



Is a picture worth a thousand words? Using films and television shows to teach public relations



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ABSTRACT

While a number of studies have looked at the image of public relations practitioners as portrayed in films and other media, few if any of those studies have focused primarily on the pedagogical perspective of using films. Therefore, a benchmark international survey of public relations educators was undertaken to answer questions about how (or whether) to use films as a teaching tool. Among other things, the findings of the study shed light on how often PR instructors use films in the classroom; the value that films provide; why some professors decline to use them; which specific films and television shows are being used; and guidelines for utilizing movies and television programs as an effective pedagogical technique.

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1. Introduction

A number of studies have looked at the image of PR practitioners as portrayed by movies and television shows. However, few, if any, have focused primarily on how films and TV programs illustrate public relations principles and practice – especially *good* PR practice. It is a critical distinction, for at least two reasons: (1) many on-screen stories that illustrate PR practice do not actually involve PR practitioners; and (2) public relations lessons portrayed in such stories often are not even identified as being related to PR. So, while the on-screen images of PR practitioners sometimes illustrate PR principles and practice, they ignore a wealth of potential other material that may be useful in understanding PR.

In addition, some observers of how PR is portrayed in mass media (be it feature films, TV shows or other channels) have concluded that such images tend to be caricatures, at best, and serious distortions and clichés, at worst, whose value as a legitimate educational tool may be limited, and perhaps more negative than positive.

It is worth noting, too, that previous studies in the public relations field have done very little to answer questions related to decisions about whether or how PR teachers should use movies and TV shows as a pedagogical tool. Anecdotal evidence suggests that public relations teachers often use excerpts and even entire films and TV episodes to teach various PR principles and to illustrate best (and worst) practices. Yet there has been little in the literature to provide information

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about how frequently teachers employ that pedagogical practice, why it is employed (or not employed), how it is employed, and how effective it is.

Thus, a study was conducted to address those questions and others. The study was not designed to promote the use of films, as has been the case with most practitioner articles on the subject. Rather, it was designed primarily to gather data about existing practices, and to provide useful information for public relations educators, especially those who may be new to teaching and those who may be undecided or ambivalent about using films or TV shows in the classroom.

2. Background and literature review

The use of films for pedagogical purposes has been studied rather extensively in a variety of disciplines. So the relative paucity of related pedagogical research in the public relations field is rather surprising, especially considering that public relations seems to be such a natural fit for such research and for the use of films as a teaching tool.

Bluestone (2000), among others, provided an overview on the general use of feature films as a teaching tool. Eddy and Bracken (2008), to take another example, cited research suggesting that films can help students acclimate to college, engage in more-active learning, and identify something with which they are familiar and apply it to learning new concepts. Eddy and Bracken also asserted that films could aid students in sensing the world in a different way and provide teachable moments.

Other research relating to the use of films has focused on specific dimensions of the films themselves. At least two articles, for example (Champoux, 2001; Comer, 2001), made the case for using animated films, as well as non-animated films, in teaching.

Some film-related articles have made the case for specific benefits. Lee and Lo (2014), for example, described how films could help students make the transition from theory to practice using deductive and inductive reasoning.

One of the most notable aspects of the academic literature on the use of films as a teaching tool is the wide variety of fields that have addressed the topic. Represented in the literature are fields as diverse as physiology (Alvarado & Maskiewicz, 2011), ethics (Dubnick, 2000), media and sociology (King, 2000), education (Dalton, 2006; Harper & Rogers, 1999), nursing (Masters, 2005), accounting (Bay & Felton, 2012), medicine (Alarcón & Aguirre, 2007), leadership (Comer, 2001), law and psychology (Anderson, 1992) and qualitative research (Saldaña, 2009). Communication(s) fields are also well represented (e.g., Berger & Pratt, 1998; Proctor, 1993; Proctor & Adler, 1991).

Interestingly, while most fields have focused more on the ability of movies to teach relevant principles, public relations research related to films has focused very heavily on the image of the field and its practitioners (e.g., Ames, 2010; Callison, 2004; Keenan, 1996; Lambert, 2011; Kinsky, 2012; McFarlane, 2002; Miller, 1999; Priest, 2004; Saltzman, 2012). In fact, PR has even focused on subsets of PR's image, such as government PR practitioners (Lee, 2001, 2009) and women in PR (Johnston, 2010).

So the use of film as a teaching tool has been addressed a number of times in the public relations field, but almost always tangentially or in conjunction with an analysis of the way that PR and/or PR practitioners are portrayed in feature films and television shows. The same is true of most practitioner-oriented articles in the PR field. Most writings have tended to address the image of PR and PR practitioners (e.g., Bulakh, 2009), although a few (e.g., Tavcar, 1993) have noted that PR lessons can be derived from films that do not necessarily focus on PR practitioners. The practitioner articles have tended to focus on prescribing which films and TV shows are “must see” viewing for PR practitioners or students.

Another notable, rather distinctive aspect of the PR/film literature has been that few studies have attempted to ascertain the effectiveness of film as a pedagogical tool, or even to describe in a methodical way how (and which) films are being used in teaching. Mak and Hutton (2013) were perhaps the first to study the effects and effectiveness of films in the PR classroom, from the students' perspective, by linking learning goals with outcomes.

After investigating the relevant literature, the authors concluded that while the issue of PR's image, as depicted in movies and TV shows, has been rather extensively addressed, there is a significant need for further study into the use and effectiveness of films as a pedagogical tool.

3. Research questions and design

More specifically, the biggest gap in the literature appears to be the lack of a baseline study that defines the playing field, assesses the importance of the topic and proposes a research agenda. Thus, the research questions were designed and organized in journalistic format: Who, What, When, Where, Why, How and How Much.

RQ1: (a) *Who* uses films in teaching PR, (b) *how much* do they use them, and (c) *how* do they use them?

RQ2: *Why* do PR educators use (or not use) films?

RQ3: *Where* are films most effective, in terms of achieving course objectives?

RQ4: *When* do films add value to PR classes, in terms of course topics?

RQ5: *What* specific films are most used by PR educators?

RQ6: *How* satisfied are PR educators with their use of films?

RQ7: *What* lessons have PR educators learned in the course of using films, and what advice would they give to others?

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