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How PR people are portrayed in the media

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I have been around PR since the late 1970s and since then there have been constant laments that "PR isn't understood" and that PR people/practitioners/professionals are maligned, undervalued or misrepresented.

For several years, I have tracked portrayals and representations of PR and practitioners as a research project. With help from PR practitioners and researchers around the world, an online resource, PRDepiction (<https://prdepiction.wordpress.com/>) has been created. In it, books, movies, TV and radio programmes and academic papers about PR have been identified, especially in entertainment media.



There's no doubt that PROs, spin doctors, communicators and spokespeople are mostly not lovingly portrayed. Peter Capaldi's as the profane Malcolm Tucker in *The Thick of It* reminded many of a specific Blairite spin doctor, if you were 'in the know' about Westminster. For outsiders, he was indicative of normal practice in political and corporate PR.

On the other hand, Allison Janney's performance as White House Press Secretary CJ Cregg in *West Wing* was seen by many as the type of empathetic communicator that they wished to be perceived as. 'CJ' was also a strong female character playing a senior, influential role in government.

In novels, PROs are portrayed as morally conflicted, obstructive to the truth and a front for corporate interests. The first important PR figure in literature was J Ward Morehouse who appears in the first and third books in John Dos Passos's *USA Trilogy* from the 1930s. Morehouse was a publicist whose career declined into alcoholism. More recently, MC Beaton's series of 24 Agatha Raisin novels have featured the eponymous main character who is a PR adviser cum sleuth and spun off a TV movie late last year on Sky. In Australia, PR consultant Roxy Jacenko has penned three popular novels about a glamorous fashion PR adviser, *Jazzy Lou*. So it's not all bad news.

There are many more movies and TV series with PR and publicity characters than we can list on PRDepiction. But here's the good news: Professor Joe Saltzman of the University of Southern California has researched more than 300 movies and TV programmes. Recently he found "that the images of the public relations practitioner are far more varied and more positive than previously thought. When they are good, they are very, very good, and when they are bad, they are horrid."

Professor Saltzman has also discovered that "there are far more negative images in film than on television. TV series may have more impact on the public because of the frequency and necessity to have likable people as leading characters, resulting in more positive than negative images of the PR man and woman."

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So there's a message from history for the PR sector. If you want to develop a more empathetic representation of PR, go for long-run TV drama series. And avoid British comedy. Absolutely Fabulous is one of the great series but it definitely left PR in the "ditzy" category.

This article is written by Bournemouth University's Professor Tom Watson, Additions to PRDepiction are always welcomed, you can post a comment on the site, email Tom or tweet @PRDepiction.

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