

HOW I MET YOUR MOTHER

Commodity Analysis

„*True story, bro!*“ Who would not know this quote, so typical for Barney Stinson, one of the main characters of American sitcom *How I Met Your Mother*. This 9-seasons' comedy series has become one of the cult sitcoms that spread globally and its characters are therefore known nearly all around the world. The show was first screened in September 2005 and its last episode of total of 208 came in March 2014. All of them were originally screened on public American broadcast TV network CBS. The producer of the show is Twentieth Century Fox Television and the distributor is Twentieth Television, the syndication arm of the company above.

Plot of the show was inspired by lives of creators and producers of the show: Carter Bays and Craig Thomas. The series is about Ted Mosby, architect living in New York, and his four friends. The framing of the story is Ted's telling to his kids about how he met their mother, actually it is about him and his friends enjoying living in New York and experiencing typical things for young people: relationships, work or family struggles.

The main character is inspired by Carter Bays while the characters of Marshall and Lily (stable couple in the show) are based on Craig Thomas and his wife Rebecca. The actors of the main characters are: Josh Radnor (Ted Mosby), Jason Segel (Marshall Eriksen), Cobie Smulders (Ronib Scherbatsky), Neil Patrick Harris (Barney Stinson) and Alyson Hannigan (Lily Aldrin). The series as well as individual actors won several awards (Emmy, People's Choice Awards).

However, some critics and spectators of the show note, that *How I Met Your Mother* (HIMYM) has many similar characteristics with other cult sitcom *Friends*. It is set in New York, the main characters are similar and also some of their experience and stories resemble. Although they have a point, we can similarly compare many sitcoms together, as the genre is very specific.

Sitcom originally started as a 15-minute situational comedy on the radio. With the arrival of television in 1930s, the creators slowly moved some of the favorite radio

situational comedies over to the screen. One of the first truly significant TV sitcoms were The Goldbergs or I Love Lucy.¹

*„The key to a successful sitcom is variety and character-driven humor like the running gag or inside joke. The running gag is a funny situation or line of dialogue that reappears in an episode or series of episodes.“*² Clear example of this is the Barney Stinson’s quote with which we opened our paper. In sitcom, some part of scenes is usually shot in studio in front of a live public and their reactions (mainly laughter) are added to the series. One episode of a sitcom is usually around 22 minutes long³, which is quiet a short period of time in which the creators have to develop an individual story, but at the same time it must fit to the general plot of the series. This requires at least partial simplification and standardization of characters, so typical for sitcoms. It is also very important than the characters and their experiences are relatable to spectators. This is why the characters of HIMYM are very different, although they are all the same age as the sitcom is aiming on young adults.

As we introduced the context of HIMYM, now we would like to present the production and distribution background of the sitcom we chose to analyze. We have already mentioned that the producer of the show is Twentieth Century Fox Television and the distributor is Twentieth Television. Notable shows produced by 20th Century Fox Television apart from HIMYM include M*A*S*H, Glee, Modern Family or The Simpsons.

Twentieth Century Fox Television is part of a company 20th Century Fox, and a production arm of the Fox Television Group. 20th Century Fox is one of the biggest movie studios having a 16,2% market share in US.

Both of the mentioned are owned by Rupert Murdoch's 21st Century Fox. Multinational group 21st Century Fox is active in these branches: Cable Network Programming, Filmed Entertainment, Television and Direct Broadcast and Satellite TV.⁴ *“Reaching more than one billion subscribers in 170-plus countries, our core brands are FOX, National Geographic, FOX News, FOX Sports, FX and STAR India.“*⁵

¹ METZ, Winifred Fordham. Undated. How Sitcoms Work. Howstuffworks.com. Available from: <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/sitcom.htm>

² The same source

³ Originally it was 30 minutes, but gradually the length became shorter because of commercials.

⁴ <https://www.21cf.com/>

⁵ 21CF. 2016 – Annual report. Available from here: https://www.21cf.com/sites/default/files/uploaded/investors/annual-reports/2016_21cf_annual_report.pdf

In the last fiscal year, ending in June 2016, company's total segment operating income before depreciation and amortization was \$6.60 billion on total revenue of \$27.33 billion.⁶

The owner and a chairman of 21st Century Fox, Rupert Murdoch, is one of the world's most important and influential media moguls. Beside others he owns titles as Fox News, Sunday Times, National Geographic and The Wall Street Journal. He got into media business thanks to his father, a former war correspondent. Rupert inherited a newspaper at the age of 22 after his father had passed away.⁷ His current real time net worth is \$12.1 billion according to Forbes⁸ and he was considered the 35th most influential person in the world in 2016 while being the 33rd richest American.

As we can see, *How I Met Your Mother* was produced and distributed with a truly powerful companies behind itself. They are part of a well-established U.S. media structure, which has only several dominant companies operating on the market. According to Doyle (2013), we can call it an oligopoly. *"If there are only a few sellers in a market but some competition exists for their products, either homogenous or differentiated, the market structure is described as an oligopoly."*⁹ Oligopoly is the most common type of market structure that the media firms operate in.¹⁰

The series was originally aired on CBS attracting around 8 million viewers per every episode.¹¹ After the primary release, there were more TVs syndicating the show. Broadcasting syndication is a process of licensing of the rights to broadcast television/radio programs by more TV/radio stations. There are a variety of syndication types, including movie packages and public broadcasting, although perhaps the two most common, and lucrative, are first-run and off-network (re-runs). These are also the ones *How I Met Your Mother* and other series works with.¹²

HIMYM was quite successful in gaining syndication contracts, even though the ratings of the series have not been outstanding. It was for a couple of reasons, wrote Kimball in 2008. *"The audience typically skews younger and there aren't too many sitcoms that will be offered in syndication in the near future. Though sitcoms aren't in big demand*

⁶ https://www.21cf.com/sites/default/files/uploaded/earnings/q4_2016_er_final.pdf

⁷ <https://www.forbes.com/profile/rupe-rt-murdoch/?list=billionaires>

⁸ <https://www.forbes.com/profile/rupe-rt-murdoch/?list=billionaires>

⁹ DOYLE, Gillian 2013. *Understanding Media Economics*. Page 9

¹⁰ The same source.

¹¹ According to Weekly reviews of ABC Television Group.

¹² <http://www.todayifoundout.com/index.php/2015/05/broadcast-syndication/>

*in network primetime, they're a big hit in syndication*¹³ Kimball indicates that the competition was not high at the exact moment, which is one of the sign of oligarchic media system.

In 2008, New York's Lifetime Television purchased the cable re-run rights to the sitcom at a rate of about \$725,000 per episode according to The Hollywood Reporter.¹⁴ The 4-year contract was for at least 110 episodes, however allowed up to 8 seasons.

Gradually, re-runs of HIMYM appeared on local U.S. broadcast TV stations and on Chicago-based cable station WGN America. On these stations, the closing credits were introduced in the series unlike in previous airings on CBS and Lifetime.¹⁵ The important part of them were portions of "The Bro Code", which is a list of rules frequently referenced by Barney Stinson, one of the characters. The rules are on how men should interact with each other while seducing women. On the other hand, the opening theme song for the syndicated reruns was slightly shortened. And the episodes themselves were also subtly edited, leaving out a few details. This is not the only way how the show can change during re-runs, we will talk about more ways while discussing the advertisement.

In 2011, the FX channel announced to be sharing the syndication rights with Lifetime, who prolonged the syndication deal.¹⁶ Having two cable TV's sharing the syndication rights on the same sitcom is "extremely rare", journalists noted. However as their audience is quite dissimilar, it was possible.¹⁷ How I Met Your Mother continues to live on in syndication on the TV's mentioned until nowadays.

Concerning foreign market, the sitcom was redistributed to many other countries around the world. In 2006, the sitcom was introduced e.g. in Australia, Brazil, Israel,

¹³ KIMBALL, Trevor. 2008. How I Met Your Mother: Syndication Deal Ensures Season Five for Sitcom. Available from: <http://tvseriesfinale.com/tv-show/how-i-met-your-mother-syndication-deal-ensures-season-five-for-sitcom/>

¹⁴ NORDYKE, Kimberly. 2008. "'Mother' reruns nest at Lifetime". The Hollywood Reporter. Lifetime's four-year licensing deal includes up to eight seasons of "Mother", should the CBS comedy run that long. "Mother" had a big fourth-season premiere Monday, jumping 21% in the ratings over last season.

¹⁵ These two stations use marginalized credit sequences as the closing credit roll is often considered an opportunity to promote other shows of the network.

¹⁶ FX Fall 2011 Schedule Has How I Met Your Mother; The Nanny Reunion on Happily Divorced" (Press release). *Sitcoms Online*. 2011.

¹⁷ ANDREEVA, Nellie. 2011. FX Picks Up 'How I Met Your Mother' Reruns In Non-Exclusive Deal. *Deadline.com*. Available from: <http://deadline.com/2011/04/fx-picks-up-how-i-met-your-mother-reruns-in-non-exclusive-deal-120989/>

Thailand or UK. A year later it was also introduced in France or Spain.¹⁸ HIMYM is a great example of globalization of media market. Through the show, American culture is easily and widely distributed all around the world. As Marshall McLuhan notes, due to media, the world has become a “*global village*”¹⁹. Specifically, thanks to *How I Met Your Mother*, the audience from all around the world knows, what is it like to live in Manhattan or, more precisely, how the American film makers present the life in Manhattan. Globalization of media products, producers, audiences and also regulation is more and more present in world’s media ecosystem and American culture and its main media companies (20th Century Fox being one of them) are leading the process – that is why some call it “westernization”. The centralization of power in the hands of just a few companies makes media and culture more homogenous and less diversified. New products of smaller companies have a tough way to get successful in the market. Not only costs of making the show, but also power in the system is what decides here.

Talking about costs, unfortunately, the exact sum of how much the production of one episode of HIMYM costs, is not available to us. However, the major part of the costs for making the episode, are the salaries of the actors. During the 5th episode, all of the five main characters were making \$250.000 a week.²⁰ It is absolutely natural, that the salaries develop with the success of the show.

At last, we would like to focus on a role of advertisement for the sitcom. Advertisement is one of the main intakes of TV production. As Doyle notes, the media firms usually create two products – one is the content itself and the second is the audience their content attracts.²¹ The role of advertisement in *How I Met Your Mother* is very important, as for the producers as same as for the television which are airing the sitcom. For commercial during the final episode of the sitcom, CBS charged half a million dollars from advertisers for a 30-second scope.²² The distributor of the show, the 20th Television caused a fuss by offering new product placement to old episodes of the sitcom

¹⁸ Via <http://www.nationmaster.com/country-info/stats/Media/How-I-Met-Your-Mother/International-broadcasters/Series-Premiere>

¹⁹ MCLUHAN, Marshall. *The World is a Global Village*. *CBC TV*. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HeDnPP6ntic>

²⁰ Unknown. 2014. Neil Patrick Harris Chose Money Over His *How I Met Your Mother* Co-Stars During Negotiations! And He Walked Away With Bank Thanks To It! *Perez Hilton.com*. Available from: <http://perezhilton.com/2014-05-14-neil-patrick-harris-didnt-want-to-band-with-his-himym-cast-mates-during-contract-negotiations#.WTQa5WjyIU>

²¹ DOYLE 2013: 12.

²² <http://variety.com/2014/tv/news/cbs-seeks-500000-for-ad-slots-in-series-finale-of-himym-1201100302/>

resulting in seeing e.g. the 2011 Zookeeper movie commercial in episode from 2006.

“Turns out that 20th Television — the studio distributor behind Mother — has been selling promotional spots in syndicated episodes to wring even more money out of the sitcom’s already rich syndication deals.”²³

It is natural to all the successful media products that they are published in other forms later once they get well-known. The same happened with HIMYM, which published DVD of the series one-by-one. There were other products as books (several books with the Bro Code topic, How I Met Your Mother and Philosophy), soundtracks and wide merchandise offer.²⁴ The producers of the show are also involved in creating another series, extending the original one called How I Met Your Father which should be also produced by Twentieth Century Fox Television.

²³ STRANSKY, Tanner. 2011. How I Met Your Mother Ads. *Entertainemnt.com*. Available from: <http://ew.com/article/2011/07/07/how-i-met-your-mother-reruns-bad-teacher-zookeeper/>

²⁴ The originál offer of CBS can be seen here: <http://www.cbsstore.com/how-i-met-your-mother/index.php?v=cbs-howimetyourmother>