

Popular Culture's Image of the PR Image Consultant:
The Celebrity in Crisis

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Twenty years ago public relations practitioners did some serious soul searching about the profession's public image.¹ In the wake of that discussion, Karen Miller surveyed films and novels and extrapolated a number of attributes common to practitioners; most of the categories were negative.² A more recent look at popular culture, "PR Goes to the Movies: The Image of Public Relations Improves from 1996 to 2008,"³ and a subsequent study of the image of the gay PR practitioner throughout American film history, published in *The IJPC Journal*,⁴ found that the image of the PR practitioner has generally improved in recent years, and that image consultants have recently been portrayed positively. This positive trend is being threatened, however, by lack of transparency and mistaken uses of new media and social media for publicizing and marketing in arenas such as celebrity and entertainment that are central to popular culture.

One example of a positive portrayal would be Joel, the gay FBI image consultant in *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* (2005), who makes over a butch Sandra Bullock character into a feminine, Chanel and jewelry-wearing FBI media spokesperson. *Crazy, Stupid, Love* (2011) presents an example of a non-professional makeover. In this love story, with a sidestep into bromance, Ryan Gosling's "player" volunteers to make over Steve Carell's schlumpy separated husband so he'll be successful in picking up women for one-night stands. The external

changes — clothes, hair style — are perceived positively by all, including Carell's lost love, as the image consultant predicted. The Tom Hanks character in *Larry Crowne* (2011), starring Julie Roberts, also gets an amateur makeover.⁵

Some makeover projects have higher stakes than just a better “cool” factor. When a Hollywood PR image consultant works for a celebrity in crisis, a sub-category of crisis communications, the situations are challenging and the stakes are high. One example from recent films is the Jason Bateman character in the Will Smith superhero film, *Hancock* (2008). This film's PR practitioner follows a typical celebrity crisis model — think Paris Hilton, Britney Spears — to redeem the reprobate superhero and save the world.

The Celebrity Image Makeover

The person in charge of managing the celebrity makeover is the “image consultant,” and the basics for the celebrity image makeover are typically as follows:

1. When the triggering incident happens, the publicist immediately issues a short two- or three-sentence press statement in which the celebrity accepts full responsibility, apologizes, and asks for privacy while working on “personal issues.” Using a press statement rather than a press conference controls the message and does not allow for follow-up questions from reporters.

2. The consultant orchestrates a disappearance from public view — i.e., the celebrity goes into seclusion or to rehab for an unspecified addiction, and then completes “community service” out of view of the community — if possible. Serving a jail term is more problematic, even from the point of view of the authorities. Remember the paparazzi frenzy surrounding Paris Hilton's abbreviated jail time?

3. The image consultant orchestrates the right time and venue for the celebrity to reappear as a new, better, and more humble person, often as an advocate for a charity. The cause should

be non-controversial and not remind the public of the nature of the client's transgression. If an actress is coming back from a DUI, her PR consultant probably doesn't send her on a media campaign for Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD). Children's charities are good (United Nations Children's Fund). So are puppies and kittens and even babies — if your client isn't photographed dangling one by the scruff of its neck or by baby clothes from a high balcony. Remember Michael Jackson?

4. The final step is to make sure that the client's next career move is spectacularly successful. Britney Spears tried to come back too soon, resulting in a grotesque and flabby live performance at the 2007 Video Music Awards. That was immediately followed by a change of management/PR, which rebooted the makeover process. They achieved success when a glowing Spears made a gracious, by-the-book acceptance speech at the next year's VMAs. Tiger Woods' bungled image makeover might be complete, if he could just win a major tournament. "Kobe, all is forgiven," was the general public sentiment five years after Kobe Bryant was accused of rape, when he led the winning U.S. Olympic basketball team in August 2008. He followed up with NBA championships for the Los Angeles Lakers in 2009 and 2010.

In Hollywood, most public relations practitioners are called publicists. And "publicist" is certainly preferable to the entertainment trade paper *Daily Variety*'s style sheet, which apparently requires the eternal designation of "flack."⁶ This enduring insult doesn't seem to bother journalists until their papers close and they find themselves writing for companies or non-profit organizations, i.e., doing public relations. Crossing over to PR has always been a fraught decision for a journalist, because the uneasy alliance between the two separate branches of communications has always been threatened by some troubling questions: Who is in charge of the story? Who sets the agenda?

First, let's look at how the Hollywood image consultants are presented in a recent play. *Matthew Modine Saves the Alpacas* (2009) is a comedy by Blair Singer that debuted at the Geffen Playhouse in Los Angeles on September 16, 2009. When *Los Angeles Times* theater critic Charles McNulty gave the play an extremely negative review,⁷ I went expecting it to be a denunciation of the profession I had worked in for more than 20 years, before moving over to teach Entertainment PR.

Matthew Modine Saves the Alpacas lays out the basics of the celebrity image makeover process that uses “doing good” in order to “do well.” The actor Matthew Modine plays a dope-smoking has-been version of himself, now living in a Winnebago, but desperate to make a comeback. By groveling, he secures the services of a powerful, attractive (but heavily Botoxed, lifted, and collagen-filled) celebrity publicist, Whimberly North, and her flamboyant assistant, Jeffrey.

Whimberly is known for transforming “Angie” — think Angelina Jolie — from a nobody to the next incarnation of Mother Teresa. Modine wants the same Whimberly magic for his career that she claims to have done for all the one-name celebrities from Madonna to Bono. Initially Modine just wants to copy the Angie makeover template and adopt an African baby. “African babies are done,” says Whimberly, agreeing to take Modine on as a client and go into her magic golden box of PR ideas. From aligning with a disease to rebuilding the Ninth Ward in New Orleans, Whimberly and Jeffrey claim, “Nobody cares about anything until we tell them to.” This recalls agenda-setting theory in communication studies, first elucidated by McCombs and Shaw,⁸ except that this theory posits that the media (i.e., journalists) set the agenda of what people care about. Singer's play points to PR practitioners as first setting the agenda for the journalists, who then set it for the public. Dainton and Zellely noted that “although agenda setting

focuses on the gate-keeping ability of the media, other people besides journalists, editors, and broadcasters can influence the media agenda. Public relations professionals, lobbyists, and even the president of the United States can influence what the media cover as news.”⁹

For Modine’s career, however, none of the PR ideas from “inside the box” seems right. Jeffrey finds one “outside the box,” however. Modine should save the dying alpacas (a larger and gamier version of puppies and kittens) on Mount Chimborazo in the Ecuadorian Andes and thereby save the way of life of the indigenous people. What could be better publicity than saving adorable animals and saving a civilization?

And what Hollywood story can progress without a love subplot? Whimberly and Modine discover many qualities that the PR person and the celebrity share: self-love; self-involvement; the importance of being good looking; and a core belief that not even a parent can love someone more than one loves oneself.

Not surprisingly, the indigenous people of Ecuador have mixed feelings about being the objects of a celebrity’s good works and image makeover. One greets Modine as the Prodigal Son, while another asks Whimberly, “Are you the devil?”

“No, I’m the publicist,” she says, though it’s unclear whether there’s any difference. She has already gotten Modine on the covers of magazines for his great work saving the alpacas, although every few minutes one of the sad-eyed animals keels over of old age. (On stage, the alpacas are fuzzy live-sized puppets that go plop as they tip over dead.)

Meanwhile, Modine is no help getting the last pair of young alpacas to breed. His germophobic attitude and his alcohol hand sanitizer expose this remote civilization to unforeseen pathogens, which may wipe them all out. Whimberly is also ailing. In fact, like Dorian Gray, her real age seems to be revealing itself before our eyes, as her dentures dislodge with every kiss.

The day (and the alpacas and the indigenous Chimborazo) need saving, and the assistant publicist is now revealed as the savior. Having Modine save the alpacas was Jeffrey's idea, because he is the tribe's actual Prodigal Son. Now Jeffrey's power, that of the local Shaman, and Modine's idea of upping the female alpaca's attractiveness by spraying her with Calvin Klein's *Obsession* come together to provide a happy ending for almost everyone. The alpacas are saved, as are the indigenous people, while Jeffrey regains his birthright and Modine is air-lifted out to star in a great role.

The publicist, Whimberly North, however, ends badly. Her Botoxed, nipped, tucked, lifted, and liposuctioned 35-ish body reveals that it is actually 83 (maybe 85, because she always lies about her age). Though she dies, Whimberly's last PR image makeover is a complete success. Matthew Modine garners an Oscar nomination and is named United Nations Goodwill Ambassador. Still inarticulate and shallow, he hits the talk-show circuit. PR saves his career, as well as the alpacas.

Although Whimberly dies, she's had a "fabulous" life. The play satirizes her mostly for her personal vanity and her preternatural ability to look younger than she is — traits she shares with her star clients. Her professional work, however, is effective and efficient. The play's reservations about the makeover process focus on the public's ongoing willingness to accept celebrity redemption narratives. The public continues to take vacuous stars seriously as role models and spokespeople as they pontificate about their favorite causes on the talk-show circuit.

The Image Consultant in the News

In real-life pop culture, i.e., the news, the celebrity makeover is seldom that simple, often because the ongoing ability for "doing good" while avoiding "doing stupid" is beyond the capacity of some celebrities, particularly those suffering from diseases of addiction.

Even apparently healthy celebrities often lack the self-perception to understand how their words and actions may be perceived by others. Angelina Jolie's image was once that of a blood-vial wearing Goth who was the wife of Billy Bob Thornton. Next, her image was the seductive "other woman" who broke the heart of America's Sweetheart Jennifer Aniston by stealing Brad Pitt. Then Jolie's image was a cold-hearted mother who called her natural-born baby with Pitt a "blob" in comparison to her adopted children.¹⁰ Now she's the bride-to-be Mom of the tabloids' favorite, adorable nuclear family — and she's the Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations Refugee Agency. At various times, Jolie has gone on record to say she handles her own public relations — which she was apparently doing during the "blob" interview period.¹¹

Remember, however, that as a movie star, Angelina Jolie has a platoon of studio publicists working with her to promote each movie and help her skate through difficult situations. One such predicament was reported in *The New York Times* about the 2005 Fox Studios ShoWest presentation to motion picture exhibitors of the upcoming *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. At that major PR event, the supposedly uninvolved Jolie and Pitt look "both fabulous and uncomfortable."¹² Only after the movie had made its main money at the box office was Jennifer Aniston's heart officially broken by Pitt. The studio publicity machine kept control of the story in the days before *TMZ* payouts for stories, text messaging, and Twitter.

The current challenge for Hollywood image consultants is exemplified by the ongoing saga of Lindsay Lohan. Her image problems started in 2004 with a traffic accident that put her erratic driving and partying in the public eye.¹³ Years of partying, DUIs, probation, and an arrest for shoplifting have been punctuated by press statements issued by a publicist usually saying that Lohan is entering rehab and requests privacy while she works on her personal problems. It's been a long piece of work, and for her career prospects, a dangerous process. Actors and

actresses, whatever their talent, become un-castable — unbankable — when they become uninsurable. That's what happens when a studio cannot buy a completion bond from an insurance company that will reimburse the studio for its investment if production cannot be completed on a specific film, for example, one starring Lindsay Lohan. So for an actress, an image problem can be a career ender.

The Lohan image repair process has often been hindered by the public behavior of Lohan herself. And now that every cell phone has a camera and a video recorder, almost all behavior is public behavior. But sometimes she has been damaged by the behavior of professionals representing her. For example, in July 2011, Lohan's lawyer tried to convince the judge reviewing her progress in meeting her probation requirements that paparazzi would disrupt group counseling and that Lohan has "financial issues" that prevent private counseling.¹⁴ Good luck with that argument, perhaps a sign of friction or poor communication between her lawyer and her publicist. In Hollywood, as in executive suites everywhere, image often suffers when public relations takes a back seat to short-term legal maneuvering.

In the new "new media" environment, the image consultant can also stumble. A recent leak to *TMZ* had Lohan bailing at the last minute on an interview with Matt Lauer for the *Today* show. Her publicist, Steve Honig, took responsibility for the cancellation, because what he and Lohan thought was going to be a light 15-minute exchange had been redefined by Lauer as a major, in-depth, two-hour interview. Honig is quoted as saying, "I told her I didn't think it was a good idea, and I ultimately told Matt Lauer we weren't doing it, not Lindsay. She felt very badly about it. But Matt was a perfect gentleman."¹⁵

Remember the image repair sequence outlined above: The publicist/image consultant needs to control the moment Lohan makes her reappearance as a new and improved self, because

that moment should be followed not just by ongoing good behavior and good works (and no slips into addictive behavior), but also by an immediate major career success. For Lohan, this was not that moment. She needed to complete her required counseling and community service. Most of all she needs a meaty part in a big film — and for that she needs to be insurable.

A short, light *Today* interview with Lohan whipping up a nice lunch for Lauer in her home would have begun to soften her party-girl image. It would have shown her taking care of herself and eating healthily — she has admitted to bulimia in the past — just as some 2011 professional photos, as opposed to cell phone snapshots, have shown her looking beautiful and happy.

The media venue for the public unveiling of the “new and improved” celebrity has typically been either a Barbara Walters Special or Oprah’s couch, neither of which has an obvious successor. In Lohan’s case, Matt Lauer and his producers were being opportunists — trying to jump the queue. Lauer reportedly took the cancellation well, though he’d flown to Los Angeles to do the interview. So he clearly knew that he was pushing beyond the limits set by Honig. Probably Lauer was able to negotiate promises about “major” or “exclusive” future access to Lohan. So whichever insider tipped *TMZ* to the cancellation embarrassed both Lauer and Honig, who said, “I wish whoever made a quick 50 bucks off leaking the story to *TMZ* would have called me first because I would have offered them 75.”¹⁶

In the long-gone, golden, olden days — that is until three or four years ago, before *TMZ*, texting, Twitter, cell phone video, and YouTube — image consultants were better able to protect both their clients and the egos of journalists, who privately agreed to clear-cut parameters in exchange for celebrity access. They were also able to do their work without becoming part of the story or being named, even in reports of press statements, other than as “so-and-so’s publicist,”

and without being quoted directly in the media. The client was the story. The publicist was unnamed and behind the scenes. In those olden days, journalists were very happy **not** to mention the PR representative.

Why?

Journalists and PR practitioners collude on a fiction that polishes every journalist's public image: the fiction that the journalist's hard work digs up the "story." The truth behind that fiction is that for a large percentage of stories covered in the media, a PR practitioner has come up with the story angle and pitched it to the journalist. PR has also provided access, background information, and even the names of other people (sources) who have pre-agreed (with the publicist) to take a reporter's phone call and be quoted.

Content analysis research of newspapers has variously set the figure at 60% of news stories using PR sources for *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* back in 1973.¹⁷ In 2000, it was 39% for environmental reporting in six major papers, including those two, with science writers using business sources — that means PR sources — for 48% of stories and business writers using PR sources 70% of the time.¹⁸ But what reader realizes that? Journalists don't mention their "story godmothers" more than absolutely necessary, because their editors also collude in the fiction of journalist-originated news coverage. No one working in the media wants to admit that PR is setting the media's agenda.

There is research to be done on sources of entertainment stories. Meanwhile, *Daily Variety*, the daily entertainment trade newspaper that defines PR practitioners as "flacks," probably draws on PR sources for 80% of its editorial content — maybe 90% if you count the publicists' role in pitching reviews and setting up screenings. For a celebrity image crisis, the mainstream media may do some original reporting of the initial crash and burn stage — though

much of it comes out via *TMZ* and photos by paparazzi. But later in the process, everything is either from a PR source, retreads of old stories, or “original reporting” of the “citizen journalist,” the wielder of the cell phone video camera. In entertainment, these are often “citizen opportunists” looking for a quick buck from a media outlet willing to pay for a “story.”

During 2011, U.S. consumers of media have been rubberneckers at an ongoing train crash — the saga of Charlie Sheen. Here is a celebrity so self-deluded and out of touch with the mechanisms of his own Hollywood fame and fortune that he was quoted as saying his publicist, Stan Rosenfield, had lied in an earlier press statement. Rosenfield resigned, which is the only option when a client consistently damages one’s relationship with the media.¹⁹ Sheen quickly hired another Hollywood veteran, Larry Solters,²⁰ but Sheen’s makeover stayed off the tracks. Let’s look at the problems:

1. Sheen ditched any pretense of “going quiet” or “going to rehab,” as requested by his employer Warner Bros. and his media outlet, CBS.

2. He was confrontational with his employers — now ex-employers — and with his PR representative.

3. He made no pretense of “changing” or of becoming more humble.

4. He made a hasty and disastrous comeback attempt — his non-scripted “Violent Torpedo of Truth/Defeat Is Not an Option” live tour.

So is Sheen insurable? Or does he need to reboot the makeover process?

In March 2011, the Associated Press reported that publishers had rejected a Sheen book proposal because of the price (\$10 million) and “his unpredictable behavior.”²¹ In late June, *Entertainment Weekly* immediately discounted an online competitor’s reports that Sheen had signed a deal for a new sit-com produced by Lionsgate with TBS as the lead bidder.²² TBS flatly

denied it in a press statement. Later in 2011, Sheen subjected himself to a Comedy Central roast as a way to demonstrate that he has regained perspective on his life, but as of late 2011, he did not have a firm come-back project. Therefore, Sheen's redemption story, like Lohan's, is "to be continued...".

New Media and the Image Consultant

Meanwhile, where is the image of the image consultant headed? Like everyone else, PR professionals need to embrace new media, though surely not by letting a client addicted to substances or Twitter loose to text messages to *TMZ*. One dystopian vision of our present and future is depicted Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, a multi-generational story of success and failure in music, movies, and public relations.²³ In the past in the book, New York's top PR agent is referred to as La Doll, until her over-reaching A-list extravaganza event literally becomes a disaster. In the book's present, La Doll — now simply Dolly — is brought back for one more shot — and she triumphs times two: She humanizes a genocidal dictator's image by associating him with a still-beautiful, has-been actress to the benefit of both of their images.

Real-life image creators tried to imitate art in late 2011, when organizers of "a birthday party for Ramzan A. Kadyrov, the Chechen president whose rule, international critics say, has been marked by abductions and torture,"²⁴ gave substantial appearance fees to two-time Academy Award-winning actress Hilary Swank, Seal, and others. Swank's pleasure at being there for an extensive tribute and retrospective, which is posted for posterity on YouTube,²⁵ was distinctly diminished by subsequent criticism from human rights advocates. Swank soon issued a press statement of apology through her own image consultant. Subsequently, two non-profit organizations, Global Philanthropy Group and Human Rights Watch, "announced a free

confidential service to help stars and their handlers verify the records of people who want to hire them to appear” at events.²⁶

In the future of Egan’s novel — around 2021 — even after “the Bloggerscandals,” a social media genius and La Doll’s daughter Lulu cynically team up to use social media to mobilize his selection of people just like him. These are the incorruptible purists who in their hearts know that they’ve sold out all along by posting everything about themselves online for the use of corporations. These are people “who had stopped being themselves with realizing it.”²⁷ These people, unknown to each other and admitting to no one that they’ve been paid, launch multiple “peer” messages that go viral about a has-been/never-been aging musician who has never before performed live, but is a pure talent. In doing so, the social media mavens, who are more comfortable texting, even when they’re face to face, create an event as iconic as Woodstock.

Their epic event is uplifting and unifying, not dangerous like recent Los Angeles Twitter-generated flash mobs. A crowd summoned in July 2011 to the premiere of the new documentary about the Electric Daisy Circus rave turned into a confrontation with riot-gear wearing police shooting beanbag ammo.²⁸ Early in 2011, a Twitter message to congregate at Muscle Beach in Venice, California, led to a probable gang shooting.²⁹ From these incidents to rioting and looting in Britain and at the Wisconsin State Fair to political uprisings in the Middle East during 2011, social media have demonstrated the power to mobilize crowds. Twitter and instant message-generated flash mobs are more powerful and/or more dangerous and in more different ways than PR practitioners, the public, or governments imagined. Image consultants as well as other PR specialists have to figure out which are safe and ethical uses for the future and which aren’t.

Future Research

The 2011 film *The Ides of March*, based on the 2008 play *Farragut North* by Beau

Willimon, is directed by and stars George Clooney as a Howard Dean-like presidential candidate. Ryan Gosling plays the candidate's young press secretary, who loses his idealism when he is manipulated by the opposition. The theater critic for *The New York Times* compared the press secretary to "the smarmy press agent" Sidney Falco in *Sweet Smell of Success* (1957).³⁰ Miller wrote about that 1950s film portrait as the epitome of three prevalent characteristics in portrayals of PR practitioners: obsequious, cynical, and manipulative.³¹ These are all categories that were found to be on the decline until recently.³² Then came *The Joneses* (2009), starring David Duchovny and Demi Moore, and Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, first published in 2010, which look at the immorality and negative consequences of stealth marketing. Both the film and the novel indict lack of transparency and trumped-up "peer recommendations," which in *Goon Squad* are easily, secretly, and quickly transmitted and forwarded by social media.

How will image consultants, public relations practitioners, and entertainment publicists be depicted in the future in movies, plays, and novels? Much depends on how well PR practitioners and their clients, including celebrities in crisis, make the transition into a fully new media and social media environment. If thoughtful strategies and transparent tactics revealing the source of PR messages prevail, the image of the image consultant in popular culture could continue to be positive. If stealth and an addiction to impulsive instant communication prevail, the profession will need an image makeover of its own.

Endnotes

¹ Important contributions to the discussion of the image of the public relations profession during the early 1990s include: W. W. Brody, "We Must Act Now to Redeem PR's Reputation," *Public Relations Quarterly*, 37:3 (1992): 44; *National Credibility Index: New Survey Measures Who the Public Believes on Major Issues* (1999), retrieved from <http://www.prsa.org/searchresults/view/2d->

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² Karen S. Miller, "Public Relations in Film and Fiction: 1930 to 1995," *Journal of Public Relations Research* 11:1 (1999), 3-28.

³ Carol Ames, "PR Goes to the Movies: The Image of Public Relations Improves from 1996 to 2008," *Public Relations Review* 36 (2010), 164-170.

⁴ Carol Ames, "Queer Eye for the PR Guy in American Films 1937-2009." *The IJPC Journal* 2 (2011), 108-152.

⁵ Adam Tschorn, "Fashioning a Character," *Los Angeles Times* (July 31, 2011), F4-F5.

⁶ Peter Bart, "The New Flack Tack: Duck and Cover," *Daily Variety* (April 11, 2011), 2.

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⁸ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972), 176-187.

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¹² Carol Ames, "Playing Up to an Audience with Clout: Theater Owners," *The New York Times* (May 8, 2005). Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/08/movies/moviesspecial/08bames.html?ei=5070&en=2>.

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¹⁵ “Lindsay Lohan’s Publicist: I Pulled the Plug on Matt Lauer’s Interview” (June 22, 2011). Retrieved from http://www.eonline.com/uberblog/b248859_lindsay_lohans_publicist_i_pulled_plug.html.

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¹⁷ Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 1973).

¹⁸ Stephen Lacy and David C. Coulson, “Comparative Case Study: Newspaper Source Use on the Environmental Beat,” *Newspaper Research Journal* 21:1 (2000), 13-25.

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²⁵ “Hilary Swank Goes to Some Weird Chechen Birthday Party” (2011). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CmyE2WZvuPQ>.

²⁶ Barnes, C3.

²⁷ Egan, 317.

²⁸ Gloria Goodale, “Social Media Mayhem: When Flash Mobs Go from Benign to Malign,” (July 28, 2011). Retrieved from <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Society/2011/0728/Social-media-mayhem-when-flash-mobs-go-from-benign-to-malign>.

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