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The image of the government flack: movie depictions of public relations in public administration

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Abstract

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of public relations in contemporary society, little attention has been devoted by researchers to its image in popular culture, especially the nearly-universal mass entertainment medium of film. This article reviews the screen image of the public relations professional in public administration.

Of twenty flack flicks, several attributes were consistent in most of them. The characters were almost all men, they worked for the federal government and especially in the military, they primarily conducted media relations and were disproportionately present in movies made in the 1990s rather than earlier decades. Other characteristics showed greater bipolarity. In about half the movies, the government public relations officer was a comic figure, a serious character in the other half. Finally, he was as often the good guy to be cheered by the audience as a bad guy to be jeered. © 2001 Elsevier Science Inc. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

American popular culture has a long tradition of viewing government bureaucracies negatively [1]. Gates and Hill noted that “the popular media is often filled with complaints that the bureaucracy is out of control [2].” A recent review of depictions of government on television noted “that television has been critical of government from its earliest days as a medium of mass entertainment. . . We also found a long-term trend toward more negative portrayals of both government institutions and the people who staff them [3].” Holzer and

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Slater concluded that movies “have reinforced the public’s long-standing, poor image of government [4].” A survey of public views about federal agencies reflected “the generally unfavorable feelings people have about government as a whole” even while they give positive ratings to a few specific agencies [5]. Even the *Phantom Menace*, the fourth episode of the Star Wars movie series, invoked the popular negative stereotype of bureaucrats as a simple and easily understood plot device [6]. (Note on style: References to movies are in *italics*.)

Similarly, public relations has had a negative image in popular culture of manipulation, artificiality and puffery [7]. Reporters are often the conveyors and reinforcers of this negative viewpoint [8]. Reporters often refer to PR professionals – whether those working in the public or private sectors – as ‘flacks [9].’ According to the New York Times, the term “may be the most derisive printable word that journalists use to describe public relations people [10].” In 1978, Safire defined a flack as a “paid proponent, with its pejorative and sometimes madcap connotation [11].” The word continues its vitality to the present time, with frequent uses in daily journalism [12], magazines [13], books [14] and professional journals [15].

This negativity extends beyond the use of the term of flack. Regarding the public sector, Hess described the carping tone used by journalists to criticize what they view as the persistent incompetence of government press officers [16]. Similarly, a Washington Post reporter telegraphed his negative opinion of the White House press staff by titling his book ‘Spin Cycle [17].’

If so, then what is the image of the government public relations professional? Are they burdened by a doubly negative image? Most government agencies have a spokesperson or public information officer. Larger agencies have public relations offices that are staffed by many employees. These civil servants encompass in their jobs two negative images held by popular culture: the bureaucrat and the PR professional.

Does popular culture share journalists’ negative view of the public relations staffer in a government agency? Or, is the derogatory image limited to reporters, generated by their particular professional ethos and frequent interaction with these staffers?

This article reviews the screen image of government public relations professionals. It seeks to identify how public information officers have been depicted in motion pictures. Any generalizations or trends that emerge from these flack flicks can help provide detail on popular views regarding these PR bureaucrats. Are government flacks viewed negatively by society in general or is there a difference between the negative image held by the news media and the image held by popular culture? Since popular culture tends to lack nuance and texture, the plain question is: are government flacks good guys or bad guys? When they appear on the movie screen, does the audience have a stereotypical expectation of cheering or jeering?

There have been book-length studies of movies about reporters and the media [18]. However, there has been little comprehensive and systematic exploration of what has been called the ‘journalist in residence,’ that is, the public relations professional [19]. Keenan explored the screen image of public relations in network television coverage [20] and Miller studied trends in the depiction of public relations in a combination of both film and fiction between 1930 to 1995 [21]. Zaiukas identified the public relations aspects of the book and movie *Wizard of Oz* [22]. Tavcar described 17 films with a major PR theme or character [23].

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