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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 archetypical 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.

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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in their careers. Bowen (2003, 2009) examined perceptions of the profession among college students who study public relations and found that many students assumed that public relations was mostly a matter of "schmoozing" with publics to present a good image of the client (Bowen, 2003, p. 407). She suggested that television and movies might be one factor in giving public relations students such unrealistic impressions of the field. Therefore, it is important to understand how public relations is portrayed in film so that practitioners can combat unrealistic perceptions about the profession early on.

To better understand how media represent public relations, the next section discusses portrayals of public relations in the entertainment media.

Portrayals in the entertainment media

Representations of public relations practitioners in film and television have become more common since the 1970s (Saltzman, 2011). In the classic study of public relations stereotypes, Miller (1999) studied fictional portrayals of public relations from 1930 to 1995 and found eight archetypical traits associated with public relations practitioners in the entertainment media: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, or unfulfilled. Film and fiction often portrayed practitioners as effective at their jobs, but their work was fraught with moral questions.

Lee (2001) focused on movie portrayals of public relations practitioners working for the government. Although he found both positive and negative portrayals of practitioners in his study, he observed that when practitioners in films *did not* work for the government, "the negative depiction of the private-sector public relations professional is explicit and consistent" (p. 299). In his follow up study, Lee (2009) found that public relations professionals were portrayed negatively in six of the seven films.

More recent studies have suggested that representations of public relations may be improving. Ames (2010) analyzed 11 movies released after 1995 and concluded that newer films included more accurate depictions of public relations and fewer negative stereotypes. Kinsky (2011) noted that televisions programs like *The West Wing* have portrayed public relations practitioners as competent and responsible professionals. But film and television portrayals of representatives of the profession may not necessarily be completed, accurate, and objective. Writers of scripts for movies and television often apply basic narrative structure character development principles to make stories interesting and exciting.

Narrative structure

Traditionally, any good story must involve conflict (Whitcomb, 2002). Fundamentals of narrative structure and the need for conflict in storytelling suggest, first of all, that movies and television programs will probably never provide both positive and accurate representations of the public relations profession. Representatives of professions that naturally involve conflict, such as police officers and lawyers, seem to be disproportionately represented in the entertainment media. However, even these professions are not always portrayed in flattering ways (Asimow, 1999–2000; Inciardi & Dee, 1987). Furthermore, these professions are made to look more exciting than they really are. Hence, for screenwriters to make the practice of public relations central to a story, they would probably have to make the profession of public relations seem unrealistically exciting or would need to introduce conflict that would make the portrayal at least somewhat negative.

Character development

Professional writers have long distinguished between *flat* and *round* characters (Lee, 2005). The main characters of a story should be round characters. Typically, main characters need to have flaws. Howard (2004) observed, "A hero with no downside is not only predictable but, ultimately, boring" (p. 209). According to Whitcomb (2002), "It is essential that [the main character] grows, changes, learns something in the course of the movie" (p. 48). This change in the character over time is called the *character arc* (Suppa, 2006; Whitcomb, 2002).

Unlike main characters, minor characters tend to be flat. When public relations professionals are minor characters in a story, they will naturally tend to be flat, stereotypical characters (Suppa, 2006). When public relations professionals are main characters, they need to face conflict so they can grow and change. If the conflict is internal, these characters will necessarily have certain flaws. If the conflict is external, these characters will have to face some kind of antagonist (Suppa). While it may be possible to imagine a story in which the protagonist practices public relations realistically and deals with external conflict that does *not* involve negative portrayals of public relations, one can see why this scenario is uncommon. What is more likely is that the character's public relations career either fades into the background of a story or becomes *part* of the story's conflict. When this happens, portrayals of public relations will likely involve at least some negative elements.

To summarize, theories of narrative structure and character development in fiction and screenwriting make it unlikely that a portrayal of the public relations profession in entertainment media will ever be completely positive *and* realistic. One or both of those qualities will probably have to be sacrificed for the sake of a good story. So why is it necessary to study negative portrayals of public relations in film and fiction?

To the extent that fictional accounts of public relations influence public perceptions of the profession, negative or inaccurate portrayals could have harmful effects on practitioners' relationships with clients, journalists, students, and the general public. While it might be encouraging to see a few positive portrayals of the profession in recent years, there is still a need

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to monitor how public relations' image is being represented. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following research questions:

RQ1: How prevalent are Miller's (1999) archetypes in more recent portrayals of public relations practitioners?
RQ2: Are practitioners represented in any new ways that go beyond findings from previous studies?

Method

This study sought to extend Miller's (1999) research through qualitative content analysis of several recent films featuring public relations practitioners as key characters. Films are important because of their immediacy and relevance to real life people and situations (Cohen & Weimann, 2000). This study followed Miller's (1999) original study (albeit on a smaller scale) in order to test Ames' (2010) finding that progress in portrayals of public relations professionals is being made.

Sample

The sample for the study was compiled by identifying relevant movies that have not been analyzed in previous studies. We used a search on the Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) as well as on the Image of the Public Relations Practitioner in Movies and Television 1901–2011 database (http://www.ijpc.org/page/ijpc_pr_practitioner) for films featuring public relations practitioners. For this study, we selected only those movies, in which characters had a major presence on screen to ascertain that sufficient amount of information about characters was available for analysis. From these two databases, we identified 10 movies, most relevant to this study, based on portrayals of public relations practitioners as important characters in the movies.

Eight of the films selected were entirely fictional, and two films were inspired by true events. Although Miller's (1999) research was limited to public relations practitioners in *fiction*, we chose to include these historical/biographical films for two reasons. First, films based on true stories can have a cultivation effect. Second, when films are based on true stories, filmmakers still exercise a great deal of artistic license in how they portray characters.

As a result, the following films were included in this study:

Disney's The Kid (2000): A family-oriented comedy about an image consultant who meets himself as a child and realizes that his career has cost him everything that could make him truly happy.

America's Sweethearts (2001): A romantic comedy about two actors who were previously married to each other and who are forced to work together by a publicist promoting their new movie.

Phone Booth (2002): A thriller about a superficial, dishonest publicist trapped in a phone booth by a sniper and forced to publicly confess his mistakes.

Jersey Girl (2004): A romantic comedy about a media publicist who gets carried away in his work to the detriment of his daughter.

Fun with Dick and Jane (2005): A comedy about a public relations practitioner who is deceived by his employer, loses his job, and turns to a life of crime to make ends meet.

Thank You for Smoking (2006): A satire about a tobacco industry spokesperson who works to dismiss claims of tobacco's negative health effects while he deals with problems in his personal life.

The Queen (2006): A biographical film about the days following the death of Princess Diana which showed how the British royal family responded to the tragedy. One of the important characters in the movie is a public relations practitioner.

Hancock (2008): An action film about a superhero named Hancock whose actions damage the city more than help it. A public relations practitioner named Ray Embry works to change Hancock's image.

Old Dogs (2009): A family-oriented comedy about a sports marketing professional who learns from his ex-wife that he has two children and must make sacrifices in his career to be a better father.

Casino Jack (2010): A biographical film inspired by true events surrounding the corrupt lobbyist Jack Abramoff who was sent to prison for fraud, tax evasion, and conspiracy.

This list cannot be considered a comprehensive list of all films in the past decade to feature public relations practitioners. However, the selected movies do represent several different genres: comedy, satire, drama, superhero action, and historical, and each public relations character occupies an important place in each movie plot. Thus, these films provided a good cross-section of popular films released during the decade following Miller's (1999) study.

Definitions

The unit of analysis for this study was the *character*. Characters were included in the analysis if they practiced public relations and were important to the plot of a film. To determine whether or not movie characters should be considered public relations practitioners, the authors followed Miller's definition (1999): characters that identified themselves or were identified by others as public relations practitioners, press agents, publicists, or with similar titles were included. Characters who received large amounts of screen time, or who were subjects of discussion by other characters even when they were off screen, were defined as major characters. Those who had limited screen time or who were not central to the plot of a

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story were defined as minor characters. Also, characters that appeared to have altruistic motives were defined as good, while characters with primarily selfish motives were defined as bad.

The study used Miller's (1999) archetypical characteristics of public relations in fiction: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, and unfulfilled (for detailed descriptions see Miller, 1999, pp. 8–11). Following Miller's approach, movie characters were categorized by the archetype they best represented.

Data analysis

In an effort to replicate and extend Miller's (1999) study with the ten films at hand, the researchers coded public relations characters as major or minor, and good or bad. Researchers used a unified coding sheet with 12 questions, which asked coders to describe the character in each movie by identifying which of the eight archetypes (taken from the Miller's study), if any, best describes the character and by providing qualitative explanation for each choice. Coders could choose more than one archetype but had to rank-order and explain each choice by providing specific examples how the character displayed each archetype. In addition, coders took detailed notes during each film to analyze: (1) how the public relations character *fit into the plot* of the movie, (2) the *tone* of the film toward the public relations character, (3) the *moral character* of the public relations practitioner, (4) the *interactions* with other characters, as well as the attitudes characters had toward each other, and (5) the *changes*, if any, that happened to the character. Each of these elements was represented in the coding sheet with open-ended questions, such as "Does the character CHANGE throughout the plot? If yes, how? If not, why not?" and "Describe the SCENE in which the character changes." These notes were cross-compared and analyzed to see if there were any representations or portrayals of public relations characters not found in the existing literature.

A pre-test was conducted by one of the authors and two trained assistants to assess inter-coder reliability. As a result of the pilot test, definitions of archetypes and open-ended questions were adjusted for clarity. Based on discussions among coders and suggestions from the coders, the coding sheet was modified. During the data collection, each movie was coded by two or three coders. Then notes were qualitatively compared during the in-person meeting of three coders plus one of the researchers. If there were any discrepancies in identifying an archetype or understanding the character, the discussion among all coders and the researcher took place to reach complete agreement regarding the archetype selection and descriptions of each character. Coders had to argue and persuade one another why they completed the coding sheet in a particular manner and had to reach a unified decision before the end of each discussion. The researcher's role was to carefully observe interactions to ensure the quality of the arguments and to prevent groupthink. Five out of 11 characters were originally coded with some differences. Each character was discussed and agreement was reached. Discussions among coders about each character lasted anywhere from 10 to 25 min.

To answer RQ1, the authors examined which Miller's archetypes (Miller, 1999) were found in the movies reviewed for this study. RQ2 was addressed by open coding and analysis of all notes taken on each character to identify representations not covered in previous studies. The data were analyzed according to a modified thematic analysis technique (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), in which researchers identified recurring themes and scrutinized them against the coders' explanations for each character. This analysis is particularly useful in qualitative research when recurring themes might lead to a grounded theory approach to further understand narratives and systematically analyze the reasons behind accounts of these narratives (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). The next section presents the findings of the study.

Findings

Ten films were first coded according to genres: comedy($n = 5$), action ($n = 1$), historical/biographical ($n = 2$), satire ($n = 1$), and thriller ($n = 1$). Most public relations characters in the analysis were major characters ($n = 10$), with only one minor character. Seven of the public relations characters analyzed were coded as good and four were coded as bad.

RQ1: Miller's archetypes

RQ1 asked how prevalent Miller's (1999) archetypes are in more recent portrayals of public relations practitioners in film. For the most part, the dominant archetypes have remained the same. At least one of Miller's eight archetypes matched ten of the 11 characters analyzed. Three characters fit the *accomplished* archetype (characters who love their jobs and are great at them) and three more fit the *manipulative* archetype (characters who have no conscious and are willing to do whatever it takes to succeed). Two characters were coded as *cynical* (sarcastic, edgy, angry, contemptuous, and driven). One character exemplified the *obsequious* archetype (desiring to please superiors no matter the consequences), and another character was categorized as *money-minded* (not caring about ethics as long as the job pays well). In order to illustrate how these archetypes play out in the analyzed films, each character is discussed next.

Russ Duritz: accomplished

The character of Russ Duritz (Bruce Willis) from *Disney's The Kid* (2000) is a successful image consultant, but he is so image-obsessed that he is rude, manipulative, and lacks any meaningful relationships in his life. When Duritz magically encounters himself as a child, he remembers that he used to dream about becoming a pilot, getting married, and having

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a dog—all goals that his current career has made impossible. At one point, Duritz's younger self yells, "So let me get this straight. I'm 40, I'm not married, and I don't have a dog? I grow up to be a loser." Thus, although Duritz is portrayed as accomplished in his career, it is his career that prevents him from being truly happy. In fact, at this point, Duritz begins to fit Miller's (1999) *unfulfilled* archetype. By the end of the movie he has decided to become a pilot instead of an image consultant.

Dan Rayburn and Charlie Reed: accomplished

Two other characters fit the accomplished archetype. Both Dan Rayburn (Robin Williams) and Charlie Reed (John Travolta) in *Old Dogs* (2009) are successful sports marketing professionals. They enjoy their work until Rayburn's ex-wife tells Rayburn he has two children and must care for them while she is in jail. Over the course of the film, Rayburn realizes that he must put his children ahead of his career. At first, Reed is upset by Rayburn's choices because these choices result in the loss of an important client. However, by the end of the film Reed has come to appreciate the value of family and has decided to settle down and get married, himself. As with *Disney's The Kid*, this film demonstrates that successful careers, such as ones in public relations, require people to give up the more important things in life.

Lee Phillips: manipulative

Although played for laughs, the character of Lee Phillips (Billy Crystal) in *America's Sweethearts* (2001) exemplifies the manipulative archetype. Phillips is promoting a film that stars two actors who used to be married to one another. Because both actors now hate each other, Phillips must use deception and bribery to bring them together for a press junket promoting their film. Phillips's actions do not hurt any of the other characters—at least not any of the sympathetic characters. In fact, Phillips's manipulative behavior seems to be part of what makes him good at his job.

Stuart Shepard: manipulative

In the movie *Phone Booth* (2002), Stuart Shepard (Colin Farrell) is a publicist who manipulates everyone around him to get what he wants. Shepard lies to his wife, his mistress, his personal assistant, and his clients. However, when Shepard is trapped in a New York City phone booth by a sniper, he is forced to confess his lies publicly. Shepard admits, "I lie in person and on the phone. I lie to my friends. I lie to newspapers and magazines who sell my lies to more and more people." Although Shepard takes a certain amount of personal responsibility for his behavior, he seems to believe that being honest in his chosen profession is impossible. Near the end of the film he tells his assistant, "Don't be a publicist. You're too good for it." Thus *Phone Booth* presents Shepard as a typical representative of his profession, not just as one bad apple in a basket of good ones.

Nick Naylor: manipulative

Another manipulative character is Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart) from *Thank You for Smoking* (2005). Naylor is the chief spokesman for the fictional Academy of Tobacco Studies. At the beginning of the movie, Naylor appears on a daytime television talk show with three anti-smoking advocates and a cancer patient. To gain control of the situation quickly, Naylor raises his hand and gives this speech:

> Joan, how on Earth would big tobacco profit off of the loss of this young man? Now, I hate to think in such callous terms, but if anything we'd be losing a customer. It's not only our hope—it's in our best interest to keep Robin alive and smoking.

Naylor turns the crowd's condemnation from himself to a government bureaucrat. In fact, throughout the movie, he demonstrates a capacity to manipulate situations to his advantage, a skill that he says "requires a moral flexibility that goes beyond most people." Over the course of the film, however, Naylor's character goes through transformation, which will be discussed later in this article.

Ollie Trinké: cynical

The character of Ollie Trinké (Ben Affleck) from *Jersey Girl* (2004) fits Miller's (1999) description of the cynical archetype as sarcastic, edgy, angry, and driven. Trinké is quick to get angry when he deals with his subordinates and holds his clients in distain. He refers to his employees as "my fellow flacks and spin doctors."

Under the stress of losing his wife and caring for his young daughter, Trinké goes on a rant and says to journalists at the Hard Rock Café in New York City, "Would you people just shut the hell up with the Fresh Prince already? A two-bit TV actor won't be around any longer than it takes for the ink to dry on the pages of the worthless rags you jerk offs write for."

Trinké also displays elements of the *accomplished* archetype. The narration at the beginning of the film describes him as the "youngest and most successful music publicist in New York City." Several times throughout the film Trinké states that

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his career is the thing he is best at. However, like the accomplished characters in *Disney's The Kid* and *Old Dogs*, by the end of the film Trinké believes he must turn his back on the profession in order to be a better father.

Alistair Campbell: cynical

Alistair Campbell (Mark Bazeley) from *The Queen* (2006) exudes cynicism in every scene of the film. He has a particularly low opinion of the Royal Family. In fact, after the death of Princess Diana Campbell asks Prime Minister Tony Blair if Blair will ask Queen Elizabeth whether or not she greased the breaks on Diana's car. Campbell is so disrespectful that at one point Blair dresses him down in front of a room full of people. Campbell is the only minor character in this study.

Dick Harper: obsequious

The character of Dick Harper (Jim Carrey) from *Fun with Dick and Jane* (2005) is a perfect example of the *obsequious* archetype. Harper's desire to achieve financial and material success causes him to grovel before his bosses, who set him up to take the fall for their corrupt business practices. Early in the film, Harper is sent to appear on a fictional news show and defend his company from allegations of wrongdoing. Even as it becomes clear that the show host knows more about the situation than Harper does, Harper continues to defend his bosses and the company.

Jack Abramoff: money-minded

The final character who personifies one of Miller's (1999) archetypes is the lobbyist Jack Abramoff (Kevin Spacey) from *Casino Jack* (2010). Based on a true story, the film portrays Abramoff who has been motivated primarily by money. Abramoff wants to provide for his family, wants to build a school, wants to donate large sums to charity, and wants to keep up with the lavish lifestyles of other Washington lobbyists. Although the film shows how Abramoff manipulates people through bribery and deception, Abramoff is always money conscious and thus the character best fits the money-minded archetype.

These 10 characters all match at least one of Miller's (1999) archetypes, suggesting that her typology is still highly relevant more than a decade later. However, there is also some evidence of public relations practitioners being represented in new ways in film. One major character in this study did not fit any of Miller's stereotypes.

RQ2: new representations

RQ2 asked whether practitioners are represented in these movies in any new ways that go beyond findings from previous studies. Of the 10 films analyzed, only one movie featured a character that did not fit any of the Miller's (1999) archetypes. The character of *Ray Embry* (Jason Bateman) in *Hancock* (2008) is portrayed as *idealistic*—pursuing high ideals even in the face of challenge or frustration. Throughout the movie, Embry displays care and concern for others. He does not worry about getting rich, and he refuses to compromise his beliefs. Along with helping the superhero Hancock, Embry works to get pharmaceutical companies to donate medicine to people who cannot afford it. At the end of the film, Hancock paints a logo for Embry's charity on the moon.

Another type of character representation also emerged from our analysis. Many characters can also be described as *conflicted*. These characters either want or need their public relations jobs, but they feel like their jobs make it impossible for them to be good people. Miller (1999) also observed that public relations practitioners are often portrayed as facing moral questions related to their work. However, in this study we found portrayals that appear to indict the whole public relations profession, not just specific practices or employers. This representation of the field of public relations seems to imply that public relations is not necessarily a good fit for people of a strong moral character who have their priorities straight.

Examples of this conflicted portrayal include Russ Duritz (*Disney's The Kid*), Dan Rayburn and Charlie Reed (*Old Dogs*), Ollie Trinké (*Jersey Girl*), and Nick Naylor (*Thank You for Smoking*). All of these characters are good at their jobs, but with one exception: these characters either change careers or accept less successful careers in order to have healthy, functional families. The only exception is Nick Naylor. Over the course of *Thank You for Smoking*, Naylor becomes more and more uncomfortable with defending the tobacco industry. Eventually he leaves his job, but he goes to work for the mobile phone industry, helping that industry to deny any link between cellular phones and cancer. At the end of the film, Naylor concludes, "There's still a place for guys like me." The implication is that his character has neither grown morally nor developed enough to leave the profession of public relations.

While it may be too early to declare that *idealistic* and *conflicted* constitute new archetypes for media portrayals of public relations practitioners, these portrayals are worth exploring in future studies.

Discussion

This section discusses the implications of the findings and offers several suggestions for how public relations practitioners can enhance the image of the profession.

Despite Ames' (2010) and Kinsky's (2011) encouraging findings that public relations is being portrayed somewhat more realistically in entertainment media, this study did not find much support for that conclusion. The one thoroughly positive

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portrayal of public relations professional was in a superhero movie: Ray Embry was *idealistic* in Hancock. No doubt, superhero movies can contribute to a cultivation effect along with more serious films, but perhaps the unspoken message (or irony) here is that good people only succeed in public relations in a fantasy world.

Seven of the eleven characters in the study fit negative archetypes from Miller's (1999) study. Three more characters were accomplished, but found their profession to be at odds with their higher values. Only one character was both unambiguously good and using public relations for good. Taken as a whole, these films imply that public relations is primarily a profession for the soulless or the shallow.

Additionally, we found evidence of negative themes identified by Coombs and Holladay (2014) who noted that public relations has trouble escaping its negative roots and is often regarded as little more than publicity. Indeed, in the films we analyzed only the idealistic Ray Embry even described his work as "public relations." Other characters used such terms as "communications," "publicity," "flack," and "lobbyist." Trinké referred to his employees as "spin doctors." Naylor was called the "Sultan of Spin." Overall, "publicity" and "spin" seemed to be the preferred terms used by fictional public relations characters to describe their work. Our analysis indicated that public relations practitioners in film are often portrayed badmouthing their own profession. This also suggests that public relations practitioners are portrayed as people who contribute to the diminishing of the status of the profession, which in turn fuels social construction of negative perceptions of the profession (Tsetsura, 2010a, 2010b). As a result, the profession can suffer not only from externally created stereotypes created by the film writers, but also from the reproduction of stereotypes by practitioners themselves, through their everyday talk and use of symbolic resources to construct professional identities, as previous studies have demonstrated (Buckingham, 2003; Tsetsura, 2011; Vandermeersche et al., 2013). Although public relations professionals may not be able to change perceptions of the field in Hollywood right away, they are capable of understanding and reflecting that these portrayals are not always accurate and complete. Film and fiction are different from reality, but reality can also be socially constructed through reproduction of stereotypes and negative portrayals seen in film and fiction. This study's results lead us to provide practical recommendations to public relations practitioners to help them combat negative stereotypes of the profession.

Practical recommendations to practitioners

Although these findings are somewhat discouraging because they demonstrate that negative stereotypes of public relations practitioners still persist in the movies, they illustrate the important fact that public relations as a profession cannot expect others to manage its public image. Public relations practitioners themselves should be conscious about their actions and understand the impact of their decision on the profession.

Some may argue that Hollywood portrayals of public relations professionals have little to do with how practitioners see their profession or what they can do about these negative perceptions. However, in line with arguments of the cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1998), previous studies suggested that Hollywood portrayals have the potential to damage public relations practitioners' perceptions of themselves (Bowen, 2003, 2009; Kinsky, 2011; Lee, 2009). Thus, we position our suggestions as a way to encourage practitioners not to buy into these negative portrayals in the movies so that they can do their jobs better and feel more satisfied doing them. Public relations professionals can and should resist stereotypical portrayals of their profession, but first and foremost public relations practitioners *themselves* must be mindful of how they represent their own work. Therefore, we offer the following suggestions to public relations practitioners, particularly young professionals, who care about the profession and want to improve the image of public relations:

Treat the profession with respect

Public relations practitioners should take pride in their work and appreciate the good they can do for society. Instead of accepting Hollywood's negative stereotypes about public relations, practitioners should remember that they are professionals who help organizations manage communication and build mutually beneficial relationships with their publics (Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Heath & Combs, 2006). Instead of using terms like "spin" or "BS" when discussing what they do, practitioners should use words that convey a sense of value in their work.

Additionally, to combat negative portrayals of public relations in the movies, practitioners can work together with PRSA and other professional associations to participate in strategic communication and publicity campaigns targeted at filmmakers to highlight profession's good deeds. Drawing attention to positive accomplishments of public relations might also help to counteract negative perceptions. In other words, filmmakers might still rely on already existing negative portrayals of the profession, but they would also be exposed to positive portrayals of public relations.

Treat the media and clients with respect

Movies often portray public relations practitioners embroiled in conflict with journalists or their own clients. No doubt, one reason for these portrayals is that conflict makes for good entertainment (Whitcomb, 2002). However, public relations practitioners in real life must be consummate professionals. Even when journalists or clients are difficult, public relations practitioners must respond with grace and dignity. For instance, if professionals use catchy phrases from Hollywood films, such as *Thank You for Smoking*, in their everyday talks, they may inadvertently reproduce negative stereotypes about the profession (Tsetsura, 2010a). In addition, clients who cannot be respected because of ethical issues may and should be

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dismissed, and unreasonable journalists can be circumvented with new media channels to combat negative perceptions of public relations practitioners as obsequious and money-minded.

Treat oneself with respect

Treating oneself with respect means not compromising own values or standards of excellence. Public relations practitioners who carry out their responsibilities with excellence set an example for others inside and outside the field. Keeping a positive outlook, avoiding ethical compromises, and finding ways to help others through public relations matters more than how public relations is represented in Hollywood movies. Although cultivation effects might have created misconceptions about public relations in the minds of many people, those who actually get to know responsible professionals and work with professional public relations practitioners would quickly realize that the image of the profession portrayed in the movies may not be accurate. In order for the professionals to combat wide-spread attacks on public relations (Coombs & Holladay, 2014), professionals should respect their profession and themselves by practicing ethical and responsible public relations.

Limitations and direction for future research

This study provides a snapshot of ten films released in the decade following Miller's (1999) study. Our findings cannot be generalized to all media portrayals of public relations. It is possible that studies of different media (e.g., made-for-television movies or television shows) would produce different results. With the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) database available online from the University of Southern California (Saltzman, 2011), it is becoming easier for researchers to find and analyze portrayals of all kinds of media professionals.

Content analysis cannot determine what effect negative media portrayals of public relations have on audiences. Although cultivation theory suggests that the media portrayals influence people's perception of the profession, future research should use focus groups, interviews, and experiments to explore whether such portrayals of public relations do in fact affect the field's public image.

Conclusion

Consistent with Miller's (1999) findings, but contrary to the Ames' study of 2010, public relations is still portrayed more negatively than positively in Hollywood films. While this study identified a new positive representation of public relations (the *idealistic* Ray Embry), it also found a new negative representation—the *conflicted* practitioner who must choose between the profession and higher values. We conclude that public relations practitioners must take it upon themselves to uphold the image of the field by respecting their profession, respecting clients and the media, and above all, respecting themselves.

Future research can look for reoccurrence of portrayals of the professionals as *idealistic* and *conflicted*, two new characteristics we identified in this study. The presence of these portrayals may indicate that society is developing a more complex and comprehensive view of the public relations profession, a trend which is also reflected in pop culture. However, this does not explain why some screen writers choose to portray public relations professionals as idealistic and conflicted. Perhaps, such portrayals simply reinforce negative stereotypes of public relations professionals, such as being cynical and isolated, identified more than a decade ago (Miller, 1999). Perhaps, these portrayals help to develop a better narrative structure of the movies (Whitcomb, 2002) and to create desired conflicted characters (Suppa, 2006). Going forward, scholars must continue to study media portrayals of public relations to determine multiple reasons for negative portrayals of the profession in film and fiction.

Additionally, future studies should examine the connection between portrayals of public relations professionals in the movies and fiction and the perception of the profession in society. Further evidence needed to demonstrate how exactly negative portrayals of professionals may affect work and identities of public relations practitioners. Finally, it might be fruitful to investigate how exactly movie characters that represent public relations professionals get developed. For instance, researchers can interview screenwriters and filmmakers to learn to what extent fictional narrative structures and character development in the movie plots influence the decision to portray public relations professionals in a certain way.

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