

“I Tell Them the Truth . . . That’s My Goal”:  
PR, Popular Culture, and the Teachable Moment

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Popular culture provides rich common ground in public relations classrooms — among students as well as between faculty and students. This not only engages students in critically examining public relations practices and outcomes but also lends insight into their perceptions of the field. Thus, rather than reject the portrayals of the field and the professional in popular culture, even the absurd, we should embrace these opportunities for class discussion.<sup>1</sup>

The focus here is on two shows that portrayed two extremes of public relations on prime-time television: the NBC drama *The West Wing* (in particular, an episode titled “Access”) and the BBC comedy *Absolutely Fabulous* (*Ab Fab*).<sup>2</sup> Both are now off the air, but with access to programming via online streaming sites, reruns on cable and network television, subscription services, and DVD sales, they’re increasingly accessible for viewing.<sup>3</sup> Both shows have been celebrated for their contributions to entertainment and, although neither series focused on public relations, both integrated the function into many of the story lines. Finally, it should be noted that both shows aired pre-Twitter and before the universal availability of Facebook.<sup>4</sup>

***The West Wing* (1999-2006)**

The series follows the West Wing staff of two-term president Jed Bartlet (Martin Sheen). C.J. Cregg (Allison Janney) is a former public relations agency professional recruited by the

Bartlet campaign during the first election and is now the White House press secretary. Despite its dramatic license, the show's credibility as a teaching resource lies in its array of consultants, who include key Washington players. The "Access" episode, in particular, credits four consultants with White House staff credentials: DeeDee Myers, President Bill Clinton's press secretary; Gene Sperling, Clinton's economic advisor; Ken Duberstein, President Ronald Reagan's chief of staff; and John Podhoretz, Reagan's and President George H.W. Bush's speechwriter.<sup>5</sup>

In the style of the American public television news magazine, *Frontline*, the *Access* production team has come to film a day in the life of C.J., who is now in her second term as Bartlet's press secretary, a tenure record not yet achieved by a woman in real life.<sup>6</sup> C.J.'s face, it is explained, is the one most associated with the Bartlet administration besides that of the president himself. But, other than confronting an adversarial press daily, her role is not well understood. *Access* seeks to learn how C.J.'s interaction with the press defines America's relationship with the White House. During the crew's visit, a crisis erupts in the form of an FBI standoff with a gunman, and *Access* captures C.J.'s role in that as well.

This episode lends a great deal to teachable moments: political public relations, relationships, press relations, public relations management, crisis management and crisis communication, and public relations history. It is also instructive in showing the chaotic aspects of public relations, a particularly important lesson for students who might place too much stock in the apparent linearity of the PR planning process.

At the outset, "Access" provides background on the press secretary function, interspersing actual news clips, such as Jim Haggerty's innovation in taking President Dwight D. Eisenhower into the realm of live, recorded press briefings. The team also explains the tradition of the flak jacket, in which each press secretary leaves a note, a word of wisdom, to his or her successor.<sup>7</sup>

As the episode develops, however, PR scholars, students, and professionals alike will recognize elements of environmental scanning, represented by C.J.'s description of waking up early to scan the news outlets before coming into work and by the reliance on cable news, which airs constantly in her office, in the press room, and in the West Wing offices. They also will recognize elements of issue management, such as when C.J. warns against ignoring what might at first seem trivial and when she discusses the 24/7 news cycle and its impact — “inescapable” — and the lack of real time to reflect and get perspective.

Not surprisingly, press relations is a fairly constant element in this episode and includes discussions about anticipating news directions and journalists' needs, such as supplying copies of documentation, unbidden, in response to a press inquiry. C.J. emphasizes the importance of credibility in working with the press, describing an incident in which her off-hand remark resulted in months of work to regain the press corps' trust. The range of expertise required by someone who works with the press is illustrated by questions she receives from reporters, and not just during the formal press briefings, but also as she is walking to her office, for example (when offhand remarks or slips could be more likely). Inquiries raised in quick succession concern the first lady's dress, AIDS, D-Day, legislation, the tech industry, and jobs numbers. C.J. also is involved with negotiating protocols for an international dignitary's visit with the president.<sup>8</sup>

The politics of work, of being a PR professional, is also featured. Sometimes it can be difficult to convey to PR students the challenges they will face in balancing internal and external interests or in being perceived as favoring one over the other. C.J. is the highest ranking woman in the West Wing but, in this episode, senior executives within the West Wing believe they can control the media's coverage of the FBI story and determine what C.J. should or should not

know under the guise of protecting her from ethical conflicts. And, indeed, the *Access* crew films a door closing in her face. The thinking is, as a senior official on the show explains, if C.J. has information, she would be obligated to share it with the press. The episode reveals, however, that the decision to shut her out leaves the president unprepared in responding to questions during a news conference.<sup>9</sup>

Multitasking as a way of life is conveyed by the constant disruption of the day's plans, with staff emphasizing the importance of back-up plans because it is rare, they explain, when a day proceeds as scheduled. C.J. comments early on that she uses her commute to gather her thoughts for the day ahead. And, in what would be lauded by the PRSA Code of Ethics, C.J. enhances the profession by serving as a role model and mentor to staff and interns.

Although the pride of working in the White House runs throughout this episode and the series, there is a distinct lack of glamour exhibited among the characters. That is, C.J. dresses in realistic business attire for the time the series aired: simply styled pantsuits and blouses. No plunging necklines, short hemlines, designer hairstyles, or dramatic make-up. Additionally, the imbalance of her work and life is also addressed. It becomes clear by the end of the episode that C.J. gets up early, goes home late, and makes personal sacrifices for her job.

Perhaps of most value in this episode are the attempts by C.J. to address some of the gray areas inherent in public relations. She acknowledges to the *Access* crew, for example, that she withholds information but does not lie because that would damage her credibility. Many outside the field might deride such a distinction, but it can be a troubling situation familiar to many who have served in a PR role. In one of her interviews with the *Access* team during the course of the day, C.J. attempts to elaborate: "People think we stymie the press, mislead the public to spin or hide the truth, when in fact any good press secretary aims to do just the opposite." Then she

laughs self-consciously and tells the interviewer that this project was a bad idea. She tries again, saying, “I make sure the press and, through them, the public is well informed. I tell them the truth . . . that’s my goal.”<sup>10</sup>

***Absolutely Fabulous* (1992-1996 and 2001-2004)**

In contrast to *The West Wing*’s “Access,” which serves as an example of best practices within the popular culture universe of public relations, the BBC’s *Absolutely Fabulous* (often referred to as *Ab Fab*) weaves into its plotlines some common and derisive public relations stereotypes.<sup>11</sup>

The main character of the show, Edina Monsoon (Jennifer Saunders), owns her own public relations firm. Unlike C.J., Eddy is flamboyant, trendy, excessive, and rebellious, frequently challenging her somber and parent-figure daughter Saffron (Julia Sawalha). Eddy takes couture to the extreme (Christian Lacroix is a favorite) and wears it badly, clownishly. She is often shown with her best friend, former model and quasi-fashion magazine figure Patsy Stone (Joanna Lumley).<sup>12</sup> Both women revel in a 1960s sensibility of sex, drugs, rock ‘n’ roll, and general hedonism.

Not surprisingly, Eddy’s work ethic is lacking, as her daughter Saffy often points out. Unlike C.J., Eddy goes to the office sporadically and often drinks champagne while there, usually with Patsy. Eddy frequently runs late, misses meetings, and she employs an inept and ditzy assistant named Bubble (Jane Horrocks). Eddy’s focus rarely strays from herself, even when working with clients. The PR work she does do often entails grand gestures executed at the last minute to gather up as many celebrities as possible for some event. Her clients are usually unhappy, disappointed, and envious of the treatment others are receiving from other agencies. They threaten to leave Eddy’s firm and then often do.

True to the experience of many in public relations, Eddy's daughter does not quite understand what she does. In one *Ab Fab* episode, Eddy tries, with Patsy's help, to explain: "PR!? I PR things, people, places, concepts . . . Lulu. I am, and if you've heard of me I have PR. I make the fabulous. I make the crap into credible. I make the dull into delicious."<sup>13</sup>

Eddy's response, in 1995, encapsulates what many still perceive public relations to be. In 2010, for example, BBC News ran a story announcing a new scholarly conference dedicated to public relations history. The photo accompanying the story featured Eddy and Patsy.<sup>14</sup>

American viewers will see two new shows this fall that are built around public relations. NBC's comedy *Free Agents* operates against a backdrop of emotional upheavals, drinking, and romance.<sup>15</sup> [*EDITORS' NOTE: The show centered around two PR executives at a Portland, Oregon advertising agency who have a drunken one-night stand, then struggle to stay professional at work. Alex Taylor (Hank Azaria) is recently divorced, while Helen Ryan (Kathryn Hahn) is trying to move on following the death of her fiancé. Their friends keep trying to get them to re-enter the dating scene. The comedy was cancelled after four episodes in the fall of 2011.*]

In ABC's *Scandal* [*EDITORS' NOTE: The show premiered in April 2012*], a crisis management firm operates under the leadership of Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington).<sup>16</sup> Olivia, a former White House communications director with a direct line to the president, "dedicates her life to protecting and defending the public images of our nation's elite" but with a "dysfunctional staff."<sup>17</sup> Unlike C.J., Olivia sees few gray areas in public relations. She and her firm make scandals disappear and conduct damage control. She goes by her gut and is never wrong.<sup>18</sup>

### **Reality Shows: Examples from Real Life**

The discussion here has touched on a few scripted TV shows, but reality television also has potential for teachable moments.<sup>19</sup> As a colleague has pointed out, these shows tend to air

more frequently over the course of one season, providing even more exposure to the accuracies and inaccuracies of public relations' portrayal in popular culture.<sup>20</sup> And, as much as the shows might be derided, students watch them and follow them faithfully, at times critically evaluating their portrayals of public relations and becoming advocates for the field in the process.

An early example of such advocacy arising in the classroom occurred with the debut of *PoweR Girls*, a 2005 MTV production that chronicled the work of Lizzie Grubman's fashion public relations firm, Grubman PR, and four hopeful young publicists/interns looking for success. As the show aired throughout the semester, students offered comments and observations, often challenging the show's ethical positions and professionalism.

For example, one student displayed a promotional piece for the show in *Maxim* magazine in which the interns were clad in underwear. Another student reported that while watching the show, her mother called to be sure that what she was seeing was not what her daughter was majoring in, even as the student's roommate found the portrayal of public relations appealing. To both, the student conveyed admirable advocacy in explaining what public relations is — and what it is not. A third student noted a scene in which the interns went shopping, neglecting their work assignment, and then lying to Grubman on the phone about what they were doing. And it was all captured, the student noted, by the reality television crew.<sup>21</sup>

More recently, a student stood up as an advocate for the field via social media in the wake of E!'s *SPINdustry*, a documentary about Jonathan Cheban's and Simon Huck's Command PR public relations firm.<sup>22</sup>

The trials and tribulations of media celebrities and television, film, and sports stars, via blogs, micro-blogs, social networks, and celebrity news shows and websites, offer fertile ground for teachable moments as well. More than once, for example, students have assumed public

relations to be behind those very public and painful celebrity breakdowns. One way to counter such perceptions has been to review standards of ethical conduct. Another has been to trace the coverage itself to determine the status of the celebrity's publicity counsel; it is not uncommon to find that there were changes either shortly before or after a public incident. Another assumption is that in the "real world," public relations is actually an event planning function, a glamorous job conducted in designer clothes for the privileged and chronicled by a media seeking to serve client interests — an approach more in line with that of Edina Monsoon. When students voice these observations, however, they open the door for discussion and clarification. It is an opportunity to engage them in critically evaluating the public relations function and the perceptions of others outside the field. It is a C.J. moment.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This expands ideas that argue the field is mature enough to embrace the "bad" as well as the "good" in public relations history. See, for example, Karen Miller Russell, "Embracing the Embarrassing." Keynote speech at the International History of Public Relations Conference; Bournemouth, England, July 8, 2010: <http://blogs.bournemouth.ac.uk/historyofpr/2010/07/08/history-of-pr-keynote-speech-1-dr-karen-m-russell/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Absolutely Fabulous* contains language and portrayal of use/abuse of alcohol and drugs that some might consider offensive. However, because these incidents are conveyed in the extreme for comic effect, this might not be a problem.

<sup>3</sup> As of this writing, *Ab Fab* is scheduled to air three more times in the next 12 months for its 20th anniversary.

<sup>4</sup> Over time, I've found that many more students are familiar with *The West Wing* than with *Ab Fab*, although they haven't tended to focus on the public relations aspect.

<sup>5</sup> "Access" aired March 31, 2004. It was written by Lauren Schmidt and Josh Singer and directed by Alex Graves. Aaron Sorkin created *The West Wing* series but left in 2003.

<sup>6</sup> DeeDee Myers and Dana Perino (for President George W. Bush) are the only women thus far to have served in that position.



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<sup>7</sup> Ron Nesson, press secretary for President Gerald R. Ford, started this tradition when he left the jacket to his successor, Jody Powell, press secretary to President Jimmy Carter, in January 1977. In 2009, Robert Gibbs, former press secretary to President Barack Obama, showed the jacket to Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski of MSNBC's *Morning Joe*, but he wouldn't share the notes.

<sup>8</sup> See also the list of links following the episode summary:  
[http://www.westwingguide.com/S5/Episodes/108\\_ACCESS.html](http://www.westwingguide.com/S5/Episodes/108_ACCESS.html).

<sup>9</sup> This sentiment brings to mind Clinton press secretary Mike McCurry's stance during the Monica Lewinsky crisis: If he didn't ask, he wouldn't know, and he couldn't lie. See, for example, Peter Baker, and Howard Kurtz, "McCurry Exit: A White House Wit's End," *The Washington Post* (July 24, 1998), A01.

<sup>10</sup> This scene also illustrates the classic interview technique of remaining silent when a subject has finished speaking. The strategy is to see whether the subject will "fill in" the silence. Despite her training, C.J. does just that, leading to that last qualifier.

<sup>11</sup> *Absolutely Fabulous* and its encore specials aired from 1992-1996 and from 2001-2004. It was written by Jennifer Saunders and produced by BBC Comedy and French and Saunders Productions. There has long been speculation that Saunders based her character on Lynne Franks, a real, larger than life London PR guru, but both women have denied it.

<sup>12</sup> The show's portrayal of the fashion magazine business is also rife with parody.

<sup>13</sup> "Jealous," *Absolutely Fabulous*. Season 4, Episode 3, Part 2. Aired April 27, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Sean Coughlan, "Public Relations Is Now History," BBC News online (April 21, 2010): [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/education/8634442.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/education/8634442.stm). The story concerned the first International Public Relations History Conference, held at Bournemouth University.

<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.nbc.com/free-agents/about/>. Accessed September 28, 2011. *Free Agents* is based on a British comedy of the same name that takes place in a talent agency. That show is scheduled to air this fall on BBC America: <http://press.bbcamerica.com/press-release.jsp?id=42555>. Accessed September 28, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> *Scandal* is created by Shonda Rhimes, creator of ABC's *Grey's Anatomy* and its spinoff, *Private Practice*.

<sup>17</sup> See ABC's "About *Scandal*" at <http://abc.go.com/shows/scandal>. Accessed September 29, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> ABC *Scandal* Trailer: <http://abc.go.com/watch/abc-new-shows/SH55127502/VD55127576/scandal-trailer>. Accessed September 29, 2011.

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<sup>19</sup> For more shows, films, books about or featuring public relations, see, for example, Joe Saltzman, “The Image of the Public Relations Practitioner in Popular Culture” (<http://www.ijpc.org>); Karen S. Miller, “Public Relations in Film and Fiction, 1930-1995,” *Journal of Public Relations Research* 11:1 (1999), 3-28; Mordecai Lee, “The Image of the Government Flack: Movie Depictions of Public Relations in Public Administration,” *Public Relations Review* 27 (Fall 2001), 297-315; and Tom Watson “Films, TV, Radio and Books on PR,” [blogpost]: <http://dummyspit.wordpress.com/2011/02/01/films-tv-radio-and-books-on-pr---update-3>.

<sup>20</sup> The author thanks Danny Shipka, assistant professor, Manship School of Communication, Louisiana State University, for offering this insight during the session “The Image of the Public Relations Practitioner in Popular Culture: What Is the Predominant Image and How Do We Repair It?” at the Public Relations Division and Entertainment Studies Interest Group, Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, St. Louis, MO, August 9, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Grubman recently appeared on the reality show *The Real Housewives of New Jersey*. She’s the boss of intern Ashley Holmes, Jacqueline’s daughter.

<sup>22</sup> *SPINdustry*, produced by Kim Kardashian, aired on February 21, 2010, and launched a series, *Spin Crowd*, that aired during the fall of 2010.