

The Portrayal of Public Relations on Television

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According to Fred W. Friendly, television is “the greatest teaching tool since the printing press” (as cited by Pace, 1998). We learn about our world as we watch TV programming, seeing places and people we do not see in our daily lives. Those unfamiliar areas often include jobs outside our own experience. Trujillo and Ekdom (1987) said, “Television portrayals do not teach us about actual distributions of occupations in America but rather teach us about occupations that are socially valued in America” (page 369). I believe these portrayals, and even the choice to include particular jobs in a script or not, impact viewers. The portrayal of PR practitioners may impact whether students choose to major in public relations, it may impact how journalists work with PR practitioners, and it may affect how society, in general, thinks of the profession. While the impact of viewers may not be done on purpose, the authors of *Prime Time: How TV Portrays American Culture* point out that “the creative community’s collective worldview cannot help but influence the world the rest of us view on television, even when that is not the writer’s or producer’s intentions” (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman, 1994, p.11).

A host of researchers have looked to television and its portrayals of occupations. As far back as 1954, Smythe discussed the presentation of reality as portrayed on television. Ten years later, DeFleur conducted one of the seminal examinations of this topic of careers on television in 1964. In the following years, some looked broadly at the presentation of occupations on

television (Turow, 1980; Signorielli & Kahlenberg, 2001), while other researchers studied the portrayals of specific careers or industries, such as teaching (Gerbner, 1966), law enforcement (Dominick, 1973), industry (Trujillo & Ekdom, 1987), nurses and physicians (Kalisch & Kalisch, 1986; Pfau & Mullen, 1995), business people (Thomas & LeShay, 1992), and the federal government (Pfau, Moy & Szabo, 2001). Certain researchers have focused on the impact of these occupational depictions on children (DeFleur & DeFleur, 1967; Wright et al., 1995) or on adolescents (Wroblewski & Huston, 1987; Signorielli, 1993; Hoffner et al., 2006; Hoffner, Levine & Toohey, 2008).

With regard to the specific field of public relations, groundbreakers Bishop (1988), Henderson (1998), Spicer (1993), Keenan (1996), and Miller (1999) began the foray into scrutinizing how PR is depicted in various media. Bishop (1988) and Spicer (1993) looked at the framing of PR in print media, while Keenan (1996) examined network television news via Vanderbilt Archive abstracts. Jo (2003) later added on to Spicer's efforts and looked at both newspapers and network news. With regard to fictional media, Miller (1999) studied portrayals in film and novels from 1930 to 1995, and according to Miller, "It is safe to say that a reader or viewer could learn very little about the actual practice of PR from film and fiction" (p. 23).

There is a dearth of studies looking at the depiction of PR practitioners on television. However, four studies offer important characteristics and terminology references. To fill the gap in television-related research covering the PR industry, I conducted a study of the first season of *The West Wing*, which was presented in a poster session at AEJMC in 2006. The purpose of the study was to examine how the four public relations practitioners featured regularly on that season were portrayed (Toby Ziegler, communications director; Sam Seaborn, deputy communications director; C.J. Cregg, press secretary; and Mandy Hampton, media/political consultant). A content

analysis of the 22 episodes of Season 1 was performed in which the tasks these characters performed and the tasks they discussed performing were recorded. Miller's (1999) archetypal characteristics as well as Stone and Lee's (1990) bipolar adjectives were used in evaluating the portrayal of these practitioners.

Out of the 110 "chapters" on *The West Wing* DVDs (there were five chapters per episode), 108 of them had a PR practitioner involved. Most appearances of these four characters were framed in an overall positive light, showing them as wise, sensitive, sober, neat, ethical, competent, brave, and articulate. The top tasks they were shown doing were exchanging views with co-workers, reporting facts to superiors, various senior staff duties (e.g., attending meetings), responding to crises, researching, giving advice, delegating, receiving advice, dealing with government officials, and monitoring the media. The work activities they most often discussed included dealing with government officials and writing a speech.

With regard to Miller's archetypes, *The West Wing* practitioners most often fit the "accomplished" description. Some gender differences were found. For example, the male characters were the only ones to discuss speech writing; they were more likely to deal with government officials, be included in decision making, be considered a major character in a scene, and to be disciplined on the job. The female characters were more likely to answer media questions, to deal with media outside interviews, to lead a news conference (each of which makes sense based on C.J. Cregg's position as press secretary), and they were shown as silly more often. The characters were portrayed positively overall and were generally depicted as respected, heeded, included, effective, professional, enthusiastic, rational, respectful, and serious.

A 2009 article by Kinsky and Callison on the use of PR terms on network news offers a second study in this area. While this research was similar to Keenan's (1996) and Jo's (2003)

studies, the list of terms searched via Lexis Nexis was expanded to other PR-related terms (i.e., community relations, corporate communications, corporate marketing, flack, media relations, public affairs, public information, public relations, PR, publicist, press agent, and spin doctor) taken from Wilcox and Cameron (2006). The researchers did a content analysis of a random sample of the 530 stories found from 1997 to 2005.

The results of the Kinsky and Callison (2009) study showed that the most commonly used terms in these stories was “public relations” (59.3%) and “PR” (27.4%). The most common topic of the stories fell under the category of politics/government (34.1%). The terms were most commonly used as a cliché (45.1%). Across the sample, these PR terms were used by 16 news anchors and 91 reporters. For whatever reason, “PR” was properly used more often than “public relations” (64.5% vs. 48.5%). Overall, the terms were used more neutrally. Significant differences were found when comparing the valence of the use of the term to the network where it was used. ABC had a less harmful framing (more positive and neutral uses) than the other networks, while CBS had more harmful framing (62%). Also significant was the fact that politics/government story topics had the highest number of negative valence uses of PR terms (38.2%). Another significant result was found based on who said the term and what the focus of the story was. PR terms were more often spoken by reporters in war/government stories (59.9%).

A larger project by Kinsky, Garner, Duta, and Adut (2011) focused on the depiction of PR on the seventh season of *The Apprentice* and is the third study worth examining. Three contestants connected to careers in PR, advertising, or marketing (i.e., Surya, Jenn, and Carey) were examined. The purpose of this study was to look at how the practitioners and the industry looked across the season. A content analysis was conducted of all 14 episodes. Notes were taken related to the person’s title, work shown, work discussed, effectiveness of communication

efforts, and general characterization.

Results showed a lot of terminology crossover. For example, Carey said he owns an “event marketing and promotions firm.” Event planning most often falls under the PR umbrella, yet here it is credited as a marketing act. Many times public relations efforts were referred to as marketing, and marketing was pointed to as the reason for individual and team downfalls throughout the season (e.g., “Poor marketing was why we lost,” Surya said). The marketing emphasis continued as most sponsor representatives for the weekly contests were marketing employees for the company involved (e.g., the vice presidents of marketing for Lexus, GNC, Soft Scrub, and Smart Mouth; the chief marketing officer for Priceline; the senior vice president and chief marketing officer for El Pollo Loco).

With regard to the individual contestants’ careers, Carey owned a promotions firm, as mentioned above. Jenn was labeled on-screen as a “publicist,” but she also introduced herself as a “part-owner of a multimedia company” and a magazine publisher in her “spare time.” This presentation of herself pointed to a trend Miller (1999) noticed in which PR is treated as either magic or easy. Jenn said in Episode 7, “I’m an events person. I do PR events for my job and this was tougher than anything that’s been thrown at me in my entire life.” Surya introduced himself as a director of marketing, though on the screen he was referred to as a brand manager.

Besides examining the participants, coders also listened for the same PR-related terms studied by Kinsky and Callison (2009) with the addition of marketing-related terms. The results showed few PR terms being used: PR, publicist, promotions. However, several marketing terms were used: marketing, marketeering, brand integration, and sales and marketing promotion.

The fourth study focused on the framing of public relations on prime-time television. This research project by Kinsky, Garner, Duta and Adut (2011) was conducted as part of a larger

study examining work on television and is still under analysis. The purpose was to see how often PR practitioners were depicted and how accurate their portrayals were during a sample of prime-time programming. The coders also made note of any use of the PR-related terms studied by Kinsky and Callison (2009). A content analysis was performed on two weeks of prime-time shows broadcast on five broadcast network stations, resulting in 210 hours of programming. Each comedy or drama was examined for PR practitioners and notes were made regarding the work they were shown doing and the work they discussed doing.

The results revealed that PR practitioners were rarely shown. A young, white, female practitioner was a minor character (the victim's daughter) on an episode of *Castle*. She discussed writing announcements after crises and she was portrayed positively. A slightly older, white, female (Samantha) was portrayed on a re-run of *Sex and the City* running on the CW. She, too, was portrayed positively. Finally, a white female around 50 years of age was portrayed as a public information officer on *Southland*. The detectives did not respect her and saw her as a story spinner. There was also a female PIO overheard on the phone on an episode of *Law & Order*, but she was never seen and was portrayed neutrally.

PR terms surfaced more often than characters did. "Public relations" and "press conference" were used on an episode of *Castle*. "Publicity," "public information" and "press release" were used on an episode of *Law & Order*. "Press" was used on *Parks & Recreation* and on *Lost*. "Press release" was used on *Numbers*; "press" and "publicist" were used on *Samantha Who*; "PR" and "flack" were used on *CSI: NY*; "publicist" was used on *Sex and the City*; "publicity" and "publicity stunt" were used on *Family Guy*; and "publicity" and "spin" were used on *Southland*.

While the number of appearances of PR practitioners may not be large, I believe the

impact is. Students have told us they chose PR as a major because they wanted to be like Samantha on *Sex and the City*. The demand for event planning to be covered in courses or for whole certifications in that area has risen. When students find out there is such a heavy emphasis on writing in this field, many are shocked because that is not what they have seen on TV. In addition to the impacts on the classroom, there is likely an effect on relationships between journalists and practitioners, and on the perception of the field by the general public. This is an area that deserves more study, not only of the portrayals themselves, but also of the actual impacts on viewers.

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