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PR goes to the movies: The image of public relations improves from 1996 to 2008

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Abstract

This qualitative analysis of public relations in popular Hollywood films from 1996 to 2008 looks at three questions: first, how is the PR practitioner portrayed in recent films? Second, what kind of public relations activities and models of public relations are depicted? Third, how do other scholars' results in prior studies apply to the portrayal of public relations in current films? Results show that for major films from *Mars Attacks!* (1996) to *Hancock* (2008), public relations practitioners are more credible, respected and influential, and PR work is more varied and complex than found in studies of films through 1995.

Keywords: Public relations; PR; Public relations practitioner; Movies; Film

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[6. Results](#)[7. Discussion](#)[References](#)**1. Introduction**

This qualitative analysis of recent popular American films indicates that the image of the practitioner is now less negative than shown in previous studies of earlier films. The work of the practitioners is also more varied and complex. Overall, the public relations practitioner seems to have become more credible, respected and influential.

To build on the foundation of important previous scholarship, this study looks at public relations in popular Hollywood films from 1996 to 2008 that are set in the United States in contemporary times and feature public relations professionals as major characters. This study brings research on public relations in film into the present, serves as a report card on how the image of the profession is changing, and posits explanations for some of the changes.

2. Literature review**2.1. Status and credibility of public relations**

Prior to the 1996 start date of this study, the public relations profession had acknowledged a serious image problem. Behind practitioners' backs, outright in the media and even in the pages of industry journals, there were references to "a parade of hacks, flacks and assorted charlatans who have adopted 'public relations' as a prestigious synonym for press agency or publicity" (Brody, 1992). In addition to Brody, other major figures in the field of PR defined the extent of the image problem. There was even serious discussion about whether the term "public relations" was so tainted that it should be abandoned and be replaced with some other term ([Brody, 1992], [Pritchitt, 1992] and [Sparks, 1993]). As the 1992 head of the International Public Relations Association, Pritchitt proposed "Public Relations for Public Relations." His PR program included: outreach and interaction with other business constituencies "aimed at improving understanding of public relations activities and their benefits"; use of client newsletters to explain PR generally, not just to report about specific PR activities for clients; and challenge of "unjust general criticism of public relations" (Pritchitt, 1992, pp. 46–47).

Past studies produced sometimes contradictory results. The chairman of the PR for PR Committee of the Public Relations Society of America surveyed 22 prominent practitioners and reported that the negative image is "an irritant" (Young, 1992). A quantitative experiment on public opinion about PR done in 1993, but not published until 2002, found, "Overall, among the general public, the reputation of public relations is better than what many think" (Salot, 2002). In contrast, in a major national survey of professional credibility by the Public Relations Society of American, the public relations professional ranked 42nd of 44, outranking only famous entertainer and television or radio talk show host (National Credibility Index, 1999). Other research confronted the conundrum that any sources, including PR sources, directly affiliated with an organization are deemed less credible than an outside source (Callison, 2004).

2.2. Depictions of PR in print and in broadcast news

In the 1990s, scholars investigated the presentation of the profession in various media. Spicer (1993) discerned seven themes in print media: first, PR as distraction, as in a PR practitioner trying to distract a journalist from a line of questioning; second, PR as disaster, as in 'a PR disaster'; third, PR as challenge, as "a 'genuine' public relations difficulty as opposed to a one-time disaster or distraction"; fourth, PR as hype, as in synthetic excitement or overstatement; fifth, merely PR, suggesting "that public relations techniques are often used in place of substance"; sixth, PR as war, as in "an ongoing battle or fight to gain positive public opinion"; and seventh, PR as schmooze, "a still prevalent stereotype of the glad-handing, smooth-talking, personally charming front man or woman" (Spicer, 1993, pp. 53–57).

Looking at broadcast news and building on Spicer's work, Keenan (1996) described two additional themes: first, expertise, "where a story referred to someone in public relations for their knowledge or opinion on a topic," a mostly positive theme; second, society, "for those items that dealt with the role or place of public relations and public relations practitioners in the larger culture and society" and which were mainly negative, portraying the profession as "a stressful occupation with little job security and elements of criminality" (Keenan, 1996). That study also enumerated the frequency with which broadcast news stories conveyed each of four communications models as delineated by Hunt and Grunig (1994). Keenan's tally is Press Agency (31); Two-Way Asymmetric (18); Public Information (16); and Two-Way Symmetric (2).

The two-way symmetric model of communication involves both sending out information from the organization and bringing information back to the organization to use to adjust the organization's behavior. This model presents PR as an agent of negotiation and compromise; it is a model that emphasizes professionalism, knowledge, research, tact and influence within the organization (a high-level counselor on issues of long-term strategy, planning and company image), but it is a model that is rarely depicted in the media, perhaps because of difficulty of conveying its complexity in a pithy talking point or sound bite.



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2.3. Depictions of PR practitioners in film

Within the context of ongoing debate about the credibility of PR sources and the status of public relations as a profession, as well as its representation in broadcast and print media, researchers cataloged and analyzed the depiction of the PR practitioner in films ([Tavcar, 1993] and [Tilson, 2003]). While Spicer's print study (1993) extracted characteristics associated with the activity of public relations, Miller's (1999) encyclopedic study covering film and fiction from 1930 to 1995 used inductive analysis of 67 films and 51 works of fiction to extract recurring traits or archetypal characteristics associated with the public relations practitioners:

Ditzy as in "shallow but lovable"

Obsequious, "guided by whatever they think will satisfy their employers"

Cynical, an enduring stereotype from the 1950s, who is "sarcastic, edgy, angry, contemptuous, and driven"

Manipulative, practitioners who "lie and cheat both for personal career advancement and on behalf of their clients"

Money-minded, practitioners who "think about their jobs from only a financial standpoint," often provide comic relief, but can also define PR as prostitution

Isolated, and "unable to fit in with coworkers. ... ill at ease ... an outsider"

Accomplished, a positive stereotype of a practitioner who is "confident, poised, capable, responsible, bright, reliable, efficient, imaginative, well-read, personable, and trusted"

Unfulfilled, "skilled but unhappy with their jobs" (Miller, 1999, pp. 8–10).

Because novels and films both focus on character, Miller developed an analysis of "characteristics" from a vast number of sources, some of which have public relations only as a minor plot point and practitioners only as unnamed characters. Miller's sample depicted practitioners as mainly men (75%), with women practitioners often included mainly as a love interest (1999).

In Miller's sample, effectiveness, when it could be determined, "should not be considered a sign of respect. Quite often the least ethical practitioners are the most effective at their jobs" (1999, p. 16). She concluded that public relations is generally presented as "a somewhat mysterious occupation populated by unscrupulous practitioners with superiority complexes whose main goals appear to be getting their clients mentioned in the news media, duping the public and their clients, and gaining power" (Miller, 1999, p. 24).

In studying film depictions of public relations in public administration, Lee (2001) excluded films already covered by Miller and identified a sample of 20 films dating from 1944 to 2000, including several made-for-television movies, many with what he termed the "government flack" in only a minor role. Again, the main PR work in the films is media relations. Here 90% of practitioners are men. Half of Lee's sample is from the 1990s, which Lee suggested a growing interest in the profession; however the fact that 6 of the 20 films date from the period after the Miller study end date may have skewed the chronological frequency of Lee's 2001 sample. In a 2009 update on government flacks in film, Lee's additional sample of seven films includes two from the 1996 to 2008 period, but neither meets another criterion of the current study, that the PR role be substantial, as discussed below.

3. Research

To bring scholarship in the field up to the present, the current study looks at three questions: first, how are the PR practitioners portrayed in recent films? Second, what kind of public relations activities and models of public relations are depicted? Third, how do Miller and Spicer's categories apply to public relations in current films?

4. Methodology

This study looks at public relations practitioners as major characters in U.S. films that achieved significant public awareness in theatrical release between 1996 and 2008, that is, since Miller's end date. The current sample is thus unique, having no overlap with Tavcar (1993), Miller (1999), or (Lee, 2001) and (Lee, 2009), therefore allowing the present study to move the on-going scholarship in the field forward. Short plot summaries of two films—*Wag the Dog* and *America's Sweethearts*—appear in Tilson (2003), but that paper does not apply results of the Spicer (1993) or Miller (1999) study. For the current study, one source of potential subjects was the IJPC 2008 Database, of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture Project, using "PR" as a search criterion. Further searches on Internet Movie Database (IMDb) using keywords and searching plot summaries and cast lists identified other possible films.

Previous researchers, including (Lee, 2001) and (Lee, 2009), incorporated films with unnamed PR characters or characters in roles too slight to provide much useful data. Therefore, for the present study, cross-checking cast lists on IMDb, eliminates films in which a nameless character is so minor as to be listed in credits as "PR" or "publicist," or is in only a single scene, such as making an introduction at a press conference.

Theatrical release is another criterion for this study, because made-for-television movies have a different development process and a more female target audience than the theatrical releases in Miller's baseline study (1999). Eliminating movies that made almost nothing at the box office excludes films that had little opportunity to influence public opinion of PR practitioners, as does eliminating films released directly to video.

Finally, this study eliminates: U.S. movies set in other countries where the reputation of PR may differ. It also excludes movies set in the past, such as *Chicago*, that may purport to depict how press agents behaved in the past. The focus of the present study is on the image of public relations practitioners and the work of PR in current American films.

5. The sample: PR in the movies 1996–2008

5.1. *Mars Attacks!* (1996)

Presidential Press Secretary Jerry Ross, played by Martin Short, is ditzzy (Miller, 1999) but capable, within limitations, as a strategic advisor to the president. PR work includes media relations and public opinion feedback (the two-way symmetrical model). Ross is also in charge of arranging emergency broadcasts and the ill-fated alien landing ceremony. Consumed and stressed by work, he is unfulfilled (Miller, 1999), the fatal flaw that causes him to bring a prostitute (alien) into the White House. Thus, the unfulfilled PR practitioner helps to destroy the world.

5.2. *Wag the Dog* (1997)

Presidential crisis consultant Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro) is manipulative (Miller, 1999); he is a ruthless, pragmatic, amoral fixer with no personal attachments. Brean hires a Hollywood producer to create a massive PR distraction (Spicer, 1993) to "change the story, change the lead" away from the president's sexual peccadillo. The female Press Secretary is not a love interest, in contrast to the majority of women in Miller's sample (1999). She is, however, out of her depth. No one in the Press Office resigns because Brean's crisis plan is unethical, even when Brean perverts the most basic principle of media relations—never lie to the media—by issuing a denial that spreads a lie. PR in *Wag the Dog* includes strategy, client management, event management, speechwriting, and brand creation. To achieve his client's re-election, Brean would literally kill—but not with his own clean hands, of course. The "higher level" public relations functions in *Wag the Dog* are all manipulative, dishonest, sleazy, amoral, and outright criminal.

5.3. *The Kid* (2000)

PR practitioner Russ Duritz (Bruce Willis) is a successful image consultant who also does media training and crisis communication. When he crosses ethical lines with a PR stunt, a young female colleague serves both as a moral compass and a traditional female love interest (Miller, 1999). A confrontation with his childhood self-dramatizes the gap between Duritz's aspirations and what he has become, an emotionally dead workaholic, who is successful but unfulfilled (Miller, 1999). His younger self says, "You help people lie about who they really are." By positing the integration of work and family, the film's ending is the first instance of the sample that suggests the possibility of a fulfilled life working in public relations.

5.4. *America's Sweethearts* (2001)

As head of movie publicity, Lee Phillips (Billy Crystal), might seem to fit Spicer's category, PR as schmooze (1993). Phillips knows the right people, and he is adept at media relations and personal negotiation. Though accomplished (Miller, 1999), he is replaced by someone younger and cheaper, until the studio confronts a PR disaster (Spicer, 1993). As a consultant, he creates a press junket as a PR distraction (Spicer, 1993). Phillips is a good listener, executive counselor, event producer, and dynamic personality who sees his old PR job as paradise lost. He is not unfulfilled (Miller, 1999), however, because he does not miss having a personal life. He says, "If your mother dies, you shed a tear and then you go down and say, 'My mother would have loved this movie.'"

5.5. *People I Know* (2002)

Eli Wurman (Al Pacino) is a theatrical press agent, a personal publicist, and a charitable event planner, who works the room and "sucks up to celebrities." He is a cynic (Miller, 1999) and a fixer who crosses ethical lines for clients and blackmails in the name of doing good. Addicted to prescription drugs, an updating of Miller's finding that "alcohol use is portrayed an inherent in the career choice" (1999), Wurman is an older, exhausted version of Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) in *The Sweet Smell of Success*. Wurman has no personal life. He will die alone, unable to escape the entanglements of a career as a cynical career PR guy.

5.6. *Phone Booth* (2002)

This film presents entertainment publicity as an exhilarating game played by street-smart males. Leveraging relationships and celebrities to achieve media coverage, New York publicist Stu Shepard (Colin Farrell) handles editors, trades small favors such as tickets for celebrity information, places gossip items, and does low-level image consulting (how to dress for success). He is manipulative (Miller, 1999), but not criminal. His moral and ethical lapses do not justify his becoming the target of a psycho. Under the threat of death, he repudiates his personal and professional lies, as well as the entire PR profession. He tells his aspiring assistant, "... don't be a publicist. You're too good for it."

5.7. *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* (2005)

Now too famous to work undercover, FBI agent Gracie Hart (Sandra Bullock) becomes the face of the FBI, a PR function that requires an extensive makeover. As a spokesperson, she becomes a media celebrity, though her successes are seen as "merely PR" (Spicer, 1993), not real FBI work, and she is unfulfilled (Miller, 1999) with no personal life. Her make-over is engineered by FBI image consultant

Joel Meyers (Diedrich Bader), a repressed gay in a guy culture. Also unfulfilled (Miller, 1999), he teaches femininity, advocates appearance over reality, does media training, manages Hart's media tour, and handles media relations. Overall the movie repudiates the PR functions of image consultant and spokesperson.

5.8. *Jersey Girl* (2006)

Ollie Trinke (Ben Affleck) begins as an accomplished (Miller, 1999) music publicity mogul. "Confident, poised, capable, responsible, bright, reliable, efficient, imaginative, well-read, personable, and trusted" (Miller, 1999), Trinke also has a personal life. His PR duties include employee relations, celebrity crisis communication, overseeing publicity materials, and event management. He also does media relations, including hosting a press event, at which he is overwhelmed by the loss of his wife and the stress of balancing infant care with PR work. He cracks, publicly bad mouths his client, and denounces the journalists and the rags they work for. Blackballed, Trinke rebuilds his personal life, but he must eventually relinquish hope of returning to public relations.

5.9. *For Your Consideration* (2006)

The title is the ad line for the ubiquitous Hollywood trade ads designed to generate Oscar buzz for both Hollywood and independent films. The milieu is the low-budget world of third-rate desperation. Marginal Hollywood publicist Carey Taft (John Michael Higgins) is ditzzy (Miller, 1999) and out of date, the harmless object of satire. An old-fashioned press agent, he plants "items" and tries to create buzz as he pitches D-list actors to E-list local media. Another PR practitioner is the female unit publicist, the on-set media liaison. She is neither a love interest (Miller, 1999) nor an object of satire, but a tool to expose the self-delusion on the fringes of Hollywood.

5.10. *Sex and the City* (2008)

In this brand extension of the 1998–2004 HBO series, which is beyond the scope of this study, Samantha Jones (Kim Cattrall) is an accomplished (Miller, 1999) celebrity publicist with one client, her boyfriend. Calling herself his manager, she handles media relations and negotiates magazine covers. Although she has a personal life, she is bored in Malibu away from her New York girlfriends. Too egotistical to be a PR practitioner, she tells her TV star boyfriend, "The last two years it's been all about you. The first three were all about me. That was so much better."

5.11. *Hancock* (2008)

Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman), "the Bono of PR," is a non-profit advocate and the celebrity crisis consultant to down-and-out superhero, Hancock (Will Smith). Since Hancock is incorrigible, the situation fits Spicer's category of PR as challenge, "a 'genuine' public relations difficulty as opposed to a one-time disaster or distraction" (Spicer, 1993). Successful and accomplished (Miller, 1999), Embrey has Hancock follow a typical celebrity makeover process: apologize, accept punishment, become scarce to the media and the public, and then reemerge as a reformed, better person. He teaches Hancock "how to interface with the public," because "it's not a crime to be an asshole, but it's very counterproductive." With a fulfilled personal life as a husband and father, Embrey's PR crisis consultancy helps to save the world from destruction and his non-profit All-Heart campaign works toward a better future. As Hancock says, "You're going to change the world. Good job, Ray."

6. Results

The result for the first research question, as the chronological analysis above shows, is that the presentation of the PR in the movies is becoming more positive over time. Compared to Miller's sample through 1995, the image of the practitioner has improved, with negative stereotypes decreasing in kind, frequency, and virulence. The image also improves markedly from 1996 through 2008. To the second question, the actual PR work done by practitioners is now less "mysterious" (Miller, 1999, p. 24). Job duties are depicted in more detail, and they are more realistic, diverse, nuanced, challenging and respected. Almost all of the practitioners are good at public relations, but as in the previous study, being good at PR doesn't necessitate either doing good or being good, particularly in the early films in the sample.

As to the application of Miller's categories, negative stereotypes in the current sample are fewer in kind, with three of Miller's seven negative categories not represented. First, obsequious: none of the PR practitioners is a puppy dog. Today's PR practitioner is more often a respected counselor who tells clients hard-truths, for example, Embrey telling the superhero, Hancock, to serve his jail term. Second, money-minded: no one in this sample of films is in PR for a big payoff. Covering a period that encompasses the dotcom boom—and bust—and the financial services boom—and bust—and the ongoing bonanza in film star salaries, filmmakers are no longer accusing hard-working PR professionals of greed. Third, isolated and "unable to fit in with coworkers ... ill at ease ... an outsider" (Miller, 1999, p. 10): each practitioner is a "people person," even Gracie Hart of *Miss Congeniality*, who is drafted as spokesperson because the public loves her. Thus, there are fewer of Miller's negative categories.

Miller's most negative category is manipulative, those who "lie and cheat" on their own behalf and that of their client (1999). Conrad Brean does nothing on his own behalf, but *Wag the Dog* is a damning satire of PR as distraction, spin, reframing, fake pageantry, and manipulation of the public and the press. Its PR practitioner is cool and calculating, the brain behind the shallow doofus of an unseen president. The fixer will do anything for his client from rewriting history to murder; the Press Secretary and her staff follow his orders. The press laps up the pageantry and the excitement of a winnable war

in this film from 1997. Since then, "wag the dog" has become a code phrase for political manipulation of the press and the public. Smaller scale manipulation is also represented in *Phone Booth* (2002). The PR person's misdeeds shrink in scope and severity, however, in the face of his possible murder by a vigilante moralist.

Cynical as in "sarcastic, edgy, angry, contemptuous, and driven" (Miller, 1999, p. 9) may have endured as a stereotype from the 1950s through the 1990s. It appears only once in the present sample, however, where it is a dying breed, represented only by Eli Wurman in *People I Know* (2002). When he achieves a moment of professional redemption by calling in all his chits, Wurman says, "I don't have any more days like today left in me." Neither manipulative nor cynical appears during the later years of the present sample.

Taft in *For Your Consideration* (2006), the satire of Hollywood's obsession with the Oscars, is ditzzy as in "shallow but lovable" (Miller, 1999, p. 8), and technologically out of date. He is, however, harmless. Though on the fringes of Hollywood, he can still get "placement."

The other films in the sample present much less negative images of public relations. The practitioners in *Mars Attacks!* (1996), *The Kid* (1999), *Miss Congeniality 2: Armed and Fabulous* (2005), and *Sex and the City* (2008) are all unfulfilled, "skilled but unhappy with their jobs" (Miller, 1999, p. 10). They are stressed by the time and the work demands of the job. They lack personal fulfillment, recognize the lack, and try to remedy it in sometimes questionable ways. Of this group, *The Kid* presents the possibility of integrating love, life and work in public relations.

Accomplished PR practitioners are found in 3 of the 11 films. *America's Sweethearts* (2001) and *Jersey Girl* (2006) both posit the loss of a PR job as Paradise Lost. Lee Phillips, who has done nothing worse than get older and more expensive, is able to regain his Eden/PR job. Ollie Trinke in *Jersey Girl*, however, has broken two of the commandments of PR: thou shalt not "dis" thy client, and thou shalt not publicly bag on journalists nor disparage the media. The Eden of a PR career combined with a fulfilled personal life is forever beyond his grasp.

Finally, the most recent and most positive film, *Hancock* (2008), shows PR as challenging, positive and worthwhile. Its practitioner balances a happy, satisfying personal life with the demands of his profession, and PR helps both the client and the public, using the two-way symmetrical model of PR. The accomplished PR practitioners in these films are not bitter ex-journalists or isolated, anti-social novelists who have gone into PR for the money. Public relations is now presented as a profession in its own right, not a desperate, fall-back position.

All of these films show complex, challenging PR work that goes beyond mere press agency. As the analysis of the sample above shows, many of the details and processes of public relations work are delineated, in contrast to Miller's sample, where PR work is "magic" or "embarrassingly easy—a phone call or a cocktail with a reporter is all that it takes" (Miller, 1999, p. 23). In the current sample, public relations activities from media relations to event planning and production to image consulting to strategic planning are varied and complex. Often they are undertaken in response to public misunderstanding, demonstrating the two-way symmetrical model of PR.

Diversity is not mentioned in the analysis above, because there is none. In these films, PR is still done solely by Caucasians. As previously ([Lee, 2001] and [Miller, 1999]), most practitioners are men. In contrast to the samples in previous studies, the practitioners in the most current films are no longer by definition liars, cheats, scoundrels, or failures at some other job. The accomplished practitioners in the recent films of the current sample period have a higher credibility, more status in society, and more influence with their clients. Their major challenges are ethics and workaholicism. The final frontier for the PR practitioner, according to these films, is to get a life and to be more than a PR function by making and keeping personal connections, despite the demands of the profession.

7. Discussion

According to current films, PR work is now considered more valuable and its processes are better understood than previously. During the 1996–2008 period, in addition to the efforts of PRSA to educate the public about PR ([Pritchitt, 1992] and [Young, 1992]), the Writers Guild of America West, which represents film and television writers, undertook a public relations initiative. Its goal was to educate the public that films are not solely the work of "auteur" directors, but must be written by writers before they can be directed by directors (Robb, 2000). As part of its ongoing campaign, the Guild educates its members to write letters to the editor and to ask for corrections when screenwriters' contributions are overlooked. The Guild also educates its members on what publicists do and how to work with a project's publicist or hire their own PR representative to enhance their professional standing. Currently the WGA website includes an excellent 4000-word primer on entertainment publicity, as it relates to screenwriters and their careers (Clein, n.d.). During the 2007–2008, writers strike, the Guild also mounted a public information campaign involving media outreach, PSAs called "Speechless Without," and multi-faceted uses of new technology, such as RSS feeds, YouTube videos and social network sites. Today's screenwriters better understand what public relations practitioners do, why their work is important, and how they do it. Screenwriters write about what they know. Now they know PR.

Increased television exposure could also help explain PR's improving image. Since 1995, the American public has had weekly exposure to long-running television series related to PR. *Spin City* (1996–2002) depicts a likable public information staff running public interference for a blustering and inept New York mayor. *The Sex and the City* (1998–2004) HBO series depicts PR as the job of one of its glamorous leads. Another less successful series, *Jake in Progress* (2005–2006), starring John Stamos, also exposes the public to the work of a celebrity publicist. An analysis of the image of the

PR professional and the work of PR presented in recent American television is a possible subject for further study. So, overall, in the period covered by this study, the American public has had the opportunity to become more familiar with the profession of public relations and its complex challenges.

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