



Idealistic and conflicted: New portrayals of public relations practitioners in film



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ABSTRACT

The profession of public relations is often portrayed negatively in popular culture. Cultivation theory suggests that these negative portrayals are likely to affect public perception of the profession. Building on Miller's (1999) study of public relations portrayals in the entertainment media, this study analyzed 10 recent films to determine how public relations characters were represented. The analysis was generally consistent with Miller's finding that archetypal negative stereotypes of public relations professionals abound. The study also identified two new portrayals of the professionals in popular film, *idealistic* and *conflicted*. In light of this finding, theoretical and practical suggestions are offered to help public relations practitioners counteract these unflattering portrayals.

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Portrayals of public relations practitioners in film

The public relations profession is often portrayed negatively in popular culture (Miller, 1999; Saltzman, 2011; Spicer, 1993). Television and movies have contributed to the impression that public relations practitioners are mostly dishonest, manipulative “spin-doctors” (Dennison, 2012). Public relations professionals have good reasons to care how they are portrayed in film and fiction because these portrayals are likely to affect the reputation of the profession. First, a fictional narrative can help us understand the patterns of culture in which professionals may operate because stories “instantiate and localize what is conventionally expected in a culture” and they “illustrate the troubles and the perils that the conventionally expected may produce” (Bruner, 2006, p. 232).

Narratives can also enable viewers to envision a subjunctive reality (“what if. . .”). According to Vandermeersche, Soetaert, and Rutten (2013), films, as the most popular stories in our culture, have gained the status of authoritative sources of information. As such, films may provide valuable insight into public's perceptions of any profession. Scull and Peltier (2007) argued that movies contain patterns of meaning that may “hold explanatory power” (p. 13). Thus, analysis of portrayal of public relations practitioners in film can reveal the patterns of how our society perceives these professionals. These portrayals may also affect the public relations practitioners' perceptions of their own profession as individuals can use symbolic resources “to construct their own identities and define their own lifestyles” (Buckingham, 2003, p. 159).

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Cultivation theory (Cohen & Weimann, 2000; Gerbner, 1998) suggests that if audiences are consistently exposed to an unflattering image of public relations over time, this image will become the mainstream perception of the profession. Some recent studies, however, have suggested that public relations portrayals may be getting better (Ames, 2010; Kinsky, 2011).

This study analyzed the way recent films have represented characters in the field of public relations. The purpose was to extend Miller's (1999) landmark study of public relations archetypes in fiction and to test the findings of Ames (2010) and Kinsky (2011) that suggested portrayals might be improving. An analysis of 10 major motion pictures revealed two images of public relations practitioners not previously described in the literature: the conflicted practitioner and the idealist. Based on the findings, we argue that the profession still receives mostly negative treatment. We offer several practical suggestions for improving the profession's public image.

The next section will review relevant literature on perceptions of public relations and portrayals of the profession in mass media. In recent decades, the very term "public relations" has fallen out of favor among some practitioners. Sparks (1993) noted that public relations work is often identified by other labels, including public affairs, public communications, and marketing communications. Therefore, studies that dealt with the term "public relations" as well as any of other relevant terms have been considered in this research.

Perceptions of public relations

Callison (2001) asked, "Do PR practitioners have a PR problem?" (p. 219). He observed that while most public relations practitioners work hard to create favorable images of clients, "the profession seldom works on its own behalf to campaign for the image of public relations itself" (p. 219). In another study Callison (2004) measured perceptions of public relations practitioners through telephone surveys and source manipulation. Although participants did not blame practitioners for being biased in favor of their organizations, Callison observed that "spokespersons who are paid to present their employers in the best possible light are not always seen as stalwarts of honesty, which often leads to motives being questioned" (p. 373).

In their book on public relations in American society, Coombs and Holladay (2014) identified several wide-spread attacks on the profession, such as the public is purposely being kept uninformed and the entire field is only publicity. Authors argued that these attacks may be a result of portrayals of public relations in mass media. Many public relations practitioners agree with the fact that they need to engage in public relations campaigns to improve the image of public relations. Discussions about the role and functions of the profession (Tsetsura & Kruckeberg, 2009) and a recently launched by PRSA a national communication campaign to improve the image of the profession, to emphasize the importance of PRSA, and to elevate the status of APR, a voluntarily accreditation in public relations (Cohen, 2013) are good examples of the latest efforts to improve the image of public relations.

In short, many agree that the public has negative perceptions of public relations as a field. But why do these negative perceptions and portrayals matter?

Importance of studying portrayals of public relations professionals

Long before Gerbner (1958) suggested that communication scholars should analyze media content to understand the relationship between mass media and culture, Lippmann (1922) argued that media portrayals shape people's views of the world. Because understandings of reality are socially constructed, the media can create "pictures in our heads" (Lippmann, 1922, p. 3) that shape our thoughts, attitudes, and actions. Cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998) thus holds that when people use mass media—particularly television—they are more likely to believe that media portrayals of reality correspond to *actual* reality.

These portrayals can feed into perceptions of public relations professionals. Cohen and Weimann (2000) explained, "According to cultivation theory, massive exposure to television's reconstructed realities can result in perceptions of reality very different from what they might be if viewers watched less television" (p. 99). "Mainstreaming" refers to the phenomenon by which people from a wide range of backgrounds and perspectives come to share similar views due to heavy media exposure (Gerbner, 1998, p. 183). For people who have no direct contact with actual public relations practitioners, media portrayals may be their only source of information about the profession. As a result, perceptions of public relations are likely to influence, and be influenced by, fictional accounts. Previous experiments showed that participants' overall ratings of public relations dropped after non-practitioners watched movie clips featuring public relations characters (Dennison, 2012). As Cohen and Weimann (2000) noted in their discussion of cultivation theory, reconstructed realities can have an effect on how viewers see the world around them. If stereotypes of public relations practitioners exist, these stereotypes may also be reinforced by the entertainment media.

Studying portrayals of public relations professionals can help us understand whether practitioners themselves see the profession in the negative light. Recent studies demonstrated that perceptions of the public relations profession and of public relations professionals are often socially constructed by practitioners themselves, through their everyday interactions with one another and with their clients (Tsetsura, 2010a). As a result of these interactions, professionals can socially construct the field of public relations as a service profession (Tsetsura, 2010b), which may not be perceived as a *real job* (Tsetsura, 2011) by those outside the profession. Both of these constructions may contribute to creating certain negative perceptions and portrayals of the field. And young professionals can develop these negative stereotypes about the profession very early

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