt, 1996, p. 46). It is clear that the audience benefits from more than just the everyday humor that is supplied. “Dilbert” is a “comic strip that millions gobble down not simply for a laugh but for a kind of psychic nourishment” (McNichol, 1995, p. D1).

Ironically, part of “Dilbert’s” charm can be found in Adams’ assertion that, “Everybody thinks it’s making fun of somebody else” (Leonhardt, 1996, p. 46). The people laughing most at the comic may be the very objects of its satire, but few view themselves as part of the problem. Certainly, workers around the world find themselves living in Dilbert’s world. It is Adams’ ability to appeal to readers’ sense of having been in
identical situations that is the strip’s strongest component. By doing so, the comic provides a rhetorical reflection of organizational communication that is socially significant. “Dilbert” is the mouthpiece for office life, and all that is wrong with it.

As “Dilbert” evolves, Adams has a “deep commitment to keeping in touch with the office workers who inspire his strip” (Jackson, 1998, p. 2C). The cartoonist continues to regularly converse with fans in person and via e-mail, and to appeal to their needs. As Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) affirms, “The Internet, putting my e-mail address on the strip and the web page” have greatly contributed to the comic’s success and, “It just wouldn’t be what it is without that.” The cartoonist continues with, “So far I’ve done a good job of not anticipating” what may be next for “Dilbert”; instead, he relies on his audience to help determine the strip’s direction.

By constantly measuring the impact of his various strips through reader feedback, Adams is able to monitor the success of different story lines and characterizations. If a plot or character is particularly well accepted, more coverage will be devoted accordingly; if not, inclusion may be decreased or eliminated altogether. Thus, “Dilbert” is a continual work in progress, and Adams is able to regularly reinvigorate the strip by skillfully incorporating reader concerns, current events, timely trends and popular topics as they develop. This interactive approach with his audience has allowed Adams to create a truly unique and timely form of discourse.

With readers “begging me to bring it to TV” (“Satire,” 1998, p. 15B), Adams has given Dilbert new life on his own show. The half-hour animated series debuted on January 25, 1999 on UPN. Adams plans to adhere to familiar territory for Dilbert and avoid becoming controversial or clichéd. As he notes, “Every sitcom, every season, has at
least one major episode in which a major character has a conflict about whether or not they may be gay. We won’t do that episode” (“‘Dilbert’ creator,” 1999, p. 6B). Adams will remain faithful to his fans, while Dilbert and his co-workers bring the woes of office life to the television screen each week.

As for the future longevity of the comic strip, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) offers, “Hard to say, because you can never say whether I’m a fast follower of events or whether I help accelerate them in some ways. Some trends are either coincidence or cause, you figure it out because I honestly don’t have an opinion.” Adams further notes that after The Dilbert Principle became a bestseller, business books sales drastically declined and, “I don’t think business books have bounced back yet. Is it a cause? I don’t know. I think after you read The Dilbert Principle, it’s a little bit harder to take a business book seriously.”

In terms of what might make him an even more astute commentator, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) cleverly responds, “I guess smart pills. However astute I am now is probably my peak.” When asked how he’s contributed to the scholarly study of comics, Adams offers, “I’ve never thought about that question before. I don’t know that I’ve made a contribution other than being a part of the things that are studied.” After thinking, he continues, “I often wonder, if the world exploded and civilization went away and someone found a ‘Dilbert’ book, if they could piece together a philosophy of ‘Dilbert’ or would it be some highly bastardized form that I couldn’t agree with?” Only future researchers may be able to answer this question.

Overall, it is clear that the cartoonist enjoys what he does, and would like to continue for a long time to come. As Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) affirms, “I
think people tend to be good at the things that interest them the most. What you’re noticing, what you’re playing with, why people think the way they think and act the way they act. I’m particularly fascinated with any absurdity.” In the world of work, Adams says, “I think cartooning is a pretty good job compared to any other job you can do” (Jaros, 1996, p. 112), and reassures, “I don’t see any end to Dilbert in sight” (p. 112). The comic was inspired by the workplace, is symbolic of contemporary organizational communication, and continues to appeal to employees everywhere.

Dilbert “has won the hearts of the working class” (“Quick takes,” 1999, p. 21), and is not likely to decrease in popularity anytime soon. As Time (1996) suggests, “The comic is earning more than ever, and the sad fact is it will probably have ample grist for a long time to come” (p. 82). Cartoonist Adams writes about what he knows best, to an audience eager for the message. According to sociologist Dean Wright of Drake University in Des Moines, “There is a cartoon that captures the imagination of each era – Pogo. Doonesbury,” and, he continues, “This is the Dilbert period … He really captures middle-aged, white-collar America” (Donahue, 1996, p. D1). In the end, “Scott Adams is a very funny guy who writes a brilliantly perceptive comic strip” (Levy, 1996, p. 55).
CHAPTER 4

THE CHARACTERS AND THE ARTISTIC STYLE

In such an era, is it any wonder that the comic-strip tribulations of a mouthless, bespectacled, mushroom-headed drone who, with his coworkers, toils away in anonymous cubicles at the whim of a pointy-haired management-dummy boss have become so hugely popular?

—Lisa Schwarzbaum, Entertainment Weekly

In superrealistic dialogue and childlike drawings, Scott Adams re-creates in miniature the workplace familiar to anyone who’s held a job in the last decade: clueless managers, ludicrous management fads and an infinite stream of interoffice memos that boggle the mind and assault the ear.

—Jolie Solomon, Newsweek

Brought to life through the cartoonist’s imagination are the characters that play out the daily and continuing story lines within a comic strip. These characters create a sense of interaction, bring personality to the strip and establish a sense of recognition with readers. Classic comic strip characters remain forever embedded in reader’s hearts. From Charlie Brown, Dagwood Bumstead, Calvin and Hobbes, Cathy, Dick Tracy, and Doonesbury, to Garfield, Little Orphan Annie, Nancy & Sluggo, Opus, Pogo, Snoopy, Mary Worth and many more, these comic creations attain status as icons within popular culture. Thus, the successful comic strip embodies not only an important and timely message, but also presents appealing and identifiable characters designed through the artistry of the cartoonist.

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Correspondingly, the most popular comic strips of all time are often as well known and remembered for their characters as for the messages conveyed through their dialogue. These interesting and unique figures, each with distinct personalities and idiosyncrasies, become symbolic representations in society. While some are based in reality and others are entirely imaginary, characters captivate and maintain the audience's attention as the visual counterpart to a strip's narrative message. Readers immerse themselves in the activities of their favorites, as they integrate the characters into their daily lives and regularly follow their activities within the strip.

In comic history, two strips that have achieved resounding success are Garry Trudeau's "Doonesbury" and Scott Adams' "Dilbert." Both are among the most popular comics ever created, and parallels can be drawn between the two in terms of effective characterization. As Christopher Lamb (1990) writes, "Doonesbury" was "a running gag with a cast of characters whose lives (like our own) are shaped by the events, mores and trends of the times" (p. 114). Further, these characters "more than just observe events, they react and adapt to them" (p. 114).

In socially significant comic strips, "The characters may not be real but the situations they react to are" (Lamb, p. 127). So accurate are these depicted situations that the characters take on a strong aspect of reality themselves, further increasing reader recognition. As Lamb (1990) says of the "Doonesbury" characters, they "add laughter and tears to the headlines and stories we read about; by imitating our world as precisely as Trudeau, the world he creates becomes as real as our own" (p. 128). The same can be said about the "Dilbert" characters, who add laughter and tears to the foibles of office life, as Adams captures the reality of the working world with piercing accuracy.
Since creating “Dilbert,” Adams has expanded his repertoire to include more than twenty characters regularly featured within the strip. “Dilbert’s” cast is now bigger than life, achieving international recognition as their likenesses adorn not only the comic strip but the Internet, a television show, best-selling books, extensive magazine covers and feature articles, and an endless array of consumer products. In Dilbert and his supporting cast, Adams has created immensely popularly characters that serve as symbolic representations of the workplace culture. Thus, it is important to examine his assemblage of characters, their early origins, their use of rhetoric and their respective roles within the comic strip.

Cast of Characters

Dilbert

On first glance, the title character Dilbert would appear to be an unlikely hero. Potato-shaped and bespectacled, with his elongated head, peculiar haircut, short-sleeved shirt and curved-up necktie, the nerdy engineer is not exactly leading man material. All things considered, “Dilbert would seem to be one sorry dude” (Cawley, 1996, p. 98). The inspiration behind the character, according to Adams, is that “Dilbert is a composite of my coworkers” (Schultz, 1997, p. 38). As the fledgling cartoonist languished in seemingly endless conferences, he discovered that “concentrating at meetings was such a hideous pain that the only way to escape was to draw” (Schultz, 1997, p. 38). By sketching those around him at Crocker Bank and Pacific Bell and “just doodling to keep oxygen flowing” to his brain, Adams found that they all “kind of merged into this one little potato guy” (p. 38).
In the earliest stages, Adams incorporated the then unnamed character into his workplace presentations. When co-workers inquired about his name, Adams (1997c) had a "Name the Nerd" contest, but it was his friend Mike Goodwin who conceived "Dilbert" (pp. 9-10). Often questioned about Dilbert's somewhat strange characteristics, such as the lack of a mouth and his curled-up necktie. Adams (1997c) responds, "The best answer I can give is that 'it looks right'" (p. 9). In spite of, and perhaps because of, his odd appearance and quirky traits, Dilbert has achieved international fame. As United Media (1999) describes,

Dilbert loves technology for the sake of technology. In fact, Dilbert loves technology more than people. He's got the social skills of a mousepad and he'd rather surf the Internet than Waikiki (which, considering the physique he developed after years of sitting in front of a PC screen, is a blessing). (p. 6)

At times, Dilbert is truly pitiful even when he has the best of intentions. After Dogbert suggests, "You can create the illusion that you work long hours by leaving voice mails for your boss at 4 a.m.," Dilbert does just that. He phones his boss's voicemail and begins his message with, "Hi, this is Dilbert. It's 4 a.m. and I'm in my underwear and I thought of you...oops...erase...oops..." and a "beep, beep" is indicated. Dogbert asks, "Did you just send an obscene message to your boss?" while Dilbert sighs, "No...I think I hit the group code" (Adams, 1997a, p. 51).

For the most part, Dilbert is completely underwhelmed by his office mates. In one strip, he is pictured at his cubicle thinking to himself, "I could sit here doing nothing" and then mockingly, "Or I could implement a bold quality initiative with the help of my talented and energetic co-workers." Then coming to his senses, Dilbert laughingly says, "I
crack me up” (Adams, 1997b, p. 139). In other instances, Dilbert is self-deprecating, as when he visits a classroom to discuss careers in engineering. He tells the students that, “There’s more to being an engineer than just writing technical memos that nobody reads” and he continues, “Once in a while, somebody reads one. Then you have to find a scapegoat, or use some vacation time and hope it all blows over” (Adams, 1997c, p. 43).

In all, Dilbert is the quintessential nerd. He is symbolic of “everyman,” the personification of a loser in life. Yet, “In spite of all this he’s a likable guy who keeps trying” (United Media, 1999, p. 6), and that is the key to his appeal. As the classic underdog, Dilbert has acquired legions of fans who share his struggles and cheer him on in his quest to conquer the “cubicle-ville” in which so many are domiciled.

Although Dilbert has become larger than life, he is still one of the “little guys.” The character serves as a symbolic representation of office workers everywhere, united in a seemingly universal struggle. Readers identify with Dilbert and feel empathy for his plight, as it is one that they also experience. Created in the conference room. Adams’ potato-shaped doodle has become “the posterboy for the corporately-challenged” (United Media, 1999), a contemporary hero for office workers around the world.

Dogbert

Little more than a round white ball with eyeglasses, an oval-shaped black nose, floppy ears and pointy tail is Dogbert. As Dilbert’s canine sidekick, Dogbert is anything but a docile pet. He is bold, condescending and seeks total world domination of humankind. In “Dilbert,” Dogbert serves as the classic antagonist. Adams developed the character because “Dilbert needed somebody to talk to, but it didn’t seem likely that he would be the kind of guy who had a lot of friends or dates. Dogbert seemed the perfect solution”
Adams' (1997c) own experience with a childhood pet was that his "family was subservient to the dog" (p. 81), and Dogbert evolved accordingly.

As the comic foil with attitude to spare, Dogbert is frequently too smart for his own good. In fact, "Dogbert is sure humans were placed on this earth to amuse him and that life is a big game, which he will win" (United Media, 1999, p. 7). In one strip, Dogbert announces that, "From now on, I will not try to reason with the idiots I encounter. I will dismiss them by waving my paw and saying 'bah'." Dilbert tries to explain, "Just because someone thinks differently from you doesn’t mean he’s an idiot, Dogbert,” to which the canine predictably responds, “Bah” (Adams, 1998, p. 152). While this is one of the most popular "Dilbert" strips, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) remarks on its simplicity, saying “There’s not much to it.”

Through the character, Adams (1997c) is able to convey "a bit of the dark side" of his personality, in that "Dogbert gets to say all the things that I might be thinking but can’t say for fear of retribution" (p. 81). As the syndicator offers,

Genetically, he may be a dog, but Dogbert is no man's best friend. He treats people with disdain, reserving special contempt for Dilbert, who’s no master—or match—for Dogbert. (Although he wouldn’t admit it, if push came to shove, he’d protect the bumbler. And never let him forget it). (United Media, 1999, p. 7)

While their relationship is fraught with a rivalry, it is clear that there is an underlying affection between the two characters. Though the reader may not understand why the two choose to live together, their interaction is a source of consistent amusement.

In Dogbert, the audience enjoys "a cynical, arrogant, conniving little mutt with his paw on the pulse of the absurdity of corporate culture" (United Media, 1999, p. 7).
Dogbert’s extreme intelligence and brutal forthrightness result in biting commentary. In other words, the world of work is so incomprehensible that even a dog knows better.

### The Boss

Referred to only as “The Boss” or “The Pointy-Haired Boss,” this character is the archetypal villain in Dilbert. By intentionally not naming The Boss, Adams believes (1997c) that readers can more easily envision their own bosses and thus be appropriately antagonized (p. 189). With his pointy hair, suit and tie, he is the generic boss. In designing the boss’s hair, Adams says, “Over time it got pointier and pointier and pretty soon I realized it was looking like demonic pointers. It somehow seemed right, so I kept it” (Schultz, 1997, p. 38).

As United Media (1999) says of the character,

He’s every employee’s worst nightmare. He wasn’t born mean and unscrupulous, he worked hard at it. And succeeded. As for stupidity, well, come things are inborn ...

He’s the kind of boss who would not be averse to doing lobotomies on his staff were it not for the exorbitant expense. The Boss is technologically challenged but he stays current on all the latest business trends, even though he rarely understands them.

(p. 8)

However, The Boss should not be misunderstood. The character has evolved over time from being mean and gruff to more non-caring and clueless (Adams, 1997c, p. 189). One “Dilbert” strip shows The Boss explaining, “I’ve been saying for years that ‘employees are our most valuable asset’” but, “It turns out that I was wrong. Money is our most valuable asset. Employees are ninth.” When Wally says, “I’m afraid to ask what came in eighth,” The Boss is only too happy to respond, “Carbon paper” (Adams, 1996a,
p. 53). In The Boss, Adams has created a symbolic representation of incompetent bosses everywhere, and most readers claim to indeed have such supervisors.

Ratbert

A golden-colored animal with bulging eyes, elongated snout and long slim tale, Ratbert is one of Dilbert’s most unique characters. Adams (1997c) describes Ratbert as “an unplanned addition to the Dilbert cast” (p. 129). Ratbert’s existence in the comic world began with a “series of jokes about a gullible lab rat who thought he was being fed massive amounts of food simply because the scientist was a polite host” (p. 129).

According to United Media (1999),

It’s not easy being a member of the detested, loathed rodent family, but Ratbert handles it better than most. Ratbert, unfortunately, is a simpleminded optimist. He wants nothing more than to be loved, but he’s doomed to ratdom which, despite his cheerfulness, makes him an unlikely candidate for affection. His resiliency enables him to continually be the butt of everyone’s jokes.” (p. 10)

To transition Ratbert from the science lab to Dilbert’s world, Adams depicted the character escaping and seeking refuge at home with Dilbert and Dogbert. While he was not accepted immediately, Ratbert’s contagious personality soon won over the pair. As Adams (1997c) says, “Many readers seemed to relate to Ratbert’s pathetic outsider status and his desire to be accepted. I ended up liking the little guy too. So I kept him. Eventually Dilbert and Dogbert kept him too” (p. 129).

While the other characters afford no respect to Ratbert, the charismatic rodent is truly blissful in his ignorance. In one strip, Ratbert announces to Dilbert that, “I’m following you to work” and “I’ll start out as an annoying rodent but with hard work and training I’ll
work my way up to engineer.” As Dilbert sarcastically suggests “a career in marketing,” Ratbert obliviously exclaims, “Is this the cutest little briefcase or what?” (Adams, 1996a, p. 147).

Thus, Ratbert’s role within Dilbert is two-fold. He serves as a recipient of much ill-directed humor for the sake of comedy, and he appeals to anyone who has ever felt like an outsider. The resilient Ratbert, however, rebounds from every situation with great enthusiasm for life and an innocence that is difficult to resist.

**Catbert**

A feline version of Dogbert, Catbert is a round-shaped red-coated creature with spectacles and pointy ears. Adams did not intend to make Catbert a regularly character, and introduced him for a series of strips tormenting Ratbert. As United Media (1999) describes Catbert’s inclusion,

> It was inevitable. Catbert is a typical cat, in the sense that he looks cute but doesn’t care if you live or die. Recently he became the Human Resources Director at Dilbert’s company where he teases employees before downsizing them. (p. 9)

The irony about the character is that he was not named when he began appearing in the strip. Readers fervently responded asking for “more Catbert” and as Adams (1997c) says, “It seems to me that when hundreds of readers spontaneously and unanimously name a character for you, it’s a good idea to keep him” (p. 163).

Catbert serves as a villain within the comic strip, a spiteful Human Resources Director who enjoys tormenting employees as much as playing with catnip. While cats are not typically found in the workplace, it appears that evil Human Resources Directors are common. In a very popular “Dilbert” strip, Catbert stands above employees’ cubicles and
states, "Here's the new org [sic] chart. Maybe you're on it and maybe not." As employees reach for the chart, Catbert says, "Ooh! Nice try! So close. Too bad" and "It's fun to play with them before downsizing them" (Adams, 1997a, p. 24). With a dog and a rat in the cast, it is not surprising that a cat, one of the world's most beloved animals, would logically become the next character in "Dilbert's" repertoire.

Wally

Wally is perhaps the ultimate loser within "Dilbert." A short, stout character with thick-rimmed glasses, a very round nose and just three strands of hair at the back of his head, Wally is no ladies' man. He's sarcastic, inflexible and selfish, and his co-workers might say that those are his good points. Several variations of the Wally-like character can be found in the earliest "Dilbert" strips. The true Wally, however, was conceived through another real-life situation observed by Adams.

One of Adams' co-workers at Pacific Bell was trying to leave the company, but would only do so if he received a lucrative buyout package awarded to downsized employees. Since these packages were only given to employees performing in the lowest ten percent category, Adams (1997c) says, "That created a bizarre incentive for my co-worker to try as hard as he could to become the worst possible employee in order to get money for leaving" (p. 217). As Adams continues, "This wouldn't have been so fun to watch except that this fellow was one of the more brilliant people I've met and he was totally dedicated to his goal" (p. 217).

Wally's entire life revolves around work, where he seems totally disgusted. The character revels in misery, delights in slackness and celebrates his impossibly low standards. Wally is not a happy guy and, in fact,
Dilbert’s colleague and fellow engineer feels put-upon and he wants the world to know about it. Resentment gave way to bitterness years ago and Wally is forever scheming to get revenge on his boss, his boss’s boss and whoever else is standing close by. (United Media, 1999, p. 11)

Wally is never content, but he exhibits no desire to change his life unless it means taking advantage of his current employer.

When Dilbert suggests that they quit to start their own business, Wally asks, “Why quit? We can run our new company from our cubicles and get paid too.” Dilbert questions, “Wouldn’t that be immoral?” while Wally answers, “That’s only an issue for people who aren’t already in hell” (Adams, 1997b, p. 122). In another strip, Wally takes the latest corporate slogan of “Act like you own the company” to extremes by removing office equipment for his own garage sale. When Dilbert asks why he took his new color monitor, Wally aloofly responds, “Yeah, I never used that thing” (Adams, 1997b, p. 140)

Yet, Wally’s willingness to consistently under-perform lends a pathetic quality to him that readers find endearing. The character is symbolic of workers who would rather suffer than make any effort to improve their situations. Wally is indeed the comic embodiment of “misery loves company” and “Dilbert’s” audience loves him.

Alice

A woman in a man’s world, Alice has apparently had a bad day even before she arrives at the office. With her pink suit and triangle-shaped red hair, the workaholic character usually sees red as well and her feisty disposition does not hide this fact. Like Wally, Alice was preceded by a variety of more generic female characters within the strip.
and her character evolved over time. Also similar to Wally, Adams (1997c) based Alice on a real-life friend and co-worker at Pacific Bell (p. 209).

As United Media (1999) describes her, she lives in a constant state of hostility because,

Alice is the only female engineer in Dilbert’s department. She’s habitually overworked. Her cardiovascular system is basically coffee. She has a quick temper when confronted with the idiocy of her co-workers. She does not handle criticism well. (p. 12)

Alice represents the office “stress queen” who lives for drama. She tells it like it is whether or not it offends her co-workers, which it usually does. When Wally mentions that he is thinking of quitting to become a contract employee, Alice offers this supportive advice, “Sleep in doorways so it doesn’t rain on you. The best shopping carts are at ‘Lucky.’ You can make an excellent sign with a black marking pen and a hunk of cardboard” (Adams, 1997b, p. 127). In another strip, Alice angrily asks Dilbert and Wally, “Why is it that I never have time to eat but you men are in here every day at 11:35?” (Adams, 1997a, p. 15). Through Alice, readers enjoy a vicarious thrill by almost saying what they only wish they could to their own co-workers.

Bob, Dawn and Rex, The Dinosaurs

Adams enjoys interjecting a level of fantasy into his comic strip. Thus, when the strip was still struggling in its early years, the cartoonist “thought it couldn’t hurt to throw some dinosaurs in the mix” (United Media, 1999, p. 13). As Adams (1997c) reasons, “Everyone loves dinosaurs, right?” (p. 154). He wrote the dinosaurs into the strip by having Dilbert determine that all dinosaurs could not truly be extinct. In his engineer’s
mind. Dilbert figured that some dinosaurs must still be alive and, if so, that they were hiding. Consequently, it was no surprise when Bob the Dinosaur, tall, green and wearing tennis shoes, emerged from his hiding place behind Dilbert’s couch.

As Adams (1997c) describes his dinosaur trio,

Bob and Dawn were the two dinosaurs living in Dilbert’s house. Later they gave birth to little Rex. Bob is dumb and easily excited. His favorite activity is giving wedgies to people who deserve it. His character is more fun than Dawn or Rex, so you won’t see much of Bob’s family. They continue to hide. (p. 155)

The Dinosaurs live in Dilbert’s home, and occasionally visit him at the office. At one point, Dilbert suggests that Bob would be perfect for an opening in the procurement department and Bob asks, “What does procurement do?” When Dilbert says, “Their job is to prevent us from getting the computers we want,” Bob enthusiastically responds, “Can I hit people with my tail?” (Adams, 1997a, p. 79).

Within the strip, The Dinosaurs’ primary role is one of complete fantasy. They provide a comic hook and are a great source of entertainment for Dilbert and Dogbert. Although their wedgie-receiving office mates are seldom amused, readers definitely enjoy the light-hearted humor provided by The Dinosaurs.

The Elbonians

The Elbonians appear as a duo with matching long coats, tall fur hats, full beards and no visible eyes. They are also depicted wallowing in mud, although some readers think that it is snow. Adams (1997c) says that he cannot darken the mud as he would then lose the contrast with the Elbonians’ clothing and, “It’s one of those bothersome trade-offs that untalented cartoonists have to make” (p. 185).
Always the businessman, Adams (1997c) created the underdeveloped country of Elbonia because it “comes in handy when I want to involve a foreign location in the strip without hurting my sales of Dilbert overseas” (p. 185). Thus, “The Elbonians hail from Elbonia, a small mud-covered fourth-world country that both Dilbert and Dogbert have visited for various reasons” (United Media, 1999, p. 14). The Elbonian characters and the mythic country of Elbonia are “foreign” to Dilbert’s entire audience, and hence cannot offend any reader segment (United Media, 1999, p. 14). While not based on any one country, Elbonia and its citizens instead symbolize a composite foreign land lacking culture and sophistication.

Yet ironically, they often appear to outsmart Dilbert’s employer. In one strip, Dilbert visits the Elbonians to review the software they have been contracted to write for his company. Upon his arrival, the Elbonians offer, “The documentation is written in our own Elbonian language” and ask if this is a problem. Dilbert wryly says, “That’s better than I’d hoped. I was afraid nobody here knew how to write” to which the Elbonians respond, “Writing is easy. Someday we hope to read, too” (Adams, 1997b, p. 135). These characters and their land also provide a change of scenery within the strip and, most of the time, their environs are depicted as being even worse than Dilbert’s usual work surroundings.

**Tina the Tech Writer**

Another woman in a man’s world, Tina’s character was made female to increase gender balance within the strip (Adams, 1997c, p. 179). Tina is a fairly plain character in appearance, distinguished most by a bubble-like hairstyle. Not only is she seldom happy, but she is frequently exasperated and easily offended. Adams illustrates her continual
disgust with distended eyes and a grimacing or shouting mouth. As United Media (1999) positions Tina,

She’s the technical writer in Dilbert’s engineering department. Tina believes any conversation within hearing distance is intended as an insult to her profession and her gender. She strives to maintain her dignity while surrounded by engineers who don’t have a proper respect for her. (p. 15)

Adams (1997c) created Tina to vent his own frustration at people who take offense to everything that is said (p. 179). When Dilbert mentions that “The statue of ‘Venus de Milo’ has no arms,” Tina retorts, “Oh, I get it. You’re saying that women can’t lift heavy objects” (Adams, 1997a, p. 93). In another strip, Dogbert asks Tina, “What do you think of the movie ‘Thelma and Louise’?” and Tina responds, “I know what you’re trying to say. You think all women are bad drivers. That’s really the point of the movie, isn’t it?” Dilbert again counters, “The ‘Three Stooges’?” and Tina angrily asks, “Why are all of the documentaries about men?” (Adams, 1997a, p. 93). Dogbert particularly enjoys annoying the volatile Tina, otherwise known as “the brittle tech writer” (p. 93).

While Tina was introduced as a short-term character, she attracted quite a following and now appears as a semi-regular within the strip. Similar to Alice, Tina provides readers with a cathartic character who speaks her mind. In contrast to Alice, who typically makes astute observations, Tina overreacts to most situations. Her interaction with other characters is fueled by her propensity to twist whatever is said into the most negative form possible, and to respond accordingly. Tina is symbolic of the always offended co-worker who is quickly upset and not easily diffused, and every office seems to have such an employee.
Liz

After many years as a bachelor, Dilbert became attached for the first time in 1994. Liz, a big-haired blonde and engineer at another company, was created as Dilbert’s girlfriend. The pair were introduced at an adult co-ed soccer game, where “Liz would commonly use the back of Dilbert’s head to bank shots into the goal” (United Media, 1999, p. 16). While women readers were largely in favor of Dilbert’s new relationship, male readers were split. As Adams (1997c) relates, men in essence said, “I don’t think Dilbert should get lucky until I do” (p. 143).

On occasion, Liz has used her intelligence to take advantage of the title character. In one “Dilbert,” she tells him, “I built a spreadsheet to compare our relative qualities. I’m afraid I’m twenty percent too good for you. We must stop dating.” When Dilbert finds a mathematical error in the program, he is able to even the score and Liz later confides to Dogbert that it was all a ploy because “My last batch of flowers is wilting” (Adams, 1997a, p. 28).

Liz, however, has since met her demise. As Adams (1997c) explains, “I’m not very good at drawing attractive female characters … And she never really clicked with me or the readers, so I eventually gave up on her and had her break up with Dilbert. I don’t know if she’ll be back” (p. 144). Given the cartoonist’s propensity for appealing to his readers’ interests, it is not likely that Liz will return. However, if a new girlfriend is introduced in the future, she is certain to serve as a symbol of hope for single men and women everywhere searching for a romantic partner. In the meantime, Dilbert’s love life consists of a variety of entertaining dating blunders that cause the hero much angst while bringing readers another familiar scenario with which they can identify.
Phil, the Prince of Insufficient Light

When Adams (1997c) wanted to bring Satan into the Dilbert cast, his syndication company advised him against doing so as it might “make me look like a Satan-worshiping cartoonist” (p. 169). Yet, Adams believed that a devilish character belonged in the strip. If work is indeed hell, as so many seem to lament, then this concept is not much of a stretch. Through compromise, Phil became that character. Dressed in a red suit with matching cape, horn-topped hood, and rounded tail, he carries a large spoon in place of the customary pitchfork. As United Media (1999) describes,

Phil, The Prince of Insufficient Light, was introduced in 1989 as the ruler of Heck (for sinners whose transgressions aren’t serious enough for Hell). He pops up about once a year to impose mild sanctions for minor sins. For example, once he punished Dilbert by making him eat lunch with the accountants. (p. 17)

Whenever Phil detects workplace violations such as stealing office supplies or breaking minor rules, he appears and announces, “I summon all the demons and trolls of hell to come forth and punish you now!” (Adams, 1996a, p. 28). While Phil is somewhat devilish, he is not to be taken too seriously except by the employees who come under his scrutiny within the strip. In retrospect, Adams (1997c) admits. “The stripped-down, compromised version of Satan was much more interesting than the real thing would have been. So I’m quite pleased with the result” (p. 169).

Readers quickly noted that Phil resembled The Pointy-Haired Boss in facial characteristics, and wondered if the two were related. Adams (1997c) responds that, “In truth, I just can’t draw that many different faces, but I liked the suggestion that they might be brothers. And so it was revealed that in fact they are” (p. 169). Thus, Phil serves as a
humorous incarnation of the devil that is eerily similar in appearance to The Boss, a comparison that readers enjoy.

Asok the Intern

Every office has an intern, and when "Dilbert" did not have one, reader interns wrote to Adams requesting such an addition to the cast. Hence came the debut of Asok, an intern from India who receives "all the disrespect that comes with the job. He hasn’t had his ego and optimism crushed yet, but it’s only a matter of time" (United Media, 1999, p. 18). In one "Dilbert" strip, Asok apologetically assists Wally, saying "I am only a lowly intern, but I see an obvious solution to your problem." As he shows Wally, "Just click here ... clear your buffers and initialize the link ... now use this code patch for the memory leak" and then Asok realizes, "This is funny if you consider that your salary is twice as much as mine." Wally dryly responds, "I’m laughing on the inside" (Adams, 1997c, p. 177).

Asok also provided Adams (1997c) with a "good way to tiptoe into the diversity water and test the temperature" (p. 175). The cartoonist explains that he typically avoids racial diversity in "Dilbert’s" main cast "because I only like characters who have huge, gaping character flaws. The world is far too sensitive to let me get away with a highly flawed minority member" (p. 175).

Although Asok’s single flaw is a temporary lack of experience, Adams says that he has been "flamed to a crisp" (Adams, 1997c, p. 175) for portraying people from India in an allegedly negative light. While this may prevent Adams from further venturing into the issue of racial diversity, he asserts, "I’m keeping Asok, flames and all. And if I get any more complaints I think I’ll turn him into a drug smuggler" (p. 175).
Thus, Asok also serves two primary purposes within “Dilbert.” First, he is representative of millions of overworked and mistreated interns who pay the price for their learning experiences. Often, these interns are gifted with knowledge and common sense that far exceeds that of their superiors, and the inequities are frustratingly apparent. Second, he is the first character incorporated into the strip that came from an actual foreign country, and thus brings the beginning of cultural diversity to “Dilbert’s” workplace.

The World’s Smartest Garbage Man

Dilbert’s garbage man is tall, round-bellied, and appropriately dressed in a simple uniform and hat. As he is also known, this “sanitation engineer” is a mysterious character who has inexplicable knowledge of all subjects from science to philosophy. He shows up occasionally to solve impossibly complex problems for Dilbert or Dogbert” (United Media, 1999, p. 19). Not only is he The World’s Smartest Garbage Man, he is “the world’s smartest human” (Adams, 1997c, p. 139).

Adams (1997c) created this character because “I like putting incongruous things together” (p. 139). Although his decision to apply himself to work as a garbage man is not explained, his ability to outsmart Dilbert is a source of intense irritation to the title character. In one strip, the garbage man knocks on Dilbert’s door and says, “Pardon me, sir, but I couldn’t help noticing these equations in your garbage” and, “I took the liberty of correcting a few quantum calculations.” When Dilbert asks, “Gosh. Why are you a garbage man?” the retort is appropriately, “I think the question is ‘Why are you an engineer?’” (Adams, 1997c, p. 138). Like several other characters, the Garbage Man
appeals to readers’ sense of fantasy and the concept that anyone, regardless of position, can be a genius.

**Dilbert’s Mom**

A more recent addition to the strip, Dilbert’s mother, also known as “The Dilmom,” is one of Adams’ (1997c) favorite characters (p. 151). Introduced in 1995, she is nearly identical to Dilbert in appearance. Dilmom, however, has a rounded mound of blue-gray hair and wears a dress with a ruffled collar. It is implied that Dilbert’s Mom is responsible for his technological aptitude.

As Adams describes her, “On the outside she’s a cookie-baking, fifties sort of woman. But she reveals in small glimpses an incredible depth of technical skill and understanding” (p. 151). When Dilbert tries to sell him Mom the latest technology, she knowingly asks, “Why would I need a primary rate circuit? I’ve already got a frame relay drop to my web server in the sewing room.” With a sigh, Dilbert realizes that, “This is going to be a tough sale” (Adams, 1997c, p. 153).

In Dilbert’s mother, Adams has created the classic doting mom. While she loves her son, she also nags him often. Moreover, although Dilbert mostly finds his mother to be amusing, there are times when she tests his patience. Dilmom is a contemporary mother who is content with domestic duties, but capable of much more. Frequently, she assists Dilbert with complex ideas and suggestions for work. Dilmom represents a composite of today’s mother figure, complemented with a touch of humor.

**Dilbert’s Dad**

Readers have never seen Dilbert’s father. Although he is mentioned in the comic strip, his appearance has yet to transpire. Apparently, “He has been at the all-you-can-eat
restaurant in the local mall for years” (Adams, 1997c, p. 151), from where Dilbert and his Mom have yet to retrieve him. As Dilmom explains to Liz, “It’s really different around here since we lost Dilbert’s dad.” Liz asks when he died, and Dilbert says, “He’s not dead. We lost him at the mall, Christmas of ’92.” Liz asks, “Shouldn’t you be looking for him?” and Dilmom retorts, “I said it’s different, not worse” (Adams, 1997c, p. 152).

Adams says that, “Dilbert gets his brains from his mother’s side and his literalness from his dad. Put them together and you have a perfect engineer” (p. 151). At this point, it would seem that Dilbert’s Dad is not particularly missed. His only role appears to be in further explaining an aspect of Dilbert’s personality, although the future may tell readers more.

Carol

As The Boss’s secretary, Carol is the nightmare sitting firmly in between employees and their superior. She is a scowling woman with cone-shaped hair, round earrings and beady eyes. Adams (1997c) describes Carol as the “‘secretary from hell’ who hates her job and finds perverse joy in making everyone within a two-mile radius suffer” (p. 227). Mean, sadistic and unflinching, Carol does not care why anyone wants to see The Boss, nor will they get any help from her. Carol’s favorite question is, “Are you finished annoying me yet?” (Adams, 1998, p. 95).

In fact, Carol is quite busy with The Boss, “training him to be helpless” as “part of my master plan time eliminate him” (Adams, 1998, p. 246). While Adams (1997c) says “She’s a composite of all the bad experiences I’ve ever had with any secretary, and there have been many” (p. 227), it appears that readers have also had many similar encounters.
Carol is the wicked secretary, the insurmountable obstacle that further convolutes workers' communication with their superiors.

**Ted the Generic Guy**

Ted plays a variety of roles within "Dilbert," and serves as a convenient generic character in many situations. As Adams (1997c) wryly observes, “Maybe you’ve noticed, but I don’t have a wide artistic range” (p. 245). Hence, whenever the cartoonist has a very small part within the strip to fill, “It often ends up looking like the same guy” (p. 245). While sometimes known by different names, the generic Ted character usually receives few lines, much ridicule, and is quickly sacrificed to layoffs and other mishaps.

On occasion, Ted is the source of annoyance to his co-workers, as in one strip on strategic vacation planning. When Dilbert asks Ted to explain an item on the agenda, Ted responds, “No. I’m on vacation” and “I take my vacations in ten minute increments during regular work days. That way I can avoid assignments.” When Dilbert retorts, “Your ten minutes are up,” Ted responds, “Cough, Cough! Whoa, I’d better take some sick time” (Adams, 1996a, p. 120). Given his generic status, Ted can be used interchangeably when convenient to represent a wide array of typical employees.

**Miscellaneous Critters**

New characters are often introduced to the strip to represent individuals or entire groups, company divisions or departments. As Adams (1997c) relates,

Some people remind me of particular animals. I love to substitute the actual animal for human beings in the strip because it sends such a clear message. Everyone understands what I mean when I represent the accounting department as trolls or the...
marketing guy as a weasel. When Dilbert's blind date turns out to be a literal dog it seems oddly familiar. (p. 231)

For instance, Dilbert is shown hanging from his feet while an accounting troll reprimands him for spending a meager ten dollars a day on meals while traveling. The troll states, "The travel guidelines require you to stun a pigeon with your briefcase on the way up to the hotel then fry it up on your travel iron." When Dilbert says, "I tried . . . but it was taking too long," the troll suggests, "Try the 'wool' setting" (Adams, 1997a, p. 91).

In order for these characters to have recognition with the audience, readers must be able to identify them. Thus, Adams uses many Miscellaneous Critters to tap into common perceptions and stereotypes that ring true with readers. These characters cleverly illustrate Adams' sense of humor, and they convey a message in a familiar manner far more astutely than words alone could.

Characterization Summary

In totality, "Dilbert" combines an interesting and varied cast of characters, with each contributing to the comic strip's overall communicative chemistry. Rhetoric within the strip consists mainly of a continuing dialogue between title character Dilbert and members of the primary and supporting casts. As a whole, the characters create a comic world that is nonetheless based in reality and, as such, reflects many aspects of communication that people encounter on a daily basis in their lives. With "Dilbert's" expanded repertoire, Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) says of the characters, "There are enough of them now that everyone can map themselves or someone they know into one."
Again, parallels can be drawn between “Dilbert” and other classic comics. As Lamb (1990) says of “Doonesbury,” “It is a daily catalogue of popular culture with characters who have different philosophies and motives, who sometimes react and sometimes question but who mostly just go along for the ride—as we do in our world” (p. 114). In “Dilbert,” the characters have a wide array of background and intentions, they at times respond and ponder, and yet remain for the most part in the status quo. Primarily due to Adams’ efforts to communicate regularly with readers, he is also able to continually measure the popularity and success of a particular character, adjusting inclusion and exposure within the strip accordingly.

Each character within “Dilbert” functions as a symbolic representation of an entity known to readers. These characters are, in many cases, composites created from Adams’ real-life experiences, and the audience immediately identifies with them. As Lamb (1990) observes, “several characters of the ‘Doonesbury’ ensemble have their roots in reality” (p. 117). This mutual quality is unquestionably paramount in the success enjoyed by the two strips. Certainly, their basis in real-life gives the characters a greater dimension of believability.

Still, other characters in “Dilbert” have their roots in fantasy. They offer more light-hearted entertainment and at times, provide a sense of the ridiculous. Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) confesses to having “fantasies in my mind that are so improbable.” Yet, it is a theme that readers embrace because it allows a distraction from their everyday lives. In a world of office foibles that are absurd but true, characters based in fantasy somehow seem appropriate. As Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) explains, “They all have to be grounded in something that’s real or that you can
relate to. In order to keep it interesting so that you’re not actually reading your life, you need something that reminds you of your life but that’s different.”

In comics, “Their actors must be caricatures if they are to be recognized” (Eisner, 1994, p. 5), so whether the characters are based in reality or fantasy, their attributes are greatly exaggerated to increase levels of recognition. Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) describes his creative process similarly, saying “Start with grounding and exaggerate—a little change brings it out of their world and into a fantasy world.” As Turner (1977) asserts, “Even strips which strive for realism ... are constrained by the limitations of the artist’s pen, high speed printing presses, and cheap paper, therefore barring it from the photographic realism possible in many other media” (p. 26). Thus, fantasy is an integrated component of even the most realistic comics.

Individually, each character within “Dilbert” serves as a symbolic representation of the workplace, clearly distinguished through the use of clever rhetoric. Collectively, the characters represent the contemporary office staff, along with a touch of fantasy added for purposes of humor and entertainment. Most readers seem to recognize others in the comic strips, but not themselves. Adams (1997a) wittily portrays this irony in a strip entitled “The 7 Habits of Highly Defective People,” in which point seven states that you are such a person if you “Think the comics are not about you” (p. 44). Through “Dilbert,” readers enjoy a clever combination of characterization that provides both a sense of, and an escape from, their reality.
The Artistic Style

Since “Dilbert” achieved mainstream popularity, creator Scott Adams has attracted almost as much attention as his title character. As the brainchild behind “Dilbert,” Adams is somewhat of a non-traditional cartoonist who has nonetheless developed his own style into a unique product with international appeal. While typically artistic technique has much to do with a cartoonist’s success, this was not necessarily the case for Adams. As Eisner (1994) offers of comics, “Obviously the skill of the artist has a great deal to do with the product” (p. 5), but Adams does not consider this to be his strong suit. Neither do those who have criticized Adams’ artistic ability, suggesting that he “should invest in some art lessons” (McNichol, 1995, p. D1).

As a student at Hartwick College in Oneonta, New York, Adams received the lowest grade in his drawing class (Cawley, 1996, p. 99). His works were rejected by Playboy, The New Yorker and many others, until United Feature Syndicate offered him a deal (p. 99). The cartoonist, however, is not fazed by such criticism. Adams admits, “I’ve drawn a little better over the years,” but, “Not much” (McNichol, 1995, p. D1). When looking at the evolution of “Dilbert” through the years, a refinement of style is evident in the illustrations, but they are in essence quite similar to their origins.

Although Eisner (1994) says, “Drawing style and skill of draftsmanship have an effect on the transmission of the idea and on the impact of its content” (p. 5), Adams’ approach actually seems to correlate with his message. While the “Dilbert” characters are drawn quite simplistically, their premise was based not on art, but on business. Comic art, in fact, is “often admired for its narrative simplicity” (Abbott, 1986, p. 171). Since “Dilbert” developed from doodling efforts during meetings, Adams admits, “I never intended him to...
be a syndicated cartoon, so I didn’t realize at the time what I was creating” (Schultz, 1997, p. 38).

The fundamental style of Adams’ drawings may be very consistent with his subject of satire. Indeed, “Some find the minimalist sketches of nerdy Dilbert and his spherical and sarcastic canine sidekick, Dogbert, perfectly suited to stark stories of corporate alienation” (McNichol, 1995, p. D1). In “Dilbert,” the message seems to be more important than the illustrations. This is in keeping with Abbott’s (1986) theory that the storytelling aspect of comics supersedes the pictorial due to the medium’s emphasis on narrative (p. 176).

Adams (personal communication, March 22, 1999) describes his “great accidental discovery” that readers will “substitute recognition for cleverness.” He continues to say of “Dilbert” fans, “Most fall into the category of just looking for something they recognize and they will tolerate a far lower standard of artwork.” Given “Dilbert’s” immense popularity, it would appear that Adams is indeed an effective storyteller and that his illustrations are well suited to his message.

As a successful entrepreneur, Adams relishes the opportunity to make a living doing something he enjoys. It is not all business for Adams, though, who says of his cartooning, “It’s creativity in its perfect form. You’re creating something that will live forever from nothing” (“Quick takes,” 1999, p. 2J). Still, one of the most interesting aspects about the comic strip is that while everyone claims to know someone just like Dilbert and the other characters, no one admits to being one of them. Not surprisingly, it would seem that people more readily identify perceived flaws in others than in themselves.

To Adams’ credit, these recognizable qualities are depicted entirely through his line drawings and witty dialogue. Their identifiable nature shows that “Dilbert” is effective in
rhetorically reflecting workers around the world, expertly portraying them through its cast
of characters and use of discourse. By skillfully combining his characters and artistic style
with his message, Scott Adams has succeeded in creating a uniquely contemporary comic
strip with universal appeal.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Scott Adams clearly knows a thing or two about the wrong way to run a business. After all, he has profitably mined his years of experience as a midlevel cubicle dweller in corporate America for material to create his immensely popular "Dilbert" cartoon strip. It is a world that millions of readers recognize, a place where frustrated workers use cynicism and sarcasm to defend against misguided managers . . .

—Adam Bryant, The New York Times

These days, something isn’t validated or considered serious until it’s been harpooned in a Dilbert cartoon.

—Michael Hammer, Author of Reengineering the Corporation, The New York Times

As Turner (1977) clarifies in her studies, the intention of this thesis was “neither to argue that comic strips elicit clearly demonstrable attitude changes in their audiences, nor to portray them as meek echoings of current public opinion” (p. 24). Rather, this thesis applied the methods proposed by Turner to an examination of the comic strip “Dilbert” to ascertain a rhetorical perspective of the comic’s effectiveness in reflecting contemporary organizational communication. In keeping with Turner’s work, the thesis sought to demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between the comic and society, thus illustrating the interactive relationship between the medium and its audience.

By utilizing a three-pronged approach in this study, it was shown that “Dilbert” is a viable form of contemporary rhetoric that mirrors the society from which it emerged.

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However, its rhetorical properties are qualified in that the comic strip is not a literal reflection, but a more figurative representation. The findings of this study provide a sound understanding of the comic as a unique form of discourse that originated as a function of its surrounding culture. While specific to the study of “Dilbert,” these results are helpful in determining several general observations pertaining to the relationship between comic strips and society.

**Historical Perspective**

In developing this case study, two primary areas of historical precedence were analyzed in relation to “Dilbert”: 1) Developments in comic strips; and 2) Significant trends in organizational communication. As expected, both were shown to be strong contributing factors in establishing a foundation for the comic strip.

The research demonstrated that comics have evolved through the years into a viable rhetorical form with far-reaching implications. While traditionally thought of as more entertaining than influential, comics have become increasingly sophisticated and have thus achieved a greater sense of recognition and respect. Primarily because of their entertainment value, comic strips are extremely pervasive within society, making their potential for persuasion even stronger. The simplistic aesthetic qualities of comics, along with their marriage of words and pictures, allow for increased readability, flexibility and translation to a worldwide audience.

All of these factors combine to show that comics have attained a strong role within society, one that is likely to continue and quite possibly expand. As the research illustrated, the most popular comics of any era serve as a sign of the times by reflecting
their respective cultures. Thus, socially representative comic strips are a significant form of rhetoric with the power to appeal to and capture the masses. In all probability, future comic strips will continue to hone in on this culturally-centered focus in an attempt to reach the popular success achieved by “Dilbert.”

In terms of organizational communication, studies by scholarly researchers and features by mainstream journalists established patterns that led to the current corporate climate. These trends provided both the impetus and the environment for “Dilbert.” As corporate dysfunction and worker disgruntlement reached all-time highs, the subjects received extensive media coverage worldwide. They also provided a unique source of topical matter for a comic strip, and Scott Adams was the first to discover and incorporate this concept on a regular basis. By appealing to a commonplace concern with a dose of humor, as opposed to the harsh realities presented in most media, Adams created a distinct niche within the funny pages.

“Dilbert’s” widespread popularity evidences the strong potential for the medium to both reflect and influence the society from which it emerged. For instance, the comic strip would not have had anywhere near the impact it did if workers were not living in a cubicle culture. Hence, it can also be said that societal trends are significant factors in predicting the potential success and longevity of the medium. Comics such as “Dilbert” are indeed manifestations of their environment. As comic strips continue to evolve as rhetorical forms, the creative efforts that succeed are likely to be those that most skillfully incorporate societal issues within their panels.
The Message

Research findings indicate that the comic strip's message, rather than narrative, is the more dominant factor in attracting and maintaining an audience. Comics must convey their message quickly, succinctly and effectively. Thus, the message conveyed in popular comics provides a window into the minds of readers in regard to their interests.

In addition to the previously mentioned historical precedents, three primary factors emerged in creating a receptive audience for "Dilbert's" message. First, Adams writes about what he knows best, and what his readers can identify with, from experience personally acquired in the world he now satirizes. Second, the cartoonist paid particular attention to his audience's needs, by soliciting e-mail feedback about matters featured in the strip and developing the comic accordingly. Third, Adams recognized and capitalized on a void created by the retirements of several legendary cartoonists in a short time period.

By examining the topical content featured within "Dilbert," it was determined that the comic strip is quite successful in ridiculing many elements of contemporary organizational life. These include such issues as cubicles, bad bosses, management fads, technology, time at work, downsizing and corporate double talk, all of which qualify as very generalized issues with mass appeal. The comic strip also frequently targets more specialized areas of interest, which might attract specific segments of the population. Examples of dialogue from "Dilbert" illustrated the comic's expertise in chronicling these issues through clever discourse.

However, there are many important subjects within organizational communication that "Dilbert" does not discuss. These include sexual harassment, discrimination of any
type, employee disabilities and unfair labor practices. As highly controversial and sensitive issues, these matters already receive extensive popular media coverage.

Thus, Adams maintains “Dilbert’s” uniqueness by relying on issues that are strongly identifiable to the masses, or to targeted segments, while avoiding topics that could be too offensive or on the verge of over-saturation. In essence, the cartoonist focuses on all that is absurd about business, and has much from which to draw. This results in a comic that provides a cathartic release to its audience. “Dilbert” is real, but then again, it is not; it maintains a comical view of reality that is infinitely more desirable.

There is no doubt that Adams’ savvy as a businessman and entrepreneur contributes strongly to “Dilbert’s” success. The cartoonist is a shrewd marketer who displays great proficiency in expanding the comic strip’s realm. Adams has skillfully tapped into a market niche and developed a spokesperson for the times and “everyman” in “Dilbert.” He has created a comic that is a metaphor for all that is wrong in the world of work. While the strip does not mirror every issue within organizational communication, it does present a strong symbolic representation worthy of mass recognition. Using “Dilbert” as an example, it would appear that comic strips achieve popularity not only for what their message conveys, but also for what it does not.

The Characters and the Artistic Style

The research findings indicated that comic strip characters are imperative for their abilities to bring the narrative to life. They are the vehicles through which the rhetoric is conveyed, and readers personally identify with them as they regularly follow the exploits
of their favorites. Often, these characters attain status as beloved cultural icons. Thus, they are an integral component to the comic strip.

In "Dilbert," it was demonstrated that Adams has developed a cast of extremely popular characters. Each character serves as a symbolic representation of a "typical" office type, and again, the cartoonist's personal experiences are incorporated. Adams has continually diversified Dilbert's repertoire so that almost everyone can identify with or recognize a character, and this is one of the keys to the strip's success. Accordingly, individual characters have particular physical and rhetorical attributes that help to define their personalities and appeal.

Many of "Dilbert's" characters are based on reality, while others are highly exaggerated for purposes of fantasy. While at times bordering on the ridiculous, it is a dichotomy that accomplishes a valid purpose. This technique allows Adams to present realistic situations, somewhat softened by fantasy, within the strip. Like other forms of popular culture, comics provide a homogenized depiction of the world that the audience finds far more palatable.

In terms of artistic style, Adams is a non-traditional cartoonist. He is trained in business rather than art, which works to his advantage in a medium that has been shown to be more narratively based. Moreover, it appears that Adams' simple illustrative style correlates well with his subject matter. The cartoonist has changed the face of comic strip history with a unique style and approach. It can be suggested that Adams has paved the way for a new generation of cartoonists.
Conclusion and Recommendations for Further Study

As Adams (1997) asserts, "I wasn't satisfied that Dilbert allowed me to make a comfortable living. I turned my affirmations toward making it the most successful comic on the planet" (p. 250). Indeed, "Dilbert" is today's most popular comic strip around the globe and Adams has become the most prominent cartoonist of current times. With a daily readership of more than 150 million, the comic strip has enormous potential for rhetorical influence as it becomes increasingly ingrained within popular culture.

Quite simply, Adams created a formula for "Dilbert" that works. He is a non-traditional cartoonist for an era that defies tradition. Adams is a skillful rhetorician, a clever marketer, and a savvy businessman. He writes about what he knows best, and keeps his finger firmly on the pulse of the corporate world. "Dilbert" is a collaborative effort between Adams and his audience, the epitome of the interactive approach suggested by Turner (1977).

While the comic strip presents a satirized depiction of real-life workplace absurdities, it is not a completely accurate reflection. "Dilbert" focuses primarily on the trials and tribulations of workers everywhere, with enough fantasy so that readers are transported into a more entertaining realm. The comic strip is more of a figurative interpretation than a literal one, which in all probability actually expands its capabilities as a unique form of discourse.

This concept is perhaps best stated by sociologist and author Arthur Berger (1971), who notes, "Comics are not a perfect mirror of society. They do not reflect American society as it is . . . but this applies, in fact, to all art forms" (p. 167). Along with other vehicles within popular culture, comic strips present a creative depiction of their subjects.
that emphasizes recognition and entertainment over reality. As Turner (1977) suggests, “The comic is a form of ‘controlled reality,’ presenting a calculated view of the world” (p. 28).

In terms of “Dilbert’s” ability to change the society it lampoons, the long-term effects remain to be seen. The comic strip has made an impact in more subtle ways. For example, some companies deliberately strive not to become fodder for the comic strip. The prevalence of the term “to be ‘Dilberted’” has become commonplace in office vocabulary. More popular comic strips are used as communication in meetings, on memos, and at times, to prove a particular point much more succinctly than words alone could.

Yet, it is not likely that the comic will ever alter the corporate culture enough to eliminate its own material. The bottom line is that employee dissatisfaction is high, and most people do not enjoy their jobs. However, the majority of these people seem to suffer from complacency or endure their jobs purely due to economic necessity. Most are not going to make the effort to change their situation for the better.

Ironically, these are also the very people frequently chronicled within today’s favorite comic strip. Moreover, it is doubtful that companies will ever be able to adjust their policies and procedures enough to make employees content. There is a strong likelihood, however, that many corporations will at least make an attempt not to end up featured in “Dilbert.”

In summary, this case history of “Dilbert” provided an in-depth examination of the immensely popular comic strip. This approach allowed the examiner to determine key causative factors in its success, as well as important narrative and illustrative components.
By adapting the methods proposed by Turner (1977), this thesis completed a modern study of comic strips that supported Turner's findings. Further insight was garnered relative to the rhetorical dimensions of comic strips in a changing society and how they may continue to evolve over time.

These research findings can be applied to future research efforts investigating the persuasive power of comics. For the purposes of ongoing research, several areas of examination are recommended. These areas are both specific to, and generalized from, this study of "Dilbert."

First, it is suggested that future studies continue to analyze "Dilbert's" popularity, effectiveness and longevity. While the comic strip is currently the most successful in the world, it will be interesting to monitor its long-term viability. In addition, the strip can be reviewed as it continues to develop in terms of its message content and characterization, to measure its accuracy in reflecting the changing times. There is also a danger that "Dilbert" could at some point suffer from overexposure or obsolescence, thus providing additional aspects of further study.

Second, researchers in organizational communication may embark on studies of the actual effects of "Dilbert" in the workplace. Such research could examine the conscious changes and more subtle influences that the comic strip may have. While it would be difficult to isolate these variables from other contributors, it is within reason to expect that the comic is making some sort of impact. Further studies of the comic strip might also provide insight into this area, given the reciprocal relationship between comics and culture.
Third, researchers should study the influence of Scott Adams on future generations of cartoonists. Adams has created an original style in cartooning that may or may not be emulated by others. Given that Adams was inspired by classic cartoonists including Charles Schulz and has now created his own comic legacy, it is likely that his tremendous success will in turn inspire others to follow in his footsteps.

And finally, future studies should continue to analyze the evolution of comics as a genre. While this study hoped to make a contribution to the scholarly body of knowledge on comics, it is but one step in their history. Thus, the progression of the medium can be chronicled, evaluated, and compared through future studies of comic strips. Such research will provide extended insight into comics as a viable, influential, and significant form of rhetoric within popular culture.
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