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### PR practitioners and Pop culture

Often public relations practitioners are portrayed negatively. Television and movies have contributed to the impression that these practitioners are mostly dishonest and manipulative. It is important for portrayals of public relations to be true and accurate to the reality of what comprises the activities of public relations practitioners. This paper looks at portrayals of public relations practitioners that have become more prevalent in the late 20th century and early 21st centuries and examines how popular culture has depicted public relations practitioners. This study will use two main aspects of popular culture, films, and television shows. The study analyzes two films and two television shows to establish what exactly is being portrayed and why this is an issue.

In *Wag the Dog*, Robert de Niro portrays an American spin doctor, hired by the President of the USA to help him with his reelection. This movie pictures the stereotype of the ruthless spin doctor. According to this stereotype, a PR practitioner is viewed as a completely unethical, but at the same time highly competent individual, who can manipulate and deceive both the press and the general public. His success is based on lies, propaganda, manipulating techniques, fake stories and even illegal actions. The impact of his evil spin on society is significantly negative and even if his actions are publicized, most of the time it is who he takes responsibility for and not his clients.

Among many roles, the role of Samantha Jones in the successful HBO TV series *Sex in the City*, has promoted the stereotype of a female publicist. She spends most of her time participating in glamorous parties and events, chatting with her friends, hanging around with celebrities and dining in expensive restaurants. She hardly does anything that resembles real work but at the same time she is portrayed to be highly successful professionally. This is clearly an unrealistic, most negative stereotype that describes publicists as unskilled, useless professionals that spend most of their time drinking cocktails at parties. As all successful practitioners know, the PR profession involves a lot of work and requires many practical strategic skills to complete demanding tasks, such as social media monitoring, writing articles and press releases, budgeting, developing publicity strategies, and analyzing data.

In the 2008 comedy “*Hancock*”, Jason Bateman portrays a publicist and celebrity crisis consultant, Ray Embrey, who tries to help a troubled superhero named Hancock to overcome the publicity issues he faces. In doing so, Embrey follows an ethical approach having Hancock apologize for his actions and change his public behavior. The stereotype that this movie depicts for PR practitioners is a positive one. Ray Embrey is an ethical, highly skilled professional, who is highly successful but at the same time has found a very good work-life balance. He works for mostly non-profit organizations and his vision is to “save the world” according to his client’s words. Although this is a fictional character, it proves effective public relations and specifically

effective celebrity makeover, and crisis management can be achieved through ethical practice, honesty and transparency.

In a study by Miller's (1999) who did a study of public relations portrayals in the entertainment media, by analyzing 10 recent films to determine how public relations characters were represented. The analysis was consistent with Miller's finding that archetypal negative stereotypes of public relations professionals abound.

To get a better understanding of what a PR practitioner does we will breakdown the definition. A public relations practitioner uses different forms of communication to establish efficient two-way interaction between the company and other groups of people. They help people and organizations to gain public acceptance by explaining the aims, objectives and methods of their organization, and by building and maintaining a favorable image. The practitioner gives out information for newspaper items, magazine articles and news spots so that the public are made aware of that employer's projects and accomplishments. The work also entails arranging and conducting public contact campaigns which may include setting up speaking engagements, writing speeches, speaking for employers at community functions, planning company conferences and managing fundraising drives. The function of public relations is to build bridges of understanding, goodwill, and awareness between a company and the public it wishes to influence.

Some PR competencies are research, reputation/social media management, crisis management, and publicity. Research determines attitudes and behaviors of the public to generate understanding or influence. Reputation/social media management is used to control what is said/shared on social media and which platforms are utilized for which messages and managing online reputation. For example, during promotions for *Captain America: Civil War* Marvel studios used Facebook to encourage viewers to pick teams-'Team Red' and 'Team Blue' either Captain America or Iron Man. Giving people a sense of belonging and personalizing their viewership experience. Crisis Management addresses issues or problems that threaten the actual person/company or their reputation. In 2020, Netflix used images of young girls with sexual connotations to promote the film, *Cuties*. Publicity is the creation of relationships with media personnel who provide information to their audiences in the form of reviews, interviews, and stories by using PR tactics.

The business side of PR entertainment has two types of relations works. There are PR departments and PR firms. PR departments employees serve various PR roles and functions within the organization. PR firms have agencies that are their own company. They usually focus on a variety of different organizations and industries. Firms may be 1-2-person operations or may be global operations. R&C PMK is a communication agency that specializes in entertainment, lifestyle, sports, influence, and popular culture with offices in LA, NY, and London. A survey by *PRWeek* found that PR departments spent 40% of their budget outsourcing

work to PR firms for services such as writing and communications, media relations and publicity, strategy, and event planning. PR firms are usually hired because a new opportunity arises for an individual or media company such as a new product's debut or the career of a new celebrity. If a problem arises, professional practitioners control negative press and preserve client reputation such as negative buzz about a film, a crisis that a celebrity is facing. *Sitrick and Company* is a well-known crisis management firm in the field.

PR tactics are the actual actions taken by the PR departments or PR firms to create a positive image for the organization. They usually entail controlled and uncontrolled media such as events, stunts, promotional tactics, pop ups, merchandising, and press junkets. Promotional Tactics have techniques that are used to entice customers to purchase a product. They are usually limited to a set period of time. For example, to promote her new Tequila 818, Kendall Jenner drove a large truck over LA, taking pictures with fans, and giving away 818 merchandise such as T-shirts and Hats. Pop ups is another tactic that is used, they are short term spaces. They allow for buzz generation; have low risk of investment; a low cost overhead. Warner Brothers created a pop-up event for *Friends* that ran from September to October 2019; tickets cost \$29.50 per person. Soon after, Warner brothers announced *Friends* was being rebooted.

Press Junkets are designed by PR professionals to bring the press to the cast usually because the press wants to interview a celebrity. The press and celebs are usually at a nice hotel conference center with food/drinks, souvenirs bags and posters. Press Junkets can run 1-2 weeks.

The press usually has their expenses paid by the media outlet they are employed by. Junkets provide media outlets with two kinds of stories. Press conference style where the press can ask celebrities some questions. Then there are personal 5-15 minutes interviews with the celebrities.

PR practitioners use three main tools, press releases, media letters, and pitch letters. A press release is a letter sent out to journalists and media outlets about something noteworthy within their company like new products, corporate changes, events, awards, and partnerships. A press release is not an advertisement, it is a suggestion for a story. Some journalists like them, while others prefer emails or Twitter messages. Zeno Group- a global integrated communications agency surveyed journalist's preferences for using press releases to spark ideas for stories.

Results are below:

Media alerts are 1–2-page announcements sent to journalists or media personal (not the general public) to inform them of an upcoming event/ press conference you want to invite them to. They include information about the event such as what, why, where, and who. A pitch-letter is a story idea sent to a journalist or editor in the hopes of getting media coverage for a company's product or service. Individuals also use them to promote themselves as experts available for interviews.

There are PR practitioners in the entertainment field of film, they have a similar structure like pointed earlier. There are four stages of entertainment PR: development, production, premiere, and post-premiere. In the development stage practitioners look for their audience. The

goal is to create interest in the film. This can be done through an interested star, a well-known director, or the sale of story rights to a big book or true story. During this stage, PR people will try to cover in the following areas: Industry Magazines such as Total Film, Industry websites or Hometown Press.

In production, the target audience is potential audiences for the film. The goal is to build buzz by claiming “first looks” and “reveals.” A unit publicist is on set during production writing press releases. During this stage, PR people will attempt to promote the film through tactics such as:

**Discounted or bulk tickets-** Fandango sold *Sex and the City* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* tickets in bundles 1-2 months before premiere; encouraging moviegoers to see the film in groups.

**Apps-** for *Fifty Shades of Grey* an app was created where you can pretend to be an intern at Grey Enterprises after signing a non-disclosure agreement (just like the film) users get coffee. Take pictures of products and earn rewards. The game created incentive and intrigue about the film.

**Red carpet Premiere-** fancy red carpets (on average of 0.5 million dollars). Premieres are on Monday or Tuesday so they can be covered by the early evening news. Media coverage continued the next day with recaps of *Access Hollywood*, *E News*, etc. Later that night the stars will usually appear on Late night talk shows.

**Strategic Ad placement-** Most ads for films match audience segments and are strongly pushed on Thursdays before opening night. Studio pushed *Fifty Shades of Grey* commercials during the

commercial break of shows “*Scandal*” and “*How to get away with Murder*” both shows with strong female leads and both on Thursdays.

The last stage in post-premiere, the target audience is old/new viewers and industry professionals. The goal is keep people talking about the cast for new projects and talking about the film for sequels. PR professionals can do this through media, tie in merchandise from the film, and Award shows.

Media can hold a great influence over the individuals who partake on it. Labeling Theory is an approach in the sociology of deviance that focuses on the ways in which the agents of social control attach stigmatizing stereotypes to particular groups, and the ways in which the stigmatized change their behavior once labeled. Labeling Theory is associated with the work of Becker and is a reaction to sociological theories which examined only the characteristic of the deviants, rather than the agencies which controlled them. Howard Becker’s (1963) idea that deviance is a consequence of external judgements, or labels, that modify the individual’s self-concept and change the way others respond to the labeled person.

According to Becker, what a person watches on television or in the media automatically becomes tied in their mind to reality. Through watching or hearing of some phenomenon in media an individual is likely to tie that phenomenon into reality for that situation. This then creates a reality from which the viewer, or public, creates a reaction. The individual then reacts to what has been seen or heard and then takes on the mentality of that situation or phenomenon



in reality from thenceforth (Becker, 1963). Thus, this theory can be applied to the label of public relations practitioners as they are portrayed on television and in films.

Based on the above discussion of Becker's (1963) theory of labeling, it is easy to see how the manner in which public relations practitioners are portrayed on television and film can be a guiding force behind how the general public views the reality of a public relations practitioner. Any portrayal by the media and fed to the public is susceptible to being eaten by the public and then converted into a label that reflects what the public believes to be true for all individuals holding that position; in this case, the position being a public relations practitioner. Thus, it is important to understand exactly what "label" is getting placed upon public relations practitioners from media in order to understand how the label can either be corrected, made better, or even abolished. The examination and understanding of these labels are particularly important in light of Ellis' (1999) conclusion that media labels hold a strong hold over society. The labels that are placed into the minds of the public by media, television and films are a strong guiding factor in how the public will view that label.

Entertainment in the media is not portraying PR practitioners as they should be. Also, public relations students have their own opinion as to what defines public relations. According to Brunner and Fitch-Hauser (2009) public relations students tend to think that in their career public relations will consist of mostly technical responsibilities and managerial tasks. These same students also felt that they would be required to write, plan events, and do publicity (Brunner &

Fitch-Hauser). As shown here, public relations students tend to think of only a few aspects of public relations when imagining their future careers. So, to understand how the public views the field of public relations differ from those defined by the Public Relations Society of America (and public relations students), we need to investigate exactly what it is that the mass media is telling the public about public relations.

As it would appear from the frequent appearances and portrayals of public relations practitioners on television shows and in films, public relations as a form of employment are rising both on the screen and off. Not surprisingly, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) public relations is set to see a rise in the number of jobs available over the next eight years. By the year 2018 there will be a twenty-four percent rise in the amount of public relations jobs available. This number will take the number of public relations jobs from 275,200 in the year 2008 to 341,300 in the year 2018. Most public relations practitioners do have college degrees and with the rise in jobs for those with public relations degrees there should be a correlated rise in students enrolling in public relations programs with colleges and universities. (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009) With this increase in public relations jobs and public relations students, it is important for those getting involved in this career choice to view this profession in a positive light and understand what public relations practitioners do as a profession, in order to not choose this profession based upon the media's portrayal of public relations.

Although mass media guides the meaning of public relations for the general public, pop culture also says a lot about terminology as well. Miller (1999) looked at what popular culture has to say in a study done looking at public relations in film and fiction. Miller looked at how entertainment media was portraying public relations and found it was being mostly portrayed in a negative light. According to Miller's findings, if public relations perceptions in the general public are based upon the entertainment representations of public relations, the profession of public relations is not in good standing. Miller also found that positive representations of public relations practitioners are rare in entertainment media.

Although Miller (1999) did research on the perceptions of public relations within fiction and film, there have not been any significant studies in regards to television portrayals of public relations practitioners. Miller studied over 65 years, 51 books and 67 movies, and analyzed 202 public relations practitioners in the fiction and film analyzed. In these sources the public relations practitioners never were given one title but were referred to with different titles, one common title being "publicist." From the analysis Miller produced a list of character traits: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, and unfulfilled. Miller also looked at the relationships held by the public relations practitioners including those between the public, clients and employers, and journalists. In the end Miller claimed that the positive characterizations of public relations practitioners were found to be rare in the sample chosen for the study and that negative characterizations were embellished and made to seem the

norm when viewing a public relations practitioner in reality. Miller showed that the positive portrayals of public relations practitioners were fewer than those of negative portrayals and showed the public relations practitioners as ignorant of their own field of work. Miller suggests that with such an obscure representation of public relations practitioners and an inaccurate portrayal of public relations practitioners that the term public relations practitioner should not be used in the media samples as often as it were in the specific samples used by Miller.

A more recent study attempted to update Miller's (1999) findings. Ames (2010) found that in the years 1996 to 2008 there had been an improvement in the image portrayal of public relations practitioners in film. Ames' sample included eleven films. Ames used a form of qualitative analysis of the films chosen for her study to discover the increase in the improvement of the public relations professionals' images. Ames' findings differ from those of Miller (1999) in that Ames only looked at films, and not at fiction as Miller did. Neither Miller nor Ames examined how the profession of public relations is portrayed on television shows, nor have any other researchers looked at this form of media portrayal. Another study also examined how public relations was depicted. Lee (2001) looked at the depiction of the public relations practitioner as played by mostly male roles in the government sector.

Through past research it is easy to see how public relations practitioners as portrayed through mass media are typically what the general public accepts as the basis of its perception of the profession. Unfortunately, the impact of television shows on the perception of public

relations practitioners has been neglected by researchers which is a bit odd considering that it is perceived to be very influential in shaping what people think (Ellis, 1999). Currently, a number of television shows have begun to feature public relations practitioners.

Additionally, it is important to analyze films quantitatively as Ames (2010) obtained results based upon qualitative methods (which is explained in further detail later in the thesis). Past research from Miller (1999) does suggest that public relations in mass media has been portrayed in a negative light but is gradually showing improvement. Ames arrived at a similar conclusion. In addition to seeing if the trend toward a more positive portrayal is continuing, we also need to see if media portrayal reflects realistic views of public relations

In the public relations field, some of the greatest traits any PR practitioner can have is a curious mind, an eagerness to learn about their own industry, and others, as well as willingness to improve their skills. It is important to understand why being portrayed negatively can affect the image of a person. In a recent study, more younger people that are recently graduating from high school or college have shown interest in the PR world. If new people join this field, portraying these practitioners negatively will not help the reputation of the profession.

This thesis looked at portrayals of public relations practitioners and examined how popular culture has depicted those public relations practitioners. It has used two main aspects of popular culture, films, and television shows. The purpose of this thesis was to determine how

public relations practitioners were being portrayed in the late 20th century to the 21st century in the media

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