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# Girls on screen: How film and television depict women in public relations

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## Abstract

*This paper explores how women in public relations have been depicted in the popular culture forms of film and television. With some reference to early screen depictions, it focuses primarily on film and television from the past two decades, analysing women in a variety of public relations roles in the 1990s and 2000s. The study looks at nine leading television series and movies from the United States and United Kingdom to examine how women in public relations are portrayed, and also collates the data from previous studies to develop a profile of how depictions have changed since the 1930s. Primarily, it seeks to locate these depictions of women on screen within the spectrum of feminist and post feminist theory, both specific to public relations and from a wider perspective. It then draws on a range of thinking from popular memory, cultivation analysis and the public sphere to explain how these depictions become embedded within popular (mis)understandings of the profession.*

## Introduction

This study examines the representation of women in public relations roles in film and television. It analyses the prevalence of women and how they are portrayed in screen depictions, and considers how these inform popular understanding and expectations. Though we cannot generalise too liberally about how audiences might view the industry of public relations through these films and television shows, there is support from other industries and sectors, such as law and the military, that media depictions (including film and television) are a primary source of how

the citizenry learns about a profession (Pfau, Mullen, Deidrich & Garrow, 1995; Parker, 1998; Robb, 2004; Hill, 2009). Miller (1999) notes that movies can offer a view of the profession to people who have no personal experience of its practice. Indeed, as the profession of public relations is not one that people come into contact with on a regular basis like doctors, teachers or accountants, representations in popular culture are often *the only* frame of reference for many people. As Keenan (1996) points out, an analysis of depictions in the media is a significant step toward fully investigating public perceptions of the industry.

While the study incorporates early films from the 1920s onwards, its main focus is more contemporary, incorporating the 1990s and 2000s. Two samples are analysed in this paper: the first provides a composite of 113 public relations films and series analysed in previous literature (and inclusive of this paper's second sample); the second provides the primary focus of the paper, focusing on nine films and television series which include women in public relations during the 1990s and 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

The study draws on literature and developing theory from the 30-plus years of research into the gendered profession of public relations while also including some broader feminist and post feminist theory. While acknowledging that it cannot do justice to the full range of literature in these fields, it aims to provide an overview of some key developments and studies during this period in order to provide a framework for interrogating and analysing the cinematic depictions of public relations characters during this time. By then

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<sup>1</sup> The 1940s version of *Miracle on 34th Street* is also briefly referred to in the study.

considering the cultural and communication fields of memory studies (Foucault, 1975; Halbwachs, 1992; Edgerton & Rollins, 2001; Grainge, 2003) and cultivation analysis (Chandler, 1995; West & Turner, 2010) within the mediated public sphere (Habermas, 1989; Carpignano, Anderson, Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1993; Aronowitz, 1993; Outhwaite, 1994; Craig, 2004), it suggests how these depictions can contribute to public and professional understanding of public relations. Ultimately, the paper aims to assist in showing the profession of public relations how others see it and the industry may in turn use this knowledge as it works toward a clear and realistic understanding of its multiple and complex layers and the diversity of those who work within it.

### Women in public relations

The identification of the ‘velvet ghetto of affirmative action’ by *Business Week* in 1978, which highlighted women being employed in public relations roles rather than more senior management positions, saw the beginning of an ongoing investigation into women in public relations and the ramifications for an industry that had moved toward female domination (see IABC, 1984; Cline et al., 1986; Toth & Cline, 1989; Dozier, Grunig & Grunig, 1995.) As numbers of women in the industry grew to, and remained at, 70 to 80% (Aldoory & Toth, 2002; Rush, Oukrop & Creedon, 2004; Aldoory, 2005; Public Relations Institute of Australia (PRIA) in Johnston & Zawawi, 2009) the idea that the industry had become ‘feminised’—described by Aldoory as “a demographic shift in the profession” (2005, p. 668)—entered the public relations discourse. As Rea put it: “the face of public relations is female” (2002, p. 1).

However, although women remained in the majority in the profession, women did not move into management ranks at the same rate as men. US figures showed that in 1997, while women represented more than 60% of the profession, only 37% were classed as managers (in Rush et al., 2004, p.229). Other studies supported this, showing women were

more likely to work at a technical level, while men were more likely to be in senior roles, making policy decisions, and that women tended to do *both* technical and management roles rather than moving from one to the other (Dozier & Broom, 1995; Toth, Serini, Wright & Emig, 1998; Grunig, Toth, & Hon, 2001).

Among the reasons advanced for this trend included women’s lower inclination to push for advancement due to their work-family balance (Grunig, et al., 2001), women were seen as a ‘better buy’ than male employees, external affirmative action pressure meant women had to be employed by law, attractive rates of pay were available for comparably qualified work, and a gender ideology that women were best capable of the “emotional labour” required in the profession (Donato, 1990, p. 139). In addition, female public relations practitioners often lacked ‘organisational measures of power’ which included and perpetuated:

- their relegation to the technician role;
  - their lower position within the organisational hierarchy;
  - their lack of employee support;
  - being a token woman among a predominantly male-dominated senior management team;
  - their lack of mentors;
  - their exclusions from networks; and,
  - their lack of respect and value.
- (O’Neill, 2003; p. 154)

In *Women in Public Relations*, Grunig et al. (2001) argued that discrimination against women does exist in public relations and that it is fallacious to think otherwise. In an attempt to locate parallels between best practice public relations and those who were the primary workers in the industry—namely women—they collated what they called the “feminist values of public relations” based on negotiation, relationship building, honesty and trust (Grunig, Toth & Hon, 2000). Rush explained that “they sought to articulate the values of excellent public relations, but move the discussion from an essentialist argument to a feminist one” (2004, p. 231). Grunig, Toth and Hon (2000) also included the values of respect, caring, reciprocity, self-determination, interconnectedness, honesty, cooperation,

sensitivity, perceptiveness, ethical behaviour, intuition, and a sense of justice in their feminist values.

They argued that:

embracing feminist values should help to define the field and, in particular clarify its purposes. Those purposes – such as the reinstatement of community ... the development of relationships ... and the resolution of conflict, will be grounded in the character of those who work in public relations. (p. 65)

However, the suggestion that these values were ‘naturally more feminine’ sparked much discussion and debate (Rush et al., 2004). Froelich called them “career killers” (in Rush et al., 2004, p. 231), arguing that connecting communication and negotiation skills with feminist values could lead to what has been described as a “friendliness trap” (ibid.) where women were attracted to a career in which fairness, truth, honesty and conflict resolution will benefit the community. Aldoory and Toth (2002) cautioned about “homogenising” women in the public relations industry. They argued that differences within gender should not be overlooked:

Gender issues arise because society discounts this variation. We argue that women have not been granted variations within their gender and, instead, have been confined to specific traits and expectations. The outcome has been that public relations becomes discussed as a field with ‘too many women,’ as if they contribute only so much ability to the public relations field. (p. 125)

Aldoory (2005) further argued that the approach to public relations as ‘female’ had devalued it. This “hurt the profession in general by lowering salaries and credibility” (p. 675). She suggested that it was therefore necessary to reconceptualise approaches to gender by not focusing on “gender as female” (p. 672). This would allow men to be considered as “units of analysis” (p. 275) and also be more inclusive of gay and transgendered roles and diversity across

social and cultural boundaries, rather than simply reinforcing the white status quo. She noted that it was time to move away from the idea of the “essentializing of women as natural/different in public relations” (p. 680).

This call for an expanded, more inclusive, approach to feminism is central to the arguments of post feminist literature, explained by Brooks (1997) as not *against* feminism, but rather about feminism today. Post feminism is described by Adriaens (2009) as a “new form of empowerment and independence, [where] individual choice, (sexual) pleasure, consumer culture, fashion, hybridism, humour and renewed focus on the female body can be considered fundamental” (n.p.). She explains that this approach moves away from the second wave feminism<sup>2</sup> of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, “critiqued for being too white, too straight, too liberal, and consequently ignoring the needs from marginalized, diasporic and colonised groups and cultures” (n.p.).

Post feminist writer Genz argues that second wave literature “employs a monolithic conception of ‘woman’” (2006, p. 337), citing binary categorisations of men/women, straight/gay. Post feminism moves on from these binaries to include queerness, androgyny, transgenderism and so on (Adriaens, 2009). Another critique of second wave feminism is that it grouped all “third world women” and cast them as “victims”, essentially making the same errors in stereotyping that male ethnographers had once made (Connell, 2009, p. 44).

Post-feminism’s call for greater diversity is consistent with Aldoory’s (2005) reconceptualising of public relations feminism in which she calls for the feminist paradigm to move beyond the white middle class status quo, drawing in a greater diversity of ethnic, racial and social status. Aldoory eschews the notion that power should necessarily equate with management in organisations, suggesting that this type of approach is reductive and that a

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<sup>2</sup> *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* notes that Second Wave feminism followed the first wave – from mid 19th Century until 1920 – when “feminists pushed beyond the early quest for political rights to fight for greater equality across the board” beginning in the 1960s.

more appropriate way of conceptualising power would be to include non-traditional fields such as activist groups and social movements as possessing power.

McRobbie's (2004) discussion of post feminism and popular culture expands these arguments, suggesting a rejection of feminism by young women. In much the same way, Grunig et al. (2001) argue that young women under 30 have distanced themselves from feminism, rejecting it for its apparent lack of relevance to their generation. McRobbie explains that what was once ambivalence toward feminism by young women in the 1990s, has become "something closer to repudiation" (p. 257). She points out this is depicted in the texts of films such as *Sex and the City*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, women's magazines and advertising, though some, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, are "more gentle denunciations of feminism" than others (McRobbie, 2004, p. 257). In these depictions feminism is invoked either to "undo" it (p. 259) or to relegate it to the past (p. 262). "Elements of popular culture are perniciously effective in regard to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (p. 255). McRobbie further argues that post feminism rejects feminism in favour of "female individualism" (p. 258) and that this is seen in these forms of contemporary popular culture.

It is not the contention of this paper to argue the validity or otherwise of this proposed rejection of feminism or the gains it has made; nor can it do justice to an examination of the full range of feminist theories which might have some relevancy in a wider discussion of public relations and feminism (for such an analysis see Ihlen, Van Ruler & Frederiksson's 2009 analysis of liberal, radical, socialist, postmodern, multicultural and postcolonial feminism in public relations). Rather, its purpose is to position the study of public relations and popular culture—namely film and television—within a range of feminist and post feminist theories of the past several

decades in order to better understand film and television's importance within the broader cultural, social and organisational landscape of the time.

### Public relations and film

Research into depictions of public relations on screen has a short history, first ignited in 1993 with Tavcar's study of 17 films, followed by Miller's 1999 broader study of 118 films and novels. Since then, Tilson (2003), Ames (2009) and Johnston (2010) looked specifically at public relations, while Lee focused on government public relations (2001, 2009) and also taking a wider view, incorporated the non-profits and management on screen (2002, 2004). Similarly, Wielde and Schultz (2007) focused on government professionals on screen. Lee argues that, compared with fields of public administration (2004), politics and journalism (2001), study of public relations in popular culture is meagre "especially [considering] the nearly-universal mass entertainment medium of film" (2001, p. 297). For example there are entire scholarly websites dedicated to journalism and popular culture (see Annenberg, 2010) but none about public relations.

Furthermore, "public relations practitioners don't win the screen time of lawyers – or doctors, teachers, accountants, athletes, ad executives and architects" (Tavcar, 1993, p. 21). Indeed, the professions to 'win' the most screen time during the 20th century were law enforcement, show business, medicine, journalism, the legal profession and the armed forces – representing 46% of the 2,300 lead roles analysed in Tilson (2003). Nor is public relations on the list of 51 top occupations appearing in movies (ibid.).

Miller (1999) found that 25% of film and novel sources from the 1930s and 1940s contained a female practitioner, while in the 1990s more than 50% did. The smaller studies by Ames (2009) and Lee (2001) found most practitioners were men, while Tavcar's analysis of 17 films (1993), Tilson's eight (2003) and Johnston's 17 (2010) did not indicate any breakdown by gender.

Previous studies have, on the whole, looked for typologies or characteristics of public

relations professionals or public relations functions. Included in these have been some observations of gendered roles which provide important background to this study. For example, Miller (1999) found females were often included either as love interest or, if they were practitioners, tended to be attractive or unmarried. She noted that a primary theme of the female characters in her study was sex.

Women sleep with their clients or bosses on eight separate occasions; in other words, 16% of the female practitioners sleep with their employers. Sometimes they are sympathetically portrayed, but it is often implied that the women use sex to advance their careers, exemplified by Flannery (*Major League II*), who dumps her client/lover when his pitching career goes sour and tries to get him back when it improves. (1999, p.15)

Lee's (2001) sample of 20 movies in government roles found only two of the professionals were female, representing only 10% of his sample. He noted:

This is somewhat surprising, given that about half of these movies were produced in the 1990s, when women were well represented in the employment force than in previous decades. This imbalance not only suggests a lingering image of a male-dominated career but also of a glass ceiling for women in the profession. (2001, pp. 308-309)

It should be noted that the inclusion of women in fewer roles than men, or in supporting or subordinate roles to men, is consistent with the way women are represented in film and television in general. There is a vast literature that chronicles how women are underrepresented in film (see for example Stefanovici, 2007; Gauntlett, 2008) but that goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Other studies have investigated how different forms of popular culture, such as the print media, depict public relations (Spicer, 1993; Keenan, 1996; Meza, 2001). These, on the whole, have not incorporated any

gendered breakdown though Meza's study (2001) of 58 articles from three US papers found that only two articles dealt with women in the profession, showing it to be discriminatory and providing lower status and wages to women.

### Why look at film and television?

Lee, one of the principal researchers into film's representations of public relations and management, makes the point that popular culture provides a "prism through which a subject can be viewed from the perspective of the broad public-at-large" (2004, p. 157). He argues that "film as a preeminent component of popular culture, has the power to depict and then influence the image of a particular topic, institution, profession or endeavour" (ibid.). Indeed, as noted earlier, studies into certain industries and professions, notably the military and the legal profession, have found that film and television portrayals of those industries have a major impact on how they are understood within the community (Pfau et al., 1995; Parker, 1998; Robb, 2004; Hill, 2009). In *Memory and Popular Film*, Grainge posits that "as a technology able to picture and embody the temporality of the past, cinema has become central to the mediation of memory in modern cultural life" (2003, p. 1). He explains how audience memory can be influenced and developed through cultural constructions of identity as found in film and television (p. 11). This idea is supported by Foucault, who argues that film and television as forms of popular culture can be so powerful that they can in fact "reprogram" popular memory (1975, p. 25). He explains: "so people are shown not what they were, but what they must remember having been" (ibid.). Connell (2009) further reinforces this, citing how depictions of gender in the Soviet Union experienced what she called a "stunning historical reversal" (p. 24) during the 20th Century due to the way in which popular memory was mediated through popular culture.

However, Edgerton (2001) suggests that television sheds *additional* or *nuanced* light on history rather than creating new knowledge. He says the language of television is stylised, elliptical (as opposed to linear), associational

and metaphoric in its portrayal of ideas and images which can assist with cultural understandings of popular history. These theories from the popular memory field of popular culture theory suggest that film and television, over time, will contribute to the understanding of those within a profession—those who will move into it in the future as well as the wider community. In Halbwachs' 1992 popularisation of the term "collective memory" to describe shared recollections of the past by members of a connected group, he argues that while individuals are the ones who remember, being located in a specific group provides for a context to remember the past. This applies to groups such as associations, families, trade unions, social classes, corporations and armies.

This approach to how memory is created through popular culture has common ground with the media effects theory of cultivation analysis which suggests the importance of television in popular understanding by society. "Cultivation research looks at the mass media as a socializing agent and investigates whether television viewers come to believe the television version of reality the more they watch it" (Chandler, 1995, ¶ 4). As a critical theory, cultivation analysis has been used to examine representations of diversity in television and film depictions. Studies have found that many groups—including women, African Americans, Latinos, gay men and lesbians, disabled, poor and lower classes—are underrepresented on screen (West & Turner, 2000). Cultivation analysis suggests that these limited representations in the cultural environment limit how individuals define themselves (West & Turner, 2000) and reinforce cultural expectations: "the mass media cultivate attitudes and values which are already present in a culture: the media maintain and propagate these values amongst members of a culture, thus binding it together" (Chandler, 1995, ¶ 3). Memory studies would suggest that understandings learned through television and film become part of the collective memory of a group within society. By extending cultivation analysis theory we can provide a broader

approach to the media-specific perspective for which cultivation theory is criticised (Chandler, 1995).

We can also draw from the diverse literature on the public sphere—the network of communication from which public opinion emerges—as we consider the dominance of film and television in contemporary life (see Habermas, 1989; Carpignano et al., 1993; Outhwaite, 1994; Aronowitz, 1993; Craig, 2004). These scholars argue that the mass media has eroded the traditional public sphere, with film and television (among other media) replacing the domains of democratic discourse, public life and face-to-face communication. Carpignano et al. (1993) argue:

The mass media are the public sphere and this is the reason for the degradation of public life if not its disappearance ... Public life ... has been transformed by a massive process of commodification of culture and of political culture in particular by a form of communication increasingly based on emotionally charged images rather than on rational discourse, such that political discourse has been degraded to the level of entertainment, and cultural consumerism has been substituted for democratic participation. (p. 103)

In the context of this study then, we can view films and television series as components of this mediated public sphere, which are used as reference points about the profession within the broader structure of society and the workplace.

### **Film selection and methodology**

This study's primary aim is to analyse film and television depictions of women in public relations roles. Previous studies have considered how public relations as a profession is portrayed in film but none have specifically investigated how women practitioners are depicted in film or television.

The study uses two samples: a small sample of nine films and series which were viewed and analysed in detail (see Table 2) and a larger sample, made up of films from previous studies, also including the films and television

series from Table 2 (see Table 1). This larger sample was collated and counted in order to gain an understanding of gender breakdown in the composite number of films/series which are drawn from Miller (1999), Tavcar (1993), Lee (2001, 2009), Tilson (2003), and Johnston (2010). A total of 126 films/series were counted and coded according to decade of release and gender of the public relations practitioner/s, using the following mix of primary and secondary approaches: viewing first-hand, using descriptions by previous researchers and, finally, using the Internet Movie Database (IMDb n.d.) to determine the following categories:

- Female only (or female in dominant role);
- Male only (or male in dominant role);
- Female and male (of equal dominance in roles);
- Could not determine.

While this remains a convenience sample (Wimmer & Dominick, 2006), it nevertheless represents the largest list of films and television series which has been analysed about public relations, and the only one which breaks down gendered representation. Of the total yield of 126 films/series, 13 could not be categorised and were coded 'could not determine'. Since these films could not be categorised, due to their unavailability for viewing or lack of secondary information, they were dropped from the sample and the total was adjusted to 113 films/series in order to provide a clearer breakdown of male/female numbers (see Table 1).

The smaller sample consists of four series and five films, representing women in both primary and secondary public relations roles

during the 1990s and 2000s (see Table 2). These films/series were chosen for their popularity or because they contribute to the discussion in a meaningful way. Most are popular series or have been highly successful films. Viewing of the various series began with season one, episode one, in order to gain a context and understanding for each discreet series, however not all seasons have been viewed in their entirety as some now total hundreds of hours across up to six seasons. In some cases, therefore, generalisations have been made based on early season depictions.

The study investigates a series of key issues in public relations as suggested in the literature. These include: what type of work is undertaken by women—predominantly technical or managerial? What are the numbers of men and women in management teams and are women included in the dominant coalition? Are 'feminist values' a part of the female roles or are they depicted in post feminist roles (or both)? What is the breakdown by gender in the movies and TV series? These underlying questions are used to inform the following questions.

1. What assumptions are made about public relations, as an industry and as a professional role for women in these screen representations?

2. What is the position (political, social, professional, private) of women at the time in which the film/television programmes are produced, and what bearing might this have on the depiction and treatment of the public relations women on screen?

3. In what specific ways are roles gendered and how are those roles conceived within a binary framework?

**Table 1. Total number of public relations films/series counted and studied in scholarly works (cited in this paper) between 1993 and 2010 where gender could be determined (Total number 113).**

	1920s	1930s	1940s	1950s	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	2000s	Total
<b>Female Practitioners</b>		1	2	2	2	1	3	8	5	24 21%
<b>Male practitioners</b>		5	8	13	8	7	14	20	8	83 73.5%
<b>Male and Female – equal levels</b>	1							2	3	6 5.5%
<b>Total</b>	1	6	10	15	10	8	17	30	16	113 100%

**Table 2. Films and TV series under analysis (\*also looks at 1940s version).**

	1990s movies	1990s television	2000s movies	2000s television
<b>Comedy/satire</b>	Wag the Dog	Absolutely Fabulous	In the Loop	Absolute Power
<b>Comedy/romance</b>	Sliding Doors	Sex and the City (also viewed as a film)	Bridget Jones's Diary	
<b>Drama</b>	Miracle on 34 <sup>th</sup> Street*	West Wing		

### Discussion

Table 1 provides a breakdown according to the year the film/series was made and the gender of the principal public relations practitioner. The table shows an overwhelming representation of male practitioners, with 73.5% of films/series depicting males only or males in the primary role. In addition, 5.5% of films/series show equal numbers of males and females, so collectively those presenting males in primary, dominant or sole depictions is 78% of films/series. Conversely, females are the sole or

dominant practitioner in 21% of films, or with the combined male/female representations they make up 26.5% of films/series. The sample shows fewer females in these roles than Miller's sample, though Miller's also comprised novels and was US specific. The sample showed a higher percentage than Lee's sample of just 10%.

The sample also shows that numbers of females increased over time: by the 1990s approximately one-third of primary roles were female, while by the 2000s, almost half were



female. While we can observe a rise in the presence of females in public relations roles increased during the 1990s and 2000s, the overall representations remained well below males.

The smaller sample, in Table 2, was drawn from the 1990s and 2000s and was made up of films and television series from the United States and the United Kingdom. The films and series in this table will now be discussed in more depth.

The American series *Sex and the City* ran for six seasons, beginning in 1998 and going through to the mid-2000s, followed by two spin-off films (2008 and 2010). The hit series brought four careers into the spotlight—Samantha is a public relations executive; Carrie is a newspaper columnist; Charlotte is an art gallery director; and Miranda is a lawyer. Based around Carrie's ongoing column of women and sex in New York in the 1990s and 2000s, this series deals with women living liberated and independent lives. Of the four women in the series Samantha is cast as the most sexually promiscuous and is the only one who remains single throughout the entire series and films. She is addicted to fashion, sex, men and parties and her professional role fits in with her social life because she runs her own business and is her own boss.

In contrast, the BBC series *Absolute Power* is set inside Prentice-MacCabe Public Relations, a busy, successful and often unethical consultancy in London. Though the series ran for only two seasons (following a successful radio season), it is important to this study because it is one of the few series *explicitly* about public relations as a profession. The agency is co-owned by two men, Charles and Martin, with junior executives Alison and Jamie. More junior still are Kathy and Nick; in total there are two females to four males in the team, with the females situated in the middle and bottom of the organisational hierarchy. Though in support roles, Alison and Kathy have strong characters and regularly 'play it straight' in an otherwise ethically compromised office. Despite Kathy being identified as a "former receptionist", also hindered by a shortfall in political knowledge, she is new-

media savvy and quite inventive in her job. Alison's role is more senior, paralleling Jamie's, however their characters are quite different. Alison is clever and switched-on; she also has a level of integrity not possessed by members of 'the boys' club' with Jamie's rogue character in contrast to her reliable, sensible role.

A much vaguer reference to a public relations consultancy is 'Edina Monsoon's Creative Company' in the BBC comedy *Absolutely Fabulous*. In this series, Eddie runs the company, assisted occasionally by Bubbles her secretary. The significant support roles however are Patsy, her life-long friend, and Saffy, her very sensible daughter. Eddie has few clients but nevertheless fusses around fashion and perfume launches and celebrity events. At one such event she proudly tells Patsy that the launch is "a truly major fashion event—every rich bitch in New York is in there". The series is punctuated by parties, drinking, smoking and more parties; her public relations work is synonymous with, at best, event management activity in the form of parties. Eddie's character is contrast against the mothering role of daughter Saffy, which serves to highlight Eddie's irresponsible, immature behaviour all the more.

*Miracle on 34th Street* focuses on a very different role in the character of Doris Walker, a department store director of special events who is an extremely practical, cynical, single mother who is raising her daughter to believe the truth and, as such, she doesn't believe in Santa Claus. The film was made several times, twice for successful cinema release in 1947 and 1994. Doris is part of senior management within Macy's (1947) and Cole's (1994) Department Store and is the only woman in the management team. The theme of *truth* is significant in the film, with Doris as truth's greatest champion. In the 1990s film she tells her daughter: "... because you know the truth and truth is one of the most important things in the world".

British movie *Bridget Jones's Diary* was a box-office success, receiving "the highest cumulative admissions in Europe for a European film from 1996-2004" (Cliche n.d.).

As the publicity agent for a publishing company, Bridget's role is more about her relationship with her boss than her job. Bridget is cast firmly as a technician and is appropriately described by her lawyer-love-interest friend Mark D'Arcy as "an appallingly bad public speaker" which is indicative of her generally poor professional communication skills. Despite this, she makes a successful career shift when, after a failed affair with her boss, she resigns and moves into television journalism. Both roles in the film are at the technical level.

Another British comedy which depicts a woman in the role of publicist is *Sliding Doors*. This film presents the dual life of Helen Quilley who, after being sacked from her public relations consultancy job for drinking her boss's vodka, lives parallel existences: her lucky, positive character is aligned with regaining her confidence, setting up a new public relations role and romantic success while in her alternative life she waits tables and is conned by her cheating boyfriend. Like *Bridget Jones's Diary*, this film includes little of the day-to-day life of working in public relations, although Helen shows skills in event management. Noteworthy, though, is her response to the five male executives as they gang-up to sack her at the start of the movie: "So I'm out am I?" she asks, "... I was getting a bit chocked up with all the testosterone around the place. Best I get out before I start growing a penis". Helen becomes a sole practitioner, so her role as technician and manager are merged.

Moving from comedy/romance, we see significant differences in the depictions of women in the three political satire/drama productions in the sample. The three films/series about political communications are *Wag the Dog*, *In the Loop* and *West Wing*, each with a communications team made up of both men and women. In each of these films/series, work is central to the plot so we see far more of the profession than in the others in which work is a sideline to romance (*Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sliding Doors*) or an occasional episode or change of scenery (*Absolutely Fabulous*). The primary communications role in the political

satire *Wag the Dog* is campaign director and crisis manager Conrad Brean. However, working with Brean is Winifred Ames, a senior key female press officer, who shows savvy and initiative in the scam that Brean concocts to save the American president from a sex scandal. While Brean is dismissive of a lesser female press secretary as the film begins: "Earn your money ... show a little spunk," he jibes, he works alongside Ames with the Hollywood director brought in to create a fictitious war to deflect the president's crisis. Ames is, arguably, part of the management group.

In the series *West Wing*, of the five people in the most senior communications roles in the White House, only one, CJ, is female, the press secretary. While in the senior ranks she is nevertheless sidelined from the most important decisions, illustrated when the advisors (all males) choose not to inform her about a major military operation to ensure she doesn't inadvertently leak details to the media. CJ's media orientation keeps her just outside the dominant coalition at the start of the series, however as the series progresses she is promoted to White House's Deputy Chief of Staff.

*In the Loop* is a multi-award winning British black comedy which is all about communication—or mis-communication. The plot centres on the inept behaviour of a UK cabinet minister who suggests that a proposed Middle Eastern war is unforeseeable (and by so doing implies that it is actually *foreseeable*), sparking a diplomatic wrangle between Washington and London. The cast of US and UK government ministers, diplomatic attachés and communications advisors includes three key female characters: Judy Molloy, the Director of Communications for the misunderstood Minister for International Development; Karen Clark, a senior US diplomat, and Liza Weld, her aide. The three females are part of the intricate web of chaos, opportunism, calculation and whatever else it takes to manipulate their position on the war. Chief communications character is the UK Prime Minister's Director of Communications Malcolm Tucker, a foul-mouthed Scot who, early in the film sets the tone to demand of

Molloy: “where do you think you are? In some f\*\*\*ing regency costume drama. This is a government department, not a f\*\*\*ing Jane Austen novel”. Molloy is a senior bureaucrat within the home office but she is effectively squeezed out of the senior advisory ranks when international diplomacy is required, while Clarke and Weld (in diplomatic, rather than communications, roles) meet the men head-on, leaving Molloy alone as the marginalised female.

### Film/series analysis

1. *What assumptions are made about public relations as an industry and as a professional role for women in these films?*

The two samples provide a range of depictions about public relations as an industry and as a profession. Of the 113 films and series counted only 26% showed females in primary roles. As women now number 70 to 80% of the profession, we can see that screen representations are in inverse proportion to reality. If we consider the film/series figures since the 1990s, the female depictions have risen, to almost half. Nevertheless, overall, film and television portrayals do not reflect the actual numbers of women in the profession. This supports Lee’s observation that the “imbalance not only suggests a lingering image of a male-dominated career but also of a glass ceiling for women in the profession” (2001, p. 309). It is also consistent with a broader assertion that women are underrepresented in films and television as a whole, as indicated earlier in the paper.

What is also apparent is that women are vastly outnumbered by men in management and communications roles within movies. In all the series and movies viewed for this study, women were in the minority: in *West Wing* CJ was one of five; in *Absolute Power* female characters were two of six; in *In the Loop* female characters were three of ten; in *Miracle on 34th Street* Doris was one of seven or five (in 1947 and 1994 respectively); in *Wag the Dog* Winifred was one of three. It would seem that, from this small sample at least, women in serious roles (as opposed to the romantic comedy roles) often gain their legitimacy in

public relations from working alongside men; that is, they do not (cannot?) run the department on their own.

Connected to this issue is the make-up of the senior management or dominant coalition and the role of technician/and or advisor. The small sample indicates that as far back as the 1940s women were represented as part of the dominant coalition in organisations, as noted in *Miracle on 34th Street*, yet by the 2000s they had far from established a foothold in this position. Women’s roles as technician and/or manager vary markedly within the film sample. In political roles, the manager/advisor is apparent in CJ’s character (*West Wing*), who is in the senior ranks but is also the one person who writes press releases and sets up press conferences, thus representing the mix of technician/manager, as suggested in the literature. The two romantic comedies – *Bridget Jones’s Diaries* and *Sliding Doors* – have lead characters purely as technicians who have not gained access to management ranks: indeed Helen in *Sliding Doors* is expressly removed from any chance of gaining access at the start of the movie.

2. *What is the position (political, social, professional, private) of women at the time in which the film/television programme is produced, and what bearing might this have on the depiction and treatment of the PR women on screen?*

This question raises some significant issues. All women in the nine series/films are single, though it must be noted that two are divorced – Doris, in *Miracle on 34th Street* and Eddie in *Absolutely Fabulous*. In both these latter cases the women are single parents. This is of particular interest in the 1940s version of *Miracle on 34th Street* in which Doris’s divorced status is explicitly identified and she employs a maid to manage her home. In the 1990s version the divorced status is not raised—she is simply a single mother—reflecting a popular acceptance of single parenthood by the 1990s. While there have been studies of women and work-life balance (see for example Aldoory, Jiang, Toth & Sha, 2008), none includes marital status as a

variable, so it is not possible to obtain figures of practitioners' marital status in the 1990s and 2000s. Nevertheless, we might assume that this 100% single status is not representative. Interestingly, of the males who work alongside the females in these roles, several are referred to as married—in *West Wing* and *Absolute Power* for example.

All the women are also white and middle class. The only non-white woman is the African American maid in the 1940s *Miracle on 34th Street*. Clearly these films reinforce the white status quo. The literature indicated that young women had eschewed feminism for a post feminist approach to work and life. McRobbie argues that Bridget from *Bridget Jones's Diary* leads a post feminist single woman's existence, as free agent yet also uncertain about her future. She summed up post feminist women thus:

Confident enough to declare their anxieties about possible failure in regard to finding a husband, they avoid any aggressive or overtly traditional men, and they brazenly enjoy their sexuality, without fear of the sexual double standard. In addition, they are more than capable of earning their own living, and the degree of suffering or shame they anticipate in the absence of finding a husband is countered by sexual confidence. (2004, p. 262)

Likewise, Helen in *Sliding Doors* represents this young, single, emancipated woman. Older, but more overtly post feminist, is Samantha from *Sex and the City*, who is the only woman of the four in the series/films to remain single.

### 3. In what specific ways are the roles gendered and how are those roles conceived within a binary framework?

Despite the single, white, middle-class status of women in the films and series under review, there is extreme variation in the depictions of women in public relations. What the study indicates is that there is no one, homogenised representation of women in public relations. Women who enter the profession are not all one 'type'; they have not all fallen victim to Froelich's "friendliness trap" (in Rush et al., 2004, p. 231) yet truth and honesty and

relationship management are clearly important to many of the individuals in this small sample. The diversity in characters should be seen as encouraging if we are to heed Aldoory and Toth's (2002) warning of homogenising women and not considering differences within genders. Indeed, they argue "women have not been granted variations within their gender" (p. 125) – yet this film and television sample indicates that variations abound.

Samantha in *Sex and the City* illustrates many of the characteristics of the post feminist literature. If female individualism occurs "at the expense of feminist politics" (McRobbie, 2004, p. 258) Samantha is the embodiment of female individualism, displaying none of the feminist public relations values listed above. Samantha's role, of all those in this study, challenges traditional notions of gender and power. Unlike Helen and Bridget, Samantha is portrayed as entirely happy with her single life, in which she is in charge of her personal, sexual, and business needs; to use McRobbie's description of post feminism, in Samantha's role "feminism is invoked so that it might be undone" (2004, p. 259).

Not surprisingly, Samantha's character has drawn a range of responses as a public relations role-model. Among those are views from public relations students. PR student Alena Kravchenko (2007) runs a blog on gender in public relations. Her discussion of *Sex and the City* drew the following responses:

*Audrey said ...* In Italy, a PR practitioner is the one that gets you in cool clubs, and is not really considered as a profession. In France, my friends hardly knew about it or just referred (sic) to Samantha from *Sex and the City*... Well, there's some hard work we need to do if we want to get a better image than that!

*Anonymous said ...* Samantha Jones is yes the reason I want to pursue a career in PR, Her lifestyle is fabulous but its (sic) a TV show, as if it would get ratings if her life was boring, cheap and could acutually (sic) reflect reality???? It is meant to be unrealistic .... I think anyone interested in PR should be inspired by her.

While there is ample evidence that Grunig, Toth and Hon's (2000) 'feminist values' are present in Doris in *Miracle on 34th Street*, seen in her relationship-building and honesty, these values are just as apparent in her lawyer-boyfriend who also champions Kris Kringle's case. Fred (in the 1940s version, Bryan in the latter version) is less cynical, more trusting, and more sensitive than Doris. So in this film, there is less of a gender binary than we might have expected of a film from the 1940s.

Feminist values are also seen in the characters of Helen (*Sliding Doors*), Bridget (*Bridget Jones's Diary*), Alison (*Absolute Power*), and Winifred (*Wag the Dog*) in their sensitivity, ethical behaviour, sense of justice and perceptiveness. These women work with men who, for the most part, lack these characteristics. In *West Wing*, the binary is not as starkly contrasted. In *Absolutely Fabulous*, Eddie's lack of feminist qualities are apparent in her daughter Saffy, who is shown as the nurturing, caring and responsible one, while Samantha in *Sex in the City* does not show any of these characteristics.

Not surprisingly, the more post feminist the character, the less we see 'feminist characteristics' apparent. What occurs as the post feminist attributes emerge is a profession that is, for the most part, depicted as light-weight, consumer-driven and simplistic, or, when shown as a more serious profession, is run by men, with women in technical or support roles. Ironically, the oldest film in the sample, *Miracle on 34th Street*, shows a woman both taken seriously and accepted as equal to her male counterparts; this is not the case for many in this sample, drawn from the post feminist era of the 1990s and 2000s. Indeed, these films/series must be seen as the product of this post feminist era, an era which has seen the questioning of feminist values and, at the extreme, the abandonment of some of its advances, at least by the under-30s. What appears to be lacking in them, however, are the elements of diversity and inclusion that are also part of the post feminist call.

## Summary and conclusions

To say that public relations, as a profession, does not fare well within these public culture depictions would be an understatement; and significantly, women, as the majority of workers in the industry, have fared the worst of all. The depictions reinforce many of the concerns expressed in the literature, reinforcing and illustrating the systemic problems faced by women. In summary, the literature found that women tend to be in more junior positions than men; their roles are more often technical or supporting; they do not hold the most senior or management roles within either consultancies or in-house positions. Furthermore, while these films and series show a wide variety of women in public relations there is no diversity – they are all single (or divorced), white and middle class. This reflects the concerns expressed in the literature with the depictions simply reinforcing perceptions of the homogeneity of the profession.

While this sample is small, it does represent a collection of popular and highly successful films and series with a broad audience reach. The industry is shown on the one hand as publicity, media and event-based work, and this generally coincides with women performing the tasks, while, on the other hand, it is manipulative, scheming and unethical, where men are the most senior, with women in subordinate roles. Though there are some positive representations of the industry, and its professionals, these are in a minority. Negative and limited stereotypes of women in the profession dominate the screen depictions and though characters may be endearing, the way they represent the profession is usually not.

These representations have significant ramifications for how the profession, and those who work within it, are viewed and understood. Popular memory theory and cultivation analysis suggest these depictions reinforce public and professional knowledge of public relations and the literature of the public sphere indicates that this mediated space drives public opinion at the expense of first-hand experiences and

understanding. Miller (1999) and Keenan (1996) both called for further studies into audience perceptions of the profession to determine if exposure to media images had influenced attitudes or beliefs. While endorsing their call, this study suggests a refinement of this proposal informed by the theories of memory studies and cultivation theory to investigate how *young women*, in particular the under-30s – at university, within industry, or at school – see these roles of women and the impact this is having on their career choices, their perceptions of the industry and how they see themselves working within it and indeed, advancing the profession. If the bloggers cited above are any indication, then public relations educators and the profession as a whole are facing the significant challenge of counteracting the popular culture depictions of a new ghetto of public relations; a party ghetto where the velvet has simply been replaced by a pair of stilettos.

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