

An analysis of public relations discourse and its representations in popular culture

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Attestation of Authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Signed:

Date:

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Abstract

This thesis is an examination, exploration and discussion of the representation and perception of the public relations profession. For those outside the profession, public relations is often associated with spin doctoring and unethical communication, and this research is an attempt to understand why that negative connotation is still prevalent in society. This work takes the stance that entertainment media and popular culture are the dominant modes of meaning making for peoples' understanding. Working within the historical and societal context of an increasingly information-mediated global community, people often take what they see on television or the movies, as reality. Plato's Allegory of the Cave will be used to demonstrate the idea that the shadows on the wall (or in contemporary times, the images on a screen) are often taken to be reality, and that it can be difficult for audiences to accept that the shadows are only a mediated representation of the real world.

A discourse analysis approach has been employed for this study, which largely focuses on language and its relation to societal learning and understanding. This work incorporates several research methods, and complementary sources of information to provide a holistic and wide-ranging view of the contemporary view of public relations. Firstly, film analysis on four texts (films and television programs) was performed, to examine the way in which public relations characters are represented on screen, and to determine whether there is a set of common traits or characteristics that those characters are portrayed as having. Secondly, three focus groups have been conducted, in order to gauge how audiences feel about the profession, and to determine if seeing public relations characters on the screen has an impact on peoples' attitude towards the profession. An observational diary, spanning a year long time frame, has also been included as an appendix to this work, with the diary entries contributing a real-life, relatively unmediated view of how public relations arises in magazines, social media, news, personal interactions, and work. In addition, personal communication with Alistair Campbell (the former Communications Advisor to Tony Blair) will be touched on, to offer insight into the bad reputation public relations often has, and how the media often perpetuate the idea of spin.

Key findings of this study are that there are a common set of themes that emerge in the entertainment media representation of public relations, most notably ethical issues, power and control, physical appearance and presentation, tensions between old and young, male and female, and UK/US representations of the field. These themes and ideas are echoed in the focus group findings, and supported by the popular culture diary. Integration of the various data sets has allowed a wider and more meaningful account of the contemporary representation and perception of public relations to emerge. A case is made for the importance of questioning entertainment representations, so that Plato's Allegory of the Cave does not ring true in the years to come, and for people to be engaged with how meaning is made in their own lives.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background and Context of research

This thesis is an exploration of the way public relations characters are represented in popular entertainment media, and the intersection these representations have with the way audiences interpret them. Lee (2001) succinctly describes the problematic nature of the image of the public relations profession: “public relations has had a negative image in popular culture of manipulation, artificiality and puffery” (p. 298). At a first glance, one might reasonably associate public relations with the manipulative and mysterious act of deceiving the masses, a concept irrevocably linked to the war-time propaganda of Nazi Germany. But there are in fact, multiple layers to the history and changing identity of the profession, which range from the practices of the founding fathers of public relations like Edward Bernays, Ivy Lee or PT Barnum, to modern day representations of the profession in popular culture and the media. Ewen (1996) recounts the social history of spin, and points to several issues which have created the enigma that surrounds public relations and looks at the basis for the often negative connotations of one of the fastest growing industries in the world. van Ruler (2005) states that not only is public relations a booming occupational field, but that during 1994 to 2005, there was a projected growth in the American public relations profession of 47%. This author also points to research (Mogul, 2002, as cited in van Ruler, 2005, p. 159) in which the Institute for PR Research and Education estimates that there are some 250,000-300,000 people employed in PR and public affairs in the USA alone. A dated but nevertheless useful piece of research, a 1998 National Credibility Index survey, gauged which professions are most trusted by the public, and it was found that public relations was ranked 42nd out of 44 possible sources of information, with only famous entertainers and talk show hosts rating less credible than the profession (National Credibility Index, 1999). As one of the main functions of public relations is to communicate information to the public on behalf of a client or organisation, the credibility of that information is crucial. Without credibility, people will not believe what they are being told, and are far less likely to be supportive of the message they are being targeted with. Credibility may not be such an important component for other industries and professions, but for public relations, it is a major concern.

Therefore, it is imperative to examine the contemporary representation and perception of public relations, in order for academics, practitioners and the profession as a whole, to be able to understand and respond to any concerns the public may hold.

Lee (2001) points to the intriguing fact that although there have been many American films that have featured public relations professionals, press agents, and publicists, there is nevertheless only a small body of research-based work that investigates the depiction of the profession. Furthermore, the researchers who have investigated the screen-time given to public relations have found that the portrayal is often negative and casts the profession in a bad light. Tavcar (1993), who provides an interesting description of 17 films (ranging in publication from 1933-1993) that feature public relations characters, suggests that:

Several of the films (all shown occasionally on TV and/or available on video) shouldn't be watched after a tough day in the PR trenches. They require some armor on the psyche (p. 21).

In contrast, Lee (2001) argues that there is an extensive amount of attention given to the popular culture portrayal of journalists and politicians.

Notwithstanding the ubiquity of public relations in contemporary society, researchers have devoted little attention to its image in popular culture, especially the nearly universal mass entertainment medium of film. While depictions of politicians and journalists in movies have been extensively investigated and commented upon, there has been little comparable study of the public relations professional (Lee, 2001, p. 311).

With reference to the above quote, the field of public relations is certainly comparable to politics and journalism in the strength of its influence, and the increasing role these three sectors have in shifting people's perceptions of the world, mainly by spreading targeted information. One of the ways to understand a culture or society is to question not only what is explicitly stated and enacted in the public arena (for example news stories, current affairs, events and so on), but also how the forces that have immeasurable power over the people (such as governments, the media, or public relations) are depicted in popular culture and understood by the audiences who consume the various signs and symbols attached to those depictions.

Indeed, Grindstaff (2008) argues that studying popular culture through a scholarly lens is increasingly pertinent, as the role and influence of popular culture spreads beyond the realm of entertainment and leisure, into even more significant arenas like social and political life.

At its core, this is a media effects investigation, placed in the wider context of popular culture and the reputation of a rapidly growing profession.

Elements of various research methods such as semiotic analysis of entertainment media texts, and a focus group that will examine people's responses to such texts in order to gain first-hand data about the representation of public relations characters in film and television, and how this relates to audiences' views of the profession have been employed for this study. Furthermore, popular culture as an element of cultural sociology will be incorporated into this work, in an attempt to locate the meaning and representation surrounding public relations characters within the wider societal context. The question of how meaning is made and transmitted is of central concern to this investigation.

As a post-graduate student who also works part time in the public relations and communications arena, the media representation and public perception of the profession is a subject that is of great interest to this researcher. Indeed, it is often said that one should relate the research to personal experiences and interests; therefore it makes sense to extrapolate meaning about the public relations profession by examining the relationship between media and audience.

It should be noted early on, that this Master's thesis is a development of the Honour's dissertation this researcher completed in 2011 (Dennison, 2011) which examined the use of the term public relations and PR in the newspaper, using content analysis to reveal the connotations associated with that term. A small focus group made up of a convenience sample was used to complement the content analysis, which found that the groups understanding of public relations was largely related to spin, media relations, manipulation of public opinion, public relations as serving corporate interests, and a complex relationship with journalists.

On the other hand, the group also acknowledged that public relations does have a valid role in society, and that when a good cause benefits from the profession, it is a positive occupation for practitioners to be working within. This finding suggests that people may have a more positive perception of public relations when it is seem to be doing good in society.

For many of us, the media is an important source of information about the world in which we live. Indeed, it has been argued that the media are one of the chief means by which we reach an understanding of this world. In consequence, many people believe the media are a powerful means of shaping our attitudes and beliefs (Kruger, Rayner & Wall, 2001). With specific regard to entertainment media, as opposed to news media or educational media, the power of films and television programs will be investigated.

The time societies spend on leisure and entertainment falls under the more expansive concepts of labour-leisure time, capitalist structures, and often the work of the Culture Industry theorists of the Frankfurt School. A key concept offered by theorists (such as Kruger et al., 2001), is that the media offer us a representation of reality, not reality itself. The original concept of reality and perception comes from the classical Greek philosopher Plato. The symbolic story explains the difference between reality and what is perceived to be reality. Three men are chained up in a cave, where the only reality they have is the shadow of objects on a wall in front of them, as a fire behind the men creates the light for the shadows to be cast (people and animals walk across a raised bridge behind the chained up men, but in front of the fire. One day, one of the chained up men manages to leave the cave, and outside he finds that there are objects and people there, which he once just saw shadows of. He tries to go back to the cave and tell the other men what he has seen in the real world, but the men cannot accept that what they see before them (the shadows) is not reality. The Allegory of the Cave is closely associated with the modern construct of media, in which people grow to believe that what they see on screen is reality, and that this process leaves audiences ignorant of the world off-screen.

Shouler summarises the significance of Plato's Allegory saying:

Plato's symbolic story suggests that most people dwell in the darkness of the cave, happy to live in a world of shadows and appearances, like the kind found on television. They might take the artificial world of fleeting images to be a world of reality, but it is not (Shouler, 2008, no page given).

Plato's work on the Allegory of the Cave idea is applicable in the 21st century to the role that television and film play in the life of everyday audiences. Screen representations act as a mediation of reality for audiences, giving them a false sense of what is real and what is constructed. Weimann (2000) describes how the allegory is more applicable than ever before:

The wall in the cave was replaced by the screens of television, movies, and computers, by pictures and text in newspapers and magazines, by the sounds of recorded and transmitted voices and sounds on radio sets. We may not be chained, but nevertheless these media "walls" are our main source of information about the world out there (Weimann, 2000, p. viii).

This concept is a recurring theme in media theory, and one that will be given close attention in this work. Moreover, the meaning conveyed in film and television can be viewed as a constructed reshaping of the world, and therefore questions must be asked about the motivation behind, and accuracy of, such constructions. As Trebic (2007) argues, "Understanding the difference between what is real and what is represented is vital to our understanding of any media" (p. 87). Indeed, one might argue that the storytelling nature of entertainment media does in fact transcend the viewer, and thus is likely to make the text even more persuasive because of this. Even in the context of news production, authors such as Watson (2003) say that;

Storytelling- narrative- has always been an entertaining way of exploring and communicating meaning. One might say that, along with music which is itself so closely associated with stories through song, the story is both the oldest and the most universal form of interactive expression; and it is almost as natural and familiar to us as breathing (Watson, 2003, p. 151).

When combined with the power of the visual image, narrative through entertainment media has the potential to be a strong shaping force on the views and knowledge of audiences. For many, a fictional film or television program may offer a sense of escapism or release, but there are simultaneously several different factors that can contribute to the audience members overall understanding of the subject matter presented through the entertainment medium (like characterisation, stereotype, information processing, moral situations and so on).

The context from which this research has emerged is the information and technology saturated environment of the present day, and the role that entertainment media plays in shaping how audiences perceive the public relations profession. Early work on the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, as cited in Mastro & Robinson, 2000), suggested that television communicates signals and information which has an influence on audience's perception of the social world. Mastro and Robinson (2000) explain that the cultivation hypothesis is largely concerned with how television influences perception over time, rather than based on a single exposure to a media text. In addition, and coming from a public relations perspective, Park and White (2010) argue that;

Second-level agenda setting and cultivation theories purport that mass media contribute to beliefs about social reality by creating a cumulative, general consciousness upon which assumptions and judgments are based, suggesting that public perceptions about public relations would match media portrayal. (Park & White, 2010, p .319)

With this in mind, and combined with the fact that the media is playing an ever-increasing role in how people get their information and form opinions about the world, the way in which the media represents and stereotypes social and professional groups is becoming increasingly significant. In particular, the way in which entertainment media is consumed is of central importance to this research, as many of the stereotypes used in film, television and print mediums are often used to make judgements about others.

King and Sayre (2010) posit that;

Many media theories such as dependency theory, cultivation analysis, symbolic interaction, and social construction of reality predict that the repeated, regular exposure to media and entertainment containing distorted representations might lead to stereotyping people in the real world. The fear is that the media influences our perceptions and that these perceptions then influence our behavior toward stereotyped groups (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 318).

This statement gets to the heart of one of the central concerns that drives this research and one that also lends a degree of practical implications to the investigation. That is, the apprehension that if indeed the representation and stereotypes conveyed to entertainment media audiences does in fact influence how those audiences understand the public relations profession, does that influence similarly extend to how people will act towards public relations people in real life situations?

This thesis takes the theoretical approach that the media does in fact influence its audiences, though the extent to which this occurs is debatable. Furthermore, a thesis length study is not a sufficient timeframe or scope to conclusively (or otherwise) prove the extent and intensity of any given media effect. However, it should also be acknowledged early on in this thesis, that there is always the possibility that the research will prove that the public perception of public relations is not in fact as heavily influenced by the entertainment media representation of the profession, and if this is the case, it then becomes necessary to question which other sources of influence are involved in the image and perception of public relations.

In addition to taking a strong communication studies based approach to the present research, including public relations theory and media studies, this thesis will also blend in aspects of social psychology and cultural sociology with the incorporation of popular culture observations. This is in order to gain a more in-depth understanding of how stereotypes are formed, and how people use stereotype frames to make sense of, and judge, other peoples' actions.

By weaving popular culture into this thesis, the scope of the investigation is widened, as it examines a more inclusive environment for analysis, in that popular culture is not necessarily a key component of academic musings. Indeed, Grindstaff (2008) advises that students often bear the brunt of popular culture being such an interdisciplinary subject, by studying a field which the author says “lacks systematicity and coherence” (p. 211). In addition, is the anecdotes told by researchers and other individuals who have been openly mocked by the media for using such popular culture examples, as seen in the case of a psychologist who studied race and gender roles in the popular Disney film, *The Lion King*, and was then derided in the newspapers for her work, as well as having the legitimacy of her arguments rejected (see Rockler, 2002, p. 17). One might also look to the work of Hesmondhalgh (2005) who concedes that;

Entertainment as often been treated as second best to news and current affairs in media sociology. The sense of mere diversion clings to the term and it is hard to escape the feeling in a lot of media teaching and research that entertainment represents the leftovers, once the more politically urgent issues surrounding news have been thoroughly digested (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, p. 153).

However, the present thesis emerges from the perspective that far from being second best to news and current affairs, the study of entertainment media and by extension popular culture is invaluable to a contemporary research project. Furthermore, one might reasonably assert that any research that attempts to understand media and society but does so without taking into account the complex and interdependent relationships between meaning, media, society and world views runs the risk of ignoring the wider context of an increasingly mediated society.

In line with the idea that media studies are an important site for analysis, Hesmondhalgh (2005) points out that there has been a boom in the literature about entertainment and entertainment media in recent years, making the present day a pertinent time to survey the entertainment field. Furthermore, borrowing from the field of social psychology will add vigor to the discussion of why stereotypes are so significant, particularly if this leads to prejudice and discrimination towards public relations practitioners.

Within the context of rapidly spreading homogenous ideas, often created within globalisation processes, it becomes clear that the role of television, film and popular culture in general is becoming increasingly important in how people learn about and view the world around them.

As previously stated, the central component of this thesis is the portrayal of public relations characters in entertainment media texts, and how this interacts with the way audiences understand and interpret the profession. In addition, the use of entertainment media in this thesis as a site for critical analysis is presented with a constant discussion of popular culture, and how popular culture and contemporary society are interrelated and possibly even interdependent. It is beyond the scope of this investigation to fully explore the relationship and dichotomy between popular culture and societal factors. However, it nevertheless serves as a useful and innovative lens through which entertainment media and audience effects can be understood. It is noteworthy that entertainment media is not yet a site for widespread analysis or commentary, and that some might view such studies as pointless or unnecessary. Rockler (2002), with reference to the academic study of entertainment media in the United States has this to offer;

In the United States, many students simply do not feel that media texts- especially those that are “entertaining” as opposed to “informative” – are legitimate subjects for critical analysis” (Rockler, 2002, p. 17).

Indeed, Rockler (2002) goes on to argue that a factor in the obstacles to media literacy in the United States can be attributed to the unwillingness of many citizens living in the USA to accept such entertainment media products like film and television programs as valid sociological artefacts to study. With the national culture of the USA so closely connected to popular culture, one might also speculate if that close relationship is similar in New Zealand. It is promising however that many Kiwi high school students now have the option to learn Media Studies at NCEA levels 1, 2, and 3, which examines issues and process like representation and film composition, giving them a degree of understanding about the media system and socialisation. Even younger students who are at the intermediate level of schooling are increasingly exposed to the ways in which advertising can be misleading or deceptive.

Understanding media products like advertising appears to be coming under increased scrutiny by children at a younger age, which is arguably a positive development in school curriculum in Aotearoa. With factors like this in mind, it is imperative to closely examine and explore the various concepts associated with entertainment media, in order to locate the research in the wider body of media research and theory.

1.2 Research perspective and methodology

It should be acknowledged that while this researcher has some expectation of revealing a certain set of stereotypes, or stereotypical characteristics of public relations characters, every effort will be taken to approach the research from a neutral and unbiased position. While every researcher has his or her own frame of reference, these need to be not only acknowledged and highlighted, but also kept in mind at every stage of the research process, in an attempt to have the research be as objective and accurate as possible. The overarching methodological approach to this study is discourse analysis. Paltridge (2002) offers a useful description of this approach, touching on the language and societal significance of the process:

Discourse analysis focuses on knowledge about language beyond the word, clause, phrase and sentence that is needed for successful communication. It looks at patterns of language across texts and considers the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used. Discourse analysis also considers the ways that the use of language presents different views of the world and different understandings. It examines how the use of language is influenced by relationships between participants as well as the effects the use of language has upon social identities and relations. It also considers how views of the world, and identities, are constructed through the use of discourse. Discourse analysis examines both spoken and written texts (Paltridge, 2002, p. 2).

This approach is fitting for this thesis as the content of the work observes, explores and evaluates a variety of sources of information about the contemporary depiction and perception of the public relations field, with the researcher's own understanding of that discourse being the central variable in the investigation.

Discourse, which can be viewed as a type of conversation or dialogue between the researcher's understanding and the subject under study, helps to group together the range of practical methods that have been applied, and provides a more cohesive view through which the literature and data can be interpreted. Furthermore, as part of the discourse analysis, elements of a grounded theory approach have also been applied, and the acknowledgement of assumptions is a key part in the grounded theory process. Birks and Mills (2011) elaborate on this point;

Acknowledging your existing assumptions, experience and knowledge of the area of research is an effective mechanism for establishing where you stand in relation to your proposed study. By articulating your thoughts, feelings and ideas before you begin, you ensure that your study is transparent from the outset (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 19).

Due to the fact that research into both the media representation of public relations practitioners *and* the audience effect is still in its relatively early stages, it is therefore useful for researchers to carve out methods and concepts through which this dual topic can be observed and analysed. Whereas other subjects that might have been given more sustained and long-term academic attention are able to draw on a wealth of previous research and conceptual frameworks, this researcher is in a rather unique position for a Master's level thesis, in which fairly new academic terrain is being explored. As a result, using elements of grounded theory is possibly the most ideal approach to take for the present study, and one might borrow from Birks and Mills (2011) to justify this claim, in that these authors suggest that when little is known about the area under investigation, grounded theory is particularly appropriate as it "results in the generation of new knowledge in the form of theory" (p. 16). Birks and Mills go on to explain that it is these areas where there has been little research done previously, creating new theories from the emerging data is a worthwhile activity, and these areas of limited study are "most deserving of research effort" (p. 16-17). Charmaz (2006) offers some useful ideas for understanding grounded theory and what it offers to researchers;

What are grounded theory methods? Stated simply, grounded theory methods consist of systematic, yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves... Thus, data form the foundation of our theory and our analysis of these data generates the concepts we construct (Charmaz, 2006, p. 2).

Grounded theory is a means of allowing the data to emerge and then making statements or theory from that data. Charmaz (2006) eloquently describes that process, while referring to the grounded nature of the theories that emerge as a result of grounded theory methodology.

1.3 Thesis structure

The structure of this thesis is aimed at giving the reader a clear and thorough understanding of the research process and what has influenced its development. Chapter 1 provides the research context, and provides a basic overview of how the work is organised. Chapter 2 is an in-depth literature review of the relevant material, which provides the theoretical grounding for the present study. Chapter 3 is a detailed examination of the research methods that have been employed for this thesis, and will look at the advantages and disadvantages of using such tools. Chapter 4 will present the research findings to the reader, which will be complemented by a range of graphs, tables, and images that will aid understanding of the data. Chapter 5 will draw together both the research findings and the literature review, in order to locate the significance of this study in the previous body of work. Information gained from the popular culture diary, and personal communication with one of the most well known figures in modern public relations will be integrated into the discussion, and combined with the data from the film analysis and focus groups, in a bid to provide a holistic and wide-ranging account of the representation and perception of public relations.

A comprehensive list of academic references will be provided at the conclusion of the thesis. Efforts have been made to incorporate both seminal literature about media effects and representation, and also more contemporary views on these topics.

In addition to the more traditional components of this thesis, such as the literature review, research methods, data collection and conclusion, a supplementary element has been incorporated in order to help the reader locate the identity that public relations has in popular culture. Therefore, an extensive popular culture observation diary has been included as an appendix in this thesis, which documents how the researcher experiences public relations outside the formal research process. This supplementary element deserves some explanation and justification early on.

By exploring the way this researcher experiences the various elements of public relations (for example, terms such as publicity stunt, PR guru, PR spokesperson) as they are presented in popular culture, an attempt is made to illustrate just how implicated the profession is in a contemporary, media and information saturated environment that society currently exists within. This media diary is not a formal academic research method as such, but rather, is included in this thesis to present an informative, entertaining, and most importantly, unmediated account of the way people experience public relations without necessarily seeking it out. Similarly, personal communication from the perspective of someone who is seen to have shaped the contemporary view of public relations will be included as an appendix (see Appendix E), to offer the reader a chance to learn more about the insight and views of a real 'spin doctor'.

1.4 Summary

In conclusion, this chapter has laid out the background and context of this research, outlined the methodological approach taken, and detailed the structure of this document. By providing an overview of the work, the reader is invited to view this research as an innovative and multi method exploration of the contemporary representation and perception of public relations. The next chapter will examine the key literature that has provided the theoretical basis for this thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1: Introduction

This chapter is the result of an extensive literature review carried out over the course of this research project. Literature has been incorporated from diverse fields such as media effects research, film theory, semiotics, social psychology and stereotypes. Previous works on the representation of public relations will be discussed, as will texts that focus on professional stereotypes. Efforts have been made to incorporate both current and seminal texts, in a bid to provide a balanced, theoretically grounded account of the issues at play within the research focus. A statement from King and Sayre (2010) is cited below, which encapsulates the research query and indicates why studying the representation of public relations characters is a worthwhile activity;

The media, particularly entertainment media, present only a slice of life, but that slice is not necessarily representative of real life. Mundane, normal, everyday people and events typically are just not all that interesting or entertaining (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 318).

2.2: Re-presentation and stereotypes

At the heart of this investigation is the way in which entertainment media uses representation and stereotyping to convey meaning to the audience. Some authors (such as Burton, 1997) use the terms “representation” and “stereotypes” interchangeably, which is an interesting point to keep in mind, as some people might understand these two concepts quite differently. Examining the entertainment media representation and perception of public relations characters can help researchers to better understand how stereotypes and representations are communicated and interpreted by audiences. Pinpointing exactly how media stereotypes are formed and perpetuated would be a sizable research project to undertake, but examining the way stereotypes and representations are manifested in entertainment media, and then how those constructions resonate with media audiences is a step in the right direction. Similarly, it is essential to incorporate the developments in media effects theories over time, in order to situate the body of work this thesis is emerging from.

Bodenhausen and Macrae (2001) call the process of activating stereotypical thinking 'people perception', and advise that this is a crucial element of social cognition theory. These authors advise that;

Rather than viewing individuals on the basis of their unique constellations of attributes and proclivities, perceivers prefer to instead furnish categorical (i.e. stereotype-based) conceptions of others (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 2001, p. 240).

This statement is particularly poignant, as it succinctly describes why stereotypes, and stereotypical thinking is so problematic for interactions between people and groups. Essentially, stereotyping leads to people viewing and responding to others based on preconceived and generalised notions, rather than getting to know the person based on their own merits. In this case, the concern is that people can also judge professions based on these preconceived notions, rather than learning and understanding the role that the profession plays in society, so for public relations, whether that be supporting business goals, and increasing brand awareness, or creating a positive and mutually beneficial relationship between the organisation and the people or groups affected by it.

2.3 History of media effects theories

Since the invention and proliferation of mass media, there has been commentary and concern about the possible effects this ubiquitous form of spreading information and ideas might have on audiences, and by extension, society. To have any sort of influence, a medium must have power over those affected, so by this, when one is studying media effects, the power of the media is also being questioned. Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) advise that;

First, in its broadest sense, power refers to the ability to produce effects, to make a difference in the world. In this sense, every practice has a certain amount and type of power. For instance, television has the power to reorganize how we spend our time whereas a magazine is less likely to reorganize our time (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998, p. 26).

Theorists claim that there are several types of media effects, ranging from psychological to physiological, and even behavioural – the latter being of the greatest concern to the present investigation.

King and Sayre posit:

Can our entertainment choices affect our more general behavior? Can movies and music influence not only our opinions but also our actions toward other people? (2010, p. 111).

In the context of a heavily mediated and entertainment-based society, it is useful (and necessary) to continually examine the effects that the media can potentially have on audiences. Whether such effects are positive or negative is often a question of judgement, which could be compared to other fundamental questions that continue to arise in both scholarly and popular debate, for example whether globalisation is a positive or negative development. Where one stands on an issue like this is largely dependent on variables like personal motivation, perspective or potential economic gain. For example if someone outsources their labour to a third world country and makes large profit from that move, that individual is likely to support globalisation and argue that it is a beneficial and necessary development for global growth and prosperity. Alternatively, if one works in a profession that is glorified through the media, and as a result that profession has considerable social status and power, then the individual is likely to support the portrayal of that profession in the media.

Particularly when one acknowledges that new technologies have irreversibly changed the traditional media landscape, it is more pertinent than ever before to understand the complex and significant relationship between media, society and culture. Information and communication spreads almost instantly, creating a super highway for potential meaning-making and discourse. For this thesis alone, new technologies and platforms like YouTube, blogs, email, websites and search engines have all informed the research context. Comparatively, 70 years ago it is like a typewriter and books would have informed a similar thesis. As will be noted in the later chapters of this thesis, media consumption and taste is at a fascinating crossroad, where an increasing number of people can now have elevated control over the media products, channels and time-space elements they want to engage with. For example, consider a television viewer from the 1950s or 1960s when the medium was first gaining widespread popularity.

There would be limited channels and broadcasters of information, not to mention the ideologies transmitted through television sets would have gone largely unchallenged in lieu of any alternative information sources. Other media consumed (although these media products would be consumed separately and never concurrently) would be limited to printed newspaper and broadcast radio.

A classic example of the power of the media over audiences is the War of the Worlds broadcast in 1938. During a radio broadcast in late October 1938, the fictional story about aliens invading earth was taken by thousands of people across the United States to be true, which resulted in wide-spread panic and fear in the public. The impact of this fictional narrative on radio audiences is often used as an example of the powerful effects of the media, and illustrated both the speed and the intensity at which media can influence people. It is worth considering how media consumers in 2012 would react if the same thing happened. It is hard to accept that contemporary and savvy media consumers would experience the same fear and panic that swept the United States when the War of the Worlds was broadcast. If anything, it is more conceivable that media audiences in 2012 would be quicker to assume an invasion announcement was more of a media stunt or planned prank, thus is the nature of the current media beast.

Compare the impact of the War of the Worlds, to the present media environment. It is completely possible for an individual in 2012 to be watching a live election debate on a national television station, where the presenter is taking audience questions from a real-time text message or social networking participant (for example from Facebook or Twitter). Meanwhile the media consumer might be simultaneously keeping an eye on a Twitter feed about that televised debate, and later going to a party website to stream an alternative response to the televised debate. In the nightly news round-up, the newscaster will likely cite figures from both the televised debate, social media activity and commentary, and the participation on the various party websites.

From the above example (which was actually experienced by this researcher during the 2011 New Zealand Election Campaign), one is given an indication of how vastly the media landscape has changed over the past few decades.

While it would be ideal for this research to be able to investigate multiple mediums to see how the public relations profession is portrayed and mediated in both traditional and new media, the size of a Master's thesis dictate that not everything can be studied and it is more useful to instead dedicate the limited time and space available to a more select medium (which in this case is entertainment media, encapsulating film and television programs).

The first recognised set of theories of media effects were the Powerful Effects Theories (for example see King & Sayre, 2010, p. 112). This foundational paradigm took the stance that the media audience was powerless, and that the effects of the media were all encompassing, and largely took steam from the rise in the spread of mass produced media (such as magazines and radio broadcasts). Walter Lippmann was a prominent supporter of the powerful effects theories. Under the powerful effects paradigm, such theories as the hypodermic needle theory or the magic bullet theory were developed and became part of the epoch of media effects research and understanding. "Like a dangerous drug, or bullet, media messages were thought to be mindlessly absorbed by audiences, as though injected or shot into their systems" (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 112). Interestingly, even though research has shown that there are often multiple factors that can change how people are affected by the media (for example education, age, motivation for using the media, repeated exposure to the media message and so on), many people still believe that the powerful effects theory, or the hypodermic needle theory of media effects is still operating. Furthermore, this notion of an all-powerful media is often at the centre of research into the effects of violence and junk-food advertising on children, as it assumes a strong and inescapable impact on media audiences.

As with most theories that attempt to encapsulate all elements of an issue, the powerful effects paradigm soon collapsed and gave way to another way of approaching media effects. Following the seminal and paradigmatic introduction and adoption of the powerful effects theories, a second thesis of how the media influences audiences was developed, namely, the set of Limited Effects theories (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 112). Under the limited effects set of approaches, came such sub-theories as Scientific Perspective and the Two-Step Flow theory.

The scientific perspective maintains that there are several facets to the model of mass communication, as elucidated by the Yale psychologist Harold Lasswell (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 113). Two-step flow was a highly influential theory, and posed that the effect of media goes through opinion leaders and is then disseminated in a more informal and credible through to the larger sections of society. Opinion leaders are still influential for larger audiences today, if not more so due to an increasingly cluttered and information rich environment, where people are bombarded with information and entertainment countless times each day. One might question the extent to which entertainment media plays a role in disseminating cultural values and norms to the audience, and that is a legitimate concern. However, if the entertainment industry is viewed in the societal context of an all-consuming popular culture environment, then it becomes clearer to see how well known actors, directors and production studios might yield considerable clout when it comes to influencing the opinions and knowledge of the audience.

Another set of theories that developed out of the early stages of media effects research is the cumulative and cultural effects theories, which developed alongside theories of limited effects such as the two-step flow. This stance posited that the effect of media is a long-term and drawn out process, which occurs after repeated and long-term media exposure. This is certainly a plausible and thought-provoking theory, and it does appeal to reason that if an individual is exposed to a consistent and repeated depiction of a person or event in a certain way, then over time, that continued exposure will be internalised in some way, and then applied to real-world contexts that resemble the strongly ingrained media messages. This is consistent with the idea of a self-fulfilling prophecy, in that people will come to expect these messages from the media, so therefore when they receive the message; it is simply slotted into the preconceived notions held by the audience member. This concept is particularly relevant in the context of stereotypes in entertainment media, and furthermore is relevant to this thesis. As previously stated, one of the driving concerns of this work is that media stereotypes could not only influence how a certain societal group (or in this case occupation) is viewed by the mainstream audience, but also if that stereotype has an impact on the way people view and interact with public relations practitioners in 'real life'.

Examining various media effects theories is useful as it helps the researcher to focus the line of study on the goal, which is to explore the relationship between the media representation of public relations characters and the public understanding of the profession itself.

Therefore, by engaging with the critical media theories that have emerged over the past few decades, one is better equipped to tackle the range of effects and ideas that are the result of this study.

Burton (1997) compares the effect of media representation and stereotyping on audiences to a process of repetition and reinforcement. Indeed, this concept of repeated stimuli as being a contributing factor to audiences' socialisation is a recurring theme within media effects literature and research. As King and Sayre (2010) argue, the standardised way of representing whole groups over multiple media outputs is at the heart of accusations that the media encourages stereotyping. It does stand to reason that if the representation of a particular group is the same across many different mediums, and genres, then such messages and signs of representation are eventually going to be (at the least) strengthened in the mind of the audience. Taylor and Willis (1999) offer a definition of representation;

Representation is the term used to describe the practice of placing different signs together in order to render complex abstract concepts intelligible and meaningful. This sense-making is a fundamental cognitive process. (Taylor & Willis, 1999, p. 39).

Another useful definition is offered by Trebic (2007) who states that "representation in the media is concerned with the way that characters, ideas, issues and events are presented to us" (p. 87). Furthermore, Branston and Stafford (2006) explain that 'representation' in the context of media studies is a rich concept, and further, that there are several related meanings of the term, all of which are relevant to the present research. In particular is the notion that media representations are never merely a true picture of the world, but rather, are a construction, just as the lighting or costumes are put together for a specific purpose. This is a particularly poignant concept, the idea that the way characters are portrayed, and their lines are scripted, is just as constructed and intentional as the costumes, or the scenery or even the location.

Furthermore, it could be argued that because film and television engage more of the senses, that this has an effect on the strength of the various meanings and messages conveyed by the media text. Adaval and Wyer (2004) continue;

In other words, although the visual characterizations of a person and his or her activities might be intended solely to stimulate interest and provide enjoyment, it could actually influence the conclusions people draw from the verbal information about the person and the extent to which they are persuaded by it (Adaval & Wyer, 2004, p. 153).

It is certainly a useful concept to keep in mind in the context of the present research, as one should try to locate any meaning within the wider framework from which it is created, and if conscious efforts have been made to present public relations characters in certain ways, then that is a phenomenon and process which deserves attention and scrutiny.

Moreover, Branston and Stafford elucidate the idea that the representations and stereotypes used in media texts can often “have material effects on how people expect the world to be” (2006, p. 141). This concept is of crucial importance to the present study, as it gets to the heart of the concern that media can have an impact on people’s views and actions in the unmediated real world. Burton (1997) argues succinctly;

What is represented is certain views of these social groups. And it is these views which we unconsciously learn to accept as normal – to the exclusion of alternative views. Too often such views are negative (Burton, 1997, p. 105).

In this thesis, for example, the focus is on how the film and television representations of public relations professionals affects the way people view PR in ‘real life’. That distinction between the mediated world of movies and TV programs, and the reality of everyday off-screen, is one of central importance to this investigation. It is not just the representation of characters on screen, analysing the texts for meaning, but a crucial element of this thesis is the explanation of the effect of representation on audiences. Using a two-pronged approach to investigating the representation and perception of the public relations profession allows a better understanding of the dual nature of media and audiences.

The use of stereotype is predominantly employed when groups of people are being portrayed, in that instead of individuals being represented, “sections of the media use a kind of shorthand in the way in which they represent some groups of people” (Kruger et al., 2001, p. 67). In this sense, stereotypes and representation are somewhat similar concepts, as they both rely on simplifying a person or group in order to make it easier for the audience to understand the characteristics being invoked.

One might look to work such as Bartsch and Viehoff (2010) who offer a comprehensive list of numerous different reasons that people use entertainment media (particularly film and television). The uses and gratifications audiences experience through media is of particular interest to this thesis, as it is suggested that the reason people watch film and TV might also be related to why they are watching the text, what they hope to achieve. Furthermore, it is reasonable and useful to question if there is some sort of relationship between the way audiences make and understand meaning through entertainment media, and the use or gratification the media provides for that audience member. It is helpful to provide a short inventory of the various uses and gratification theories that have been suggested; mood-management, affective disposition, excitation transfer, sensation seeking, modes of reception, intrinsic motivation, mood adjustment, gender socialization of emotions, relationship functions of entertainment, the list goes on. As one might see from the numerous uses and gratifications mentioned above, there are multiple ways an audience might be motivated to consume entertainment media, and indeed the gratifications the audience receives are just as varied.

Gray (2008) offers an insightful argument into the relationship between the hype created around television before it airs, due to the extensive media and marketing campaigns that are now part and parcel of what one might defined as an ultra-mediated lifestyle. Gray theorises that common understandings of meaning-making place the practice as occurring after an audience member has consumed a text. Gray also argues the contrary position though, and states that through the use of television pre-views (and by extension one might also view film trailers in a similar vein) and the media hype surrounding the release of the text, viewers are given the opportunity to *pre-decode a text before it even exists as such* (Gray, 2008, italics added).

One might note that Gray's (2008) work is somewhat telling of the back end of media products, as he dissects the ways in which hype and anticipation is created around a new media text before it is even available for consumption as a whole by its' eagerly waiting audience members. The author expands;

Hype aims to be the first word on any text, so that it creates excitement, working to create frames through which we can make sense of the text before even consuming it. Certainly, given that the mediascape is filled with textuality, and with more films, television programs, books, magazines, songs, etc. than we could ever hope to consume, a key role of hype is to give us reasons to watch this film or television program, read this book or magazine, or listen to this song. In short, hype succeeds by creating meaning (Gray, 2008, p. 34).

As this thesis is taking an expansive view of the inter-relationship and even perhaps inter-dependence of media, popular culture, and audience understanding, Gray's (2008) work is even more significant. This thesis is working from a context that acknowledges the all-encompassing and rapidly developing nature of information and communication technologies, and therefore the weight given to the marketing and pre-viewing of texts fits into the overall schema of media-pop culture-audience-meaning. Gray (2008) points to work specifically commenting on film, and not surprisingly, this view takes a similar stance to hype-before-text that Gray adopts towards television programs. Kernan (2004, as cited in Gray, 2008) writes an account that places film trailers and previews as construction points for scripts of meaning and promised experiences. Furthermore, Kernan makes the crucial distinction that these meanings and anticipated experiences are developed in the potential audience often long before the film actually hits the movie screens.

Additionally, Kruger, Rayner and Wall (2001) say that the media need to simplify things to be able to make a representation, and stereotypes are the result of that simplified construction. The point about stereotypes being used as shorthand for understanding the social world is an interesting concept, and one that casts the use of stereotyping in entertainment media in a somewhat different light, specifically, is stereotyping negative if it allows audiences the chance to quickly and often automatically understand what is being presented to them?

Kruger, Rayner and Wall (2001) state that stereotyping is a process whereby “whole groups of people” are characterised “by attributing to them qualities which may be found in one or two individuals” (p. 67). Indeed, coming from a social psychology perspective, Blair (2002) points to research which has found that the use of category based stereotypes is in fact cognitively beneficial, as it allows the individual to process information quickly, and make judgements effectively. Furthermore, psychological researchers have found that not only is stereotyping often not the result of a lazy individual trying to use mental shortcuts to gather knowledge, there are some researchers who argue that stereotyping is a process that is done outside the individual’s control, making it a naturally occurring process of sorts.

Blair (2002) points to seminal research into the automatic operation of stereotypes, which found that “participants were faster to identify paired string letters if they were consistent rather than inconsistent with the stereotypes of Black Americans (e.g., Blacks - lazy vs. Blacks – ambitious)” (Gaertner & McLaughlin, 1983, as cited in Blair, 2002, p. 242). For this research, the concern is not only if there is a common way of portraying public relations characters in recently made films and television programs, but it should additionally question if stereotypes are present in entertainment media, does this create similar stereotypical views in its audiences as well?

One might argue that stereotyping is negative no matter the outcome, as it reduces the individual characteristics of people to a more impersonal and distant group representation for the purpose of speedy understanding by the audience. Conversely however, there are examples where positive actions or attributes of a few are generalised for a broader group of people, for example African-American people are often portrayed and perceived as being gifted at sport and athletics, or the stereotype that gay men have good taste in clothes and interior decorating, or even that people of Asian descent are exceptionally bright when it comes to math.

Often it is irrelevant if a stereotype is positive or negative, because the end result is consistent, as individual differences are not recognised through stereotypes.

This argument is certainly consistent with common assumptions about entire groups of society, such as female drivers, blonde haired people, politicians, doctors, and possibly even public relations people, in that the negative actions of a few are often generalised for the rest of that societal, ethnic, or professional collective.

Alternatively, it could just as easily be argued that stereotyping is a necessary process for allowing audiences to make connections between characters and the social world, when time and space in the media is often limited. Of course, that does not justify the use of negative and stereotypical media representations, but rather, acknowledging that the media is in fact a powerful and often useful learning tool for many audience members, allows this researcher to approach media effects from a more balanced point of view. By this, it is meant that if one accepts that stereotypes and representation are inescapable facts of life in a media saturated environment, then it is possible to move beyond questioning if these processes exist, and instead consider how they are formed through media messages and then interpreted by audiences. More simply put, viewing representation as a media process that is intricately linked to the creation of meaning, which is not inherently bad in itself, gives the researcher the opportunity to explore the way meaning is formed, and how this interacts with the audiences' understanding, rather than evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of the representations in the first place. Of course, if there *is* a stereotype of public relations characters and that stereotype negatively affects the off-screen interaction with people who practice in the profession, then a more in-depth and evaluative stance would need to be taken towards the subject.

As this thesis is investigating how public relations professionals are not only represented in entertainment media, but how those representations spill over into popular culture, it is useful to look at how other academics and media commentators describe the intersect. Beard (1994) offers an extensive examination of popular culture and the professional image of accountants in film.

Beard (1994) argues that;

To study popular culture is to reject the restrictive hierarchy implied by high culture and, instead, to accept all creative output of society as being worthy of attention. One of the most accessible artefacts of modern popular culture is the motion picture. In theatre, on television, and through rented videos, motion pictures today reach a larger, and younger, audience than any equivalent high culture event (Beard, 1994, p. 303).

An extension of this thesis is a diary of the popular culture representation of public relations, which has been noted through the course of one year (2011). This diary includes media of popular culture diffusion such as magazines (both tabloid, lifestyle and current affairs), social networking sites, newspaper articles, interpersonal interactions, where the researcher has noticed a mention of terms associated with public relations (such as publicist, spin doctor, PR stunts, damage control etc). A selection of pictures collected from Google illustrate the visual representations of the 'real life' public relations profession, and as this inclusion of photographs and images is particularly relevant and appropriate as this thesis is coming from the perspective that entertainment media's influence on audiences is heightened due to the visual (and audio-visual) nature of the images and symbols that portray the public relations characters. One might look to the founding father of public opinion rhetoric, Walter Lippmann, for a succinct summary of the power of the image; Whether right or wrong....imagination is shaped by the pictures seen.... Consequently, they can lead to stereotypes that are hard to shake (Lippmann, 1961, as cited in Lester, 2000, p. 76).

Similarly, Cooper (2011) comments on the common stereotype of scientists as balding, white males in white lab coats. The author says that while there are televised representations of scientists who break the traditional mould (such as David Attenborough or Brian Cox), many people fail to recognise these individuals as scientists because they don't conform to the stereotype. On the subject of the film representation of scientists, Cooper states that scientists are never featured on screen unless they are doing science, and that there are very few characters who simply happen to be scientists.

Cooper gets to the heart of the issue with a poignant statement about the characterisation of scientists, "...those scientists shown tend to be at best eccentric, at worst mad and/or evil (Cooper, 2011). In addition to noticing that scientists are represented in a certain way in film and television, Cooper also comments on the way people depict scientists, and remarks;

It is uncanny: they draw someone with a hangdog look, frizzy hair and test tube in hand, all in a scene where things are going wrong. There are national variations. In Italy, scientists tend to be scarred and have bolts in their necks, like Frankenstein's monster. In general, though, they are mostly white, male, bald and wearing a white coat. No wonder we have a problem recruiting scientists (Cooper, 2011).

One might notice a crucial factor that Cooper (2011) states, that there is a problem recruiting scientists. In fact, the author goes so far as to query if the negative and inaccurate perception and stereotype of scientists is related to the low recruitment levels. This issue is implicated in the concerns of this very research, in that there should be valid concerns about the way entertainment media stereotypes certain professions, and the impact this has on how people view those professions in real life. Furthermore, one might even question the extent to which those representations and stereotypes might affect how people who have been exposed to on-screen negative characterisations of the public relations profession will act towards these people in real life (i.e. in business or social settings).

Acknowledging the historical and theoretical development of public relations, van Ruler (2005) alludes to one of the major contributors to public relations and communications knowledge, Grunig (2001 as cited in van Ruler, 2005, p. 160), who argues that society does not yet value the public relations profession, and that in order to be truly accepted as a professionalised occupation, that value needs to be realised by society. Interestingly, Cooper also notes that in the 1980s, researchers had the innovative idea to test people's perceptions of scientists, getting them to draw how they expect a scientist to be, and then introduce them to a real scientist and see if that depiction alters after the fact. This would be a highly valuable and interesting investigation to perform for this thesis; however the constraints of time and size make such an experiment more suited for a doctorate study and timeframe.

Such an investigation would also have practical implications and applications for industries with low recruitment levels, as it would provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between perception of a certain job, and the reasons people might have for not pursuing a career in that field. Universities could similarly benefit from undertaking research like this, in order to address any gaps in enrollment and future work placements.

This thesis takes the stance that the relationship between entertainment media, popular culture, and audience understanding of the world is one of crucial importance in an increasingly mediated and information saturated environment. Moreover, it is imperative to better understand how people view characters within entertainment media, and how this corresponds or relates to audience members' views about the public relations profession in reality.

2.4 How meaning is created

This research takes the view that while there might be some individuals in the public relations profession who manipulate the truth to serve their clients' interests, and control information in a way that is not strictly ethical, it seems as though the actions of these individuals is generalised to *all* people who practice public relations. The question remains then, why does this happen? The old fashioned cliché of people being tarred by the same brush could be applicable in this instance, but when working from a rigorous academic approach, this concept does not go far enough in explaining the complex phenomenon of professional stereotypes. This is a pattern that is evident in many professions, for example medicine, law enforcement, car dealerships, and politics, to name just a few. It could be argued that very few people would struggle to think of incidents where doctors, lawyers or politicians have been found to be acting irresponsibly, unethically, and sometimes downright illegally. One might also consider that in some fields (particularly law and medicine), there are binding regulations in place which means that if people behave unethically, negligently, or illegally, they can be barred and prevented from practicing in that profession. This is not so applicable to the practice of public relations however, as individuals can still practice without any accreditation or qualifications.

But it must be acknowledged that these cases are often the exception, not the rule, and yet these individual acts are often taken and generalised for the whole profession, rather than viewing them as individual cases of professional or corporate wrongdoing. Indeed, Kruger et al. (2001) explain that often characteristics of individuals are not only generalised for the entire group, but that stereotypes rely heavily on exaggerating the truth.

This research also takes place within a highly mediated and information based society, where the role and power of the media is a process that must stay under constant scrutiny in order to maintain a balance between the best interest of society, and the economy and cultural powerhouse that is the media. As previously touched on earlier in this work, the influence the media has over audiences is one that has received critical commentary since it first became a popular way of informing and entertaining people. Combined with steadily increasing amounts of leisure time, and as television, radio, and the internet become more popular ways to spend that free time, the opportunity for potential influence over audiences' worldviews also grows.

For the purposes of this research, it is useful to explore the body of academic work on not only the way that public relations professionals are represented and stereotyped in entertainment media, but also how other professions are depicted through the same mediums. Tavcar (1993) points out that there has been extensive and ongoing attention given to how professions such as law, media, and business are portrayed in films. Stereotypes and representation become increasingly significant when understood in the context of having an impact on how people feel towards those professions as a result of how its practitioners are portrayed in the media.

Furthermore, it is even more of a concern to consider that some people could become so disenchanted, or mistrustful of people who practice those professions, that they could avoid dealing with them altogether. An example could be someone deciding not to visit a doctor or health professional, because they are too often exposed to the image of the sleazy doctor who mistreats their patients, or others who refuse to engage with local politics because of a view that politicians are corrupt and lie to their constituents.

When viewed in the context of having real-life repercussions, the stereotypes presented in entertainment media gain a more significant angle, and one that warrants close and continued investigation.

It is also interesting to examine how these popular stereotypes affect how these groups are viewed and related to in unmediated 'real life'. Tilson (2003) notes that while public relations plays a central role in promoting Hollywood films and such, it is also significant to take notice of how public relations itself is given attention in the very products being promoted and publicised. As illustrated in the media diary included as an appendix in this thesis (see Appendix A), the role of public relations practitioners and publicists are often mentioned in the mainstream media and as a result, are increasingly visible in popular culture. One might draw the conclusion that in the past, the role of the public relations advisor was kept behind the scenes (and in many cases still is), whereas in a rapidly changing social and information environment, perhaps audiences and consumers are developing a growing interest in the people and practices that maintain and perpetuate the popular culture machine that dominates global communication and consumerism.

2.5 Motivation behind representations

Due to the fact that this thesis aims to be an in-depth exploration of the representation and perception of public relations characters in entertainment media, it is essential to go beyond descriptive explanations and instead take the research and analysis to a more critical and advanced level of debate. For example, it is important to examine not only the way characters are represented in the media texts, but also whose interests are served by portraying and constructing those characters in a certain way. While the discussion of the producers of media messages will be acknowledged in this thesis, it is out of the scope of the research to allocate extensive analysis of these roles (for example directors, screenwriters, executive producers, editors). Nonetheless, according to theorists Kruger, Rayner and Wall (2001) it is imperative to question whose interests are served by representing people or groups in certain ways. For example, is there political, economic, cultural or religious motivation behind the continued and systematic ways of representing certain societal groups?

Taking a critical approach to the representation and perception of the public relations profession can open up the investigation in a way that not only questions the underlying structures that create these processes, but also seeks to understand and illuminate ways in which these phenomena can be challenged (and one might even say changed) through academic discourse.

Motivation behind representation and meaning-making is of particular significance as there is no clear interest served by portraying the public relations profession in a negative light. One might speculate that the complex and interdependent relationship between public relations and journalism has an impact on the way that the public relations profession is represented and stereotyped in the news media (for a discussion of the news media representation of public relations, see Dennison, 2010). Indeed, there has been a significant body of work and research done into the relationship between PR and journalism, which has ranged from anecdotal evidence of each profession's opinion of the other, to more comprehensive and objective analyses that examine how the news media reports on public relations. If one places this often tense relationship in the context of the information saturated environment in which we exist, the need for up to date and constant information (often provided by PR to the media) is only going to increase. With declining print media readership and circulation (which also means a decline in advertising revenue), this has led to downsizing in the newsrooms around the world, with resources for reporting and investigation become increasingly limited, casting the journalism into a position where the information, interviews and insight into business and individuals that public relations people can provide becomes highly valuable (and some might even argue necessary for the news media's survival). The relationship between public relations and journalism will continue to be significant in both practice and academia, as the public relations relies on the news media for coverage and credibility with the public, and journalists require information, material and access to people, which public relations provides.

Furthermore, a reasonable justification for the way public relations are represented in entertainment media could be as simple as normal characters and situations not being 'exciting' or 'engaging' enough for audiences who expect to be transported when consuming entertainment such as films and television programs.

One might point again to King and Sayre (2010), who argue that often stereotypes are constructed in entertainment media, because the everyday person and event is just not interesting enough for entertainment purposes. Even through the news media which is meant to be objective, factual and informative, there is a growing trend towards the infotainment¹ model (a hybrid of information and entertainment), as audiences increasingly expect and want more sensationalized stories.

With regards to the way in which media texts are constructed, and the representations are just as constructed and purposeful, the work of Umberto Eco in the mid 1960's has had a profound effect on the way semioticians approached media texts.

Eco looked at ways that meanings were put into programs by producers and extracted from programs by viewers, and the differences between these protocols (Miller, 2010, p. 123).

The work of Eco presents an interesting intersection between one of the key methodological approaches used for this thesis (semiotic analysis), and one of the underlining issues that is threaded throughout this investigation, which questions whose interests are served by representing the public relations profession in a certain way in entertainment media. Furthermore, it is telling to query which audience expectations are affected by those representations, for example, do certain audiences expect to be presented with the power and publicity hungry public relations professional? Or does the audience expect to see more idealistic and perhaps naïve practitioners represented? It could be suggested that audience members might expect to see public relations characters depicted as stereotypes such as Malcolm Tucker's potty-mouthed and aggressive character in *The Thick of It* and *In the Loop*, or Samantha Jones's flamboyant and fabulous character in the *Sex in the City* series and films.

¹ Infotainment: The rise of infotainment is argued to have major adverse consequences for the integrity of the public sphere and the management of society, insofar as it deprives citizens of the information necessary for them to make rational choices about politics and other significant matters. It trivialises serious issues, marginalises important information, and leads to mass apathy and cynicism about the world – a 'dumbing down' of the culture – which is bad for society as a whole (McNair, 2009, p. 68).

If the data does unveil any preconceived notions of public relations characters in the texts, the crucial step is to then understand where those assumptions may have emerged from.

2.6 Representation and Entertainment Media

King and Sayre (2010) offer an extensive and in-depth analysis of many facets of entertainment media, with particular attention paid to the impact that entertainment media has on society. Arguments and ideas such as this are crucial to the development of this thesis, as one of the primary concerns of this research is to understand and explore the relationship between popular fictional film and television, and the impact these texts might have on societal audiences. An informative and thought-provoking description of entertainment is posited by the authors;

The word entertainment has a Latin root meaning “to hold the attention of,” or “agreeably diverting.” Over the years it has come to refer to a constructed product designed to stimulate a mass audience in an agreeable way in exchange for money. Entertainment can be a live or mediated experience that has been intentionally created, capitalized, promoted, maintained, and evolved. In other words, entertainment is created on purpose by someone for someone else. Entertainment is easily located, accessed, and consumed. And of course, entertainment is also attractive, stimulating, sensory, emotional, social and moral to a mass audience (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 4).

Notice that a contributing element of entertainment is defined to be the fact that it is *intentionally created*, which gives validity to the concern of this thesis that the motivation behind representation and stereotypes in entertainment media is of central importance. It therefore assumes that attention is given to the intentional creation, promotion, and distribution of entertainment media products. With reference to the Latin root of the term entertainment, one might also consider the importance (and impact) of early forms of entertainment in Roman society, as this is one of the first examples of popular entertainment. Leisure and entertainment were integral parts of Roman life, with gladiatorial contests, races and games being a regular occurrence for citizens. However, Human Kinetics (2010) raises the issue that the Roman elite and rulers used these forms of entertainment to pacify, control and distract the masses from the realities of daily life. The Human Kinetics text touches on the age old concept of ‘bread and circuses’, which is a phrase for the strategy used by the ruling class to control the masses by offering free food and entertainment.

If one considers the political, economic, social, and environmental changes and upheaval the world has experienced in the past decades, it is no wonder entertainment and leisure time is steadily becoming the escape (or even the opiate) of the masses. Consider the startling fact that in 2006, more US citizens voted for *American Idol* (a popular US television show, and now a global franchise) than the amount of voters in *any* Presidential election, and one might assume that people no longer need to be forced into distraction from reality, as perhaps audiences are now capable of distracting themselves, as long as the supply of entertainment media and popular culture is present, the demand for escaping reality can thrive.

Bryant and Zillman (1994) argue that from the perspective of media producers, “the primary purpose of the preponderance of today’s electronic media messages is entertainment” (p. 437). This statement is one that is given attention later in this segment, and located within an increasingly mediated and entertainment driven society, where information and knowledge can often take a back seat. Furthermore, entertainment media and its effects need also be understood within the wider context of the profit-driven model that presumably dictates both process and product. One need only look at the numerous box office films that are released in cinemas each summer to locate these texts within the process of the entertainment industry and popular culture itself.

In addition to being a medium for entertaining and diverting attention, it is claimed by some researchers (for example see Adaval & Wyer, 2004), that entertainment media also serves as a powerful influencer on people’s perceptions of the real world. While it may be more easily assumed or taken for granted that news media could affect how audiences see the world, it could be argued that less people would see entertainment media as having any significant impact as well. People may view film and television as more frivolous and light-hearted pastimes, however, this thesis takes the stance that if anything, entertainment is a strong social influencer, and academic theory and social commentary can support that view.

For example, Adaval and Wyer (2004) stress the point;

To reiterate, Shrum et al.'s (this volume) research clearly demonstrates that exposing television viewers to fictional events can influence their perceptions that similar events actually occur in the real world. To this extent, it can influence their beliefs and attitudes about the persons and objects to which the events are relevant (Adaval & Wyer, 2004, p. 139).

From this, it could be interpreted that if (for example), an entertainment media text featured a public relations character who acted in a certain way during a business pitch or transaction, that fictional representation or depiction could then influence how the audience understands the profession off-screen as well. If the above quote from Adaval and Wyer (2004) is to be applied, then an audience member would associate a public relations profession with the behaviour seen on the media text, and therefore perhaps assume they would act consistently with the media representation if the same situation arose. This could be problematic if the representations on screen are both negative and inaccurate, not only because this would lend the public relations profession a bad name, but also because it has the potential to change the way society responds to practitioners in real life.

King and Sayre (2010) endorse this stance, but compare social learning and socialisation of the media to the media process of association as a key way in which audiences are primed to interpret real world situations through the lens of what they have seen in the media. These two authors argue that; "Like social learning, the priming function of entertainment has intuitive appeal" (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 126). Indeed, this theory posits that through repeated exposure to specific cues paired with the same events and situations, audiences begin to associate or connect those ideas in their minds, and become "conditioned to the point where merely witnessing the cue will trigger thoughts about the primed concepts or events" (King & Sayre, 2010, p. 126). While some might argue that this takes a somewhat cynical view of people's ability to critically view the world around them, others might say that people are indeed simple creatures, and that conditioning such as this, is often a fact of life.

Particularly when the notion of conditioning is viewed in the context of an information and media saturated environment, where city dwellers are reported to see upwards of 15,000 images a day (Betts, 2004), one might begin to see the inescapable nature of popular culture and the relentless amount of information that modern societies are bombarded with. As a result of this tirade of information, images and ideas, Brock, Garst and Green (2004) say that entertainment media “often present fictional portrayals of events, and individuals regularly alter their real-world beliefs in response to fictional communications” (p. 161).

2.7 Entertainment and popular culture

Interestingly, when scholars and media critics examine media texts, it is a practice performed with the aim of understanding how the text relates to the wider society and culture in which it exists. One might question the value of a study that only attempts to locate meaning within the text itself, without relating it back to the society and social context from which it is being broadcast. Therefore it is in a bid to integrate academic examination with real world practices, that the observation diary has been included as an appendix in this thesis, as an attempt to do exactly what critical authors suggest is best practice; to locate entertainment media messages and representations in the very context and cultural environment from which they exist. Hodkinson (2011) elaborates on this fundamental point;

And crucially, our understanding of media processes has to incorporate the extensive and constant flows of influence both to and from a complex broader social and cultural environment, which consists of an established but developing overall world of social relations, ways of life and modes of expression (Hodkinson, 2011, p. 10-11).

As discourse analysis is the overarching methodological approach to this thesis, using the observation diary acts as a means of documenting the way public relations manifests outside of academic study. In other words, the popular culture diary provides the reader with another strand of the conversation about the profession, adding depth and perspective to the study.

In addition, authors such as Tisdell (2008) argue that both media and popular culture have a significant impact on all societies. In fact;

More people voted for the 2006 winner of “American Idol” than the winner of any presidential election...Indeed, entertainment media (as well as news and advertisement media) have an enormous effect, both consciously and unconsciously, on “what” we think and “how” we think- about ourselves and others, and about personal and social issues. (Tisdell, 2008, p. 48).

If one chooses to take a more macro perspective of the above statement from Tisdell (2008), it becomes clear that an increasing number of people are engaging with popular culture through the media, while the number of people engaging with the democratic process (like voting who will lead a country) is either stagnant or even declining.

Furthermore, it is interesting to question what the political arena might look like if it took on some of the processes and characteristics of the modern popular culture and the entertainment media with which it is so closely intertwined. Either way, for the purposes of this thesis, Tisdell’s (2008) assertion about the number of American Idol voters compared with the number of presidential election voters certainly illustrates the pervasiveness (and even success) of the popular culture-entertainment media industries. Perhaps it also indicates that people are becoming increasingly disillusioned with democracy, and that despite being an information-rich society, there are too many examples of democracy and other systems of governance failing to deliver what they have promised. The current Occupy Wall Street movement (which has now gone global), or the Arab Spring that proliferated in 2011 are just two examples of large groups of disenfranchised people who are demanding change on a massive scale. Moreover, this somewhat startling fact is indicative of the growing power of entertainment over information, and could be seen as grounds for the increasingly blend of these two realms (particularly in the news media), that is commonly referred to as ‘info-tainment’.

2.8 Characters and characterisation in media texts

Miller (1980) argues that creating effective and interesting characters is one of the most important challenges for the screenwriter.

More tellingly perhaps, is Miller's assertion that the most effective characters on screen are in fact conveying the sense that they are *real people*.

They give us the feeling they have a personal history and a past that has made them, who and what they are, instead of having been created just to meet the requirements of a plot...We see them as human beings within the world of the film (Miller, 1980, p. 83).

Cowdery and Selby (1995) say that in television, the audience is generally presented with two character types: social types, and identifiable stereotypes.

It is often argued that any use of character stereotypes must in itself be harmful insofar as they confirm conventional or negative views of particular social groups – the working class, women, ethnic minorities and so on. Although there is possibly much truth in this it is important to look at these issues in more depth: it is not enough simply to conclude that the stereotypes that populate the sitcom genre function merely to keep people in their place and maintain relations of power (Cowdery & Selby, 1995, p. 109).

This quote suggests an interesting idea, in that the authors are questioning the extent to which stereotypes used in television sitcoms are in fact damaging to that particular social group. For example, if there is a negative stereotype of public relations practitioners in film and television, does this have an adverse affect on real-life public relations professionals? Cowdery and Selby (1995) go on to argue that media producers will often use stereotypes for a range of reasons, be it to shock, amuse, or even challenge the existing stereotypes that prevail.

DeFleur and Lowery (1995) point to some of the seminal lessons that have been learned from communications research, and say that what largely constitutes the meaning theory of media portrayals, is the age-old fact that people act on the basis of what they believe to be real and that this is one of the oldest explanations of human behaviour.

This is why the role of the media in influencing the worldview of the audience is so significant, as the media is one of the key ways in which audiences can experience social situations, and therefore expectations are created that are then fulfilled when the situation occurs in real life.

Contemporary media such as movies and television depict in detailed, dramatic and realistic ways almost every form of individual behavior and social situation that can be imagined. These depictions constitute “definitions of situations” - lessons in meanings, social implications, and personal consequences of the activities and social relationships that are portrayed. From such incidental portrayals, we can vicariously experience virtually any set of circumstances... (DeFleur & Lowery, 1995, p. 403).

This idea can be further understood within the present research context, in that an individual might never meet a public relations practitioner, and yet that same individual can capably provide a list of words to describe what that practitioner might look like, and act like. One can reasonably assert that it is the ubiquitous power of the media that enables that process to happen, and this relates back to Miller’s (1980) argument that characters on-screen are created in a way that makes them feel like ‘real people’, who the audience can relate to and understand. This is a concept that will be revisited in the findings and conclusions segments of this work.

Alternatively however, Miller (1980) theorised more than thirty years ago that screenwriters (who are essentially the originator of characters on screen) will often model his or her characters on real people, incorporating aspects of someone they know into the role. Yet Miller advises that screenwriters should avoid using other media characters as the basis for the new character, as this tends to result in a stereotype. This is an interesting point, as it leads one to question if screenwriters and other media producers might make a conscious decision to play on stereotypes, or to resist them in some way. If that is an accurate assumption, the role of the media producer, or content producer, is shifted in a significant manner. By that, it is suggested that perhaps media producers (such as scriptwriters), are also subject to the same process of decoding and adding meaning to the multitude of messages that audiences are exposed to everyday, which essentially places media producers in the audience category as well.

Beard (1994) for her analysis of the film portrayal of accountants, decided to lump together the different types of work that come under the accountancy profession, as she reasoned that the audience doesn't differentiate between the different functions of the job. Beard's approach to studying the accountancy profession can be applied to the public relations profession and this thesis. There are many functions of the public relations professional, such as publicist, crisis management, strategic counsel, events management, which shows it is a more complex field than some people might assume. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, all the functions of public relations will be included when selecting which entertainment media texts will be used for the analysis.

Central to this investigation is the way that public relations professionals are characterised in entertainment media, and how audiences respond to those characterisations. While other elements of film and television such as narrative, setting, plot and musical score equally contribute to the overall meaning created by the text, for the purposes of this research, characterisation is the most important variable for analysis and commentary.

Miller (1980) offers useful information from the scriptwriting perspective about characters in fictional works. Miller's advice is particularly helpful to the present study, as it illustrates the back-end processes that are involved in forming the characters (and by extension their dialogue and behaviour) that audiences see on screen. According to Miller, it is the characters who create an audience's need to care about the people on screen.

The audience wants to care about the characters. We become intimately involved with them through the psychological processes of empathy and identification. We like or dislike them, feel with them, worry about them, share their problems and adventures and take sides in their clashes. We see ourselves in their struggles, triumphs and failures (Miller, 1980, p. 820).

To understand the importance of characters in entertainment media and popular culture, one might consider the droves of fans and fan-based material that certain characters in film and television have attracted over the years, for example Carrie Bradshaw from *Sex and the City*, Xena - *The Warrior Princess*, *Harry Potter* from the book and film franchise, even Edward Cullen from the *Twilight* series.

Fans and audiences form a connection with characters they identify with, and the more developed and realistic a character is, the more likely it is that audiences will be attracted to that character (and by extension the film or program the character appears in). Therefore, it is important to analyse the characters who portray public relations practitioners, in a bid to understand how an audience member might respond to the text and the public relations profession overall.

2.9 Semiotics, visual media and meaning-making

Semiotics (or semiology as it is known in European countries) is largely concerned with signs, imagery and how these are used to convey meaning to the audience. By taking a semiotic approach to the selected media texts, this researcher hopes to be able to conduct a critical examination of how the public relations characters are represented through entertainment media. Semiotics is also closely related to film studies and is therefore appropriate. Of course, when one is examining the role of media effects on audiences, understanding or acknowledging how meaning is made is a subject of critical importance. Therefore, elements of semiotics are a key theoretical tool that will assist this research in the deconstruction of signs in the media texts (Kruger, Rayner & Wall, 2001).

To decline the study of signs is to leave to others the control of the world of meanings which we inhabit (Chandler, 2002, p. 15).

Branston and Stafford (2006) posit that semiotic approaches have drastically changed the way that media studies interprets individual texts, largely because it allows the researcher to understand media texts as actual conveyers *and* creators of cultural meaning.

Semiotic approaches have utterly changed the ways media studies tries to interpret individual 'texts', as we call our objects of study whether adverts, blogs, films or photos (Branston & Stafford, 2006, p. 11).

Semiotics can be understood in various ways, for example, Sebeok (1974) defines semiotics as "the study of the exchange of any messages whatever and of the systems of signs which underlie them, the key concept of semiotics remaining always the sign" (Sebeok, 1974, p. 108; as cited in Devereux, 2003, p. 123). This definition is somewhat complex, however Sebeok succeeds in relaying that semiotics is the study of signs.

More specifically, according to Taylor and Willis (1999), “Semiotics, or the science of signs, is primarily the study of how signs communicate” (p. 19). The authors go on to give a more in-depth and illustrative account of semiotic analysis;

More specifically for media studies, it is an approach suitable for analysing how meaning is produced by media texts from a diverse range of media...Instead of asking what meanings an aesthetic art form conveys, as many elitist forms of art criticism tend to do, semiotics asks how the mechanics of signs in all texts, including art objects, communicate, thereby bringing a more scientifically methodological analysis to bear on texts (Taylor & Willis, 1999, p. 19).

Using semiotics allows researchers to look at how *culture* is communicated (Seiter, 1992; as cited in Taylor & Willis, 1999, p. 19), and seeing as this thesis is concerned with not only the representation and stereotype of public relations characters in entertainment media, but also the way that audiences perceive such characterisations, analysing the way cultural communication occurs is a useful methodology to employ. By analysing the focus group discussions, and relating the ideas to the characterisations that were identified in the text analysis, one can begin to understand if popular culture (i.e. entertainment media) plays a role in peoples’ perceptions of the public relations profession. Furthermore, some theorists working from the semiotic approach argue that rather than the media acting as a mere window on the world, there is a growing school of thought that:

Instead they are seen as actually *structuring* the very realities which they seem to ‘describe’ or ‘stand in for’. Meaning is socially produced, whether through words, colour, gesture, music, fashion, etc (Branston & Stafford, 2006, p. 11).

Much like the role of Christian Metz has been a decisive element in the development of semiotics and film theory (as will be discussed in later sections of this segment), the role of the Swiss academic and linguist Ferdinand de Saussure as one of the seminal thinkers in semiotics (or as Saussure called it, ‘semiology’) must be given some attention as part of this academic exploration.

With an extensive scholarly background in languages and linguistics, Saussure is largely credited for the creation of semiology, despite the fact that he died before ever publishing a single piece of work on the subject, leaving his colleagues and students to put together and publish one of the foundational texts looking at linguistic signs, and named it *Cours de linguistique generale* (see Cobley & Jansz, 2007). The text identified several key elements of signs and sign systems, borrowing extensively from Saussure's education and experience of linguistics. Most notably, *Cours* defined Saussure's dyadic model of the sign as a two-sided entity, namely the signifier, and the signified. This concept will be discussed in more detail in subsequent paragraphs of this section.

If one understands the general theory of semiotics as the study of signs to describe how meaning is produced, then there are several aspects of this analysis that require explanation here. The first point is that all signs have a physical form, which is called the signifier. This is not only a material, visually represented sign (like an office, or a newspaper), but can also include words and how they are used (for example PR girl, or spin doctor). Additionally, Branston and Stafford (2006) argue that signs always refer to something other than itself (the referent), which is called the signified. The authors reiterate that the signified is not in fact a 'real thing' in the world, but rather the other meanings that we associate with the original sign. Lastly, it is crucial to understand that semiotics is largely concerned with the fact that peoples' perception of reality is itself *constructed* and *shaped* by the words and signs used, in whichever social context they occur in.

Monaco (2000) reasons that in film, because the images displayed are so similar to the sign they are referring to, the relationship between signifier and signified varies from more static or text based mediums, "But in film, the signifier and the signified are almost identical: the sign of cinema is a short-circuit sign" (p. 158).

To summarise the above, a semiotic approach to studying media texts comprises three central and interrelated components. First that texts include signifiers (how the sign manifests, as material object or a word), second there is the signified (or the meaning of the sign), and lastly, these elements must be understood in the context that these media signs play a part in shaping and constructing audiences' perception of reality.

A key issue that recurs in any discussion of film semiotics, is the question of language, and language systems, and if film does in fact fall into one (or both) of these categories. For example Aumont et al. (1999) dedicate much discussion to the notion of film as language, citing some film critics and makers who advocate for the universal nature of film as a sign that it is indeed a language in itself. In that sense, film can be seen as a medium which bypasses all the various national languages (Aumont et al., 1999, p. 127), giving film a universal and some might even argue unifying nature. However, Aumont et al., seem to take a rather difference stance themselves, arguing that giving film a 'language' of its own, opens the medium up to the risk of a whole range of other problematic issues, not the least of which is people misunderstanding the term 'film language' itself (p. 126).

Monaco (2000) clarifies the concept of film as language, positing that "Film is not a language in the sense that English, French, or mathematics is" (p. 154). However, Monaco reinforces that film very much *like* a language, citing factors such as infants being able to understand television images before they can speak, or that people who see a lot of films and television are able to see and read into films at more advanced levels than a less frequent media consumer.

It is noteworthy that Monaco (2000) points to differences in audience exposure to media, as this seems to co-relate to the concept of cumulative media effects (as seen in King & Sayre, 2010, p. 114) whereby the repeated and long-term exposure to media texts is said to have a culminating effect on audience members. It is certainly possible, and worth considering that the two separate ideas of audiences becoming better versed in interpreting media texts is linked with the level of influence transferred from the medium through to the audience. Moreover, film theorists often point to the fact that mediums such as poetry or other literature give a higher level of freedom and imagination to the reader or audience to interpret the signs presented, whereas with film and television, there is very little left to the imagination (see Monaco, 2000).

While this statement does not necessarily mean that the film audience has no use for interpretation, it is certainly true that the audiences needs to do less work to interpret what the film is suggesting, and this concept is explained succinctly by Monaco;

Film does not suggest, in this context: it states. And therein lies its power and the danger it poses to the observer: the reason why it is so useful, even vital, to learn to read images well so that the observer can seize some of the power of the medium. The better one reads an image, the more one understands it, the more power one has over it (Monaco, 2000, p. 159).

Metz (as cited in Monaco, 2000) says that films are difficult to explain because they are easy to understand. This is a statement many audience members can relate to, as watching film and television is such a mainstream and universally practised pastime. When the use of semiotics was first suggested in relation to film and film theory, certain quarters of the establishment raised concern that an approach to film using the study of signs was akin to removing the somewhat mysterious and intrinsically artistic nature of the medium (Lapsley & Westlake, 1990). The concerns of the film critics' establishment are summarised here;

Ideas of art as organic unity, as revelation, as the communication of inspired vision, were discarded and replaced by the supposition that all meanings and aesthetic effects were explicable in terms of determining structures and mechanisms. Art, in a word, was open to scientific analysis (Lapsley & Westlake, 1990, p. 32).

This shift, which saw humanities studies move more towards scientific approaches, are largely contributed to Saussure (see Buckland, 1991). Buckland charges that Saussure and his work on linguistics was instrumental in film semiology's break with classical film theory, before semiotic approaches to film were even applied to the medium. From the semiotic approach, film (moving images are pictorial signs) can be seen as a signifying practice, and film can be understood as iconic, symbolic and indexical signs.

Film is never reality but a semiotic representation of reality. Nevertheless, people readily experience film as real- hence the *credibility* of film (Fourie, 2001, pg. 217).

With specific regards to the study of film using a semiotic approach, the work of Christian Metz should be acknowledged early on in order to situate the development of this distinctive area of film theory. Buckland (2000) places Metz's film semiotics under the category of modern (or contemporary) film theory, as opposed to the classical theories (as espoused by Realists and Montagists) or cognitive theory (like the work of David Bordwell or Noel Carroll). Additionally, Buckland places Metz's later work in the Cognitive Film Semiotics category, under a sub-genre of new theories of enunciation (p. 3). Monaco (2000) argues that Metz's approach is the most elaborate, subtle and complex type of film theory that has been developed yet. From inter-text discussions such as the above, one might see that film theory is a rather fluid and interpretative field of study, and as such there are multiple theorists and movements that one might adopt for a research project.

According to Monaco (2000), film communicates to audiences through both denotative and connotative meanings. Denotative meaning can be understood as what a particular sign stands for, or marks (its literary or dictionary meaning), whereas connotative meaning is viewed as the cultural associations relating to the sign (which are the meanings we attach). Branston and Stafford (2006), explain that connotations "may link things by association with broader cultural concepts and values, or with meanings from personal history and experience" (p. 17). These authors use the example of gold to illustrate the difference between denote and connote. Here, gold denotes both a colour, and a type of metal. These are clear concepts that are undisputable. Compare that to what gold connotes, which could be associated with fine jewellery, wealth, currency, or something positive and sought after (as in a golden opportunity, or good as gold). The distinctions and understanding made between denotative and connotative meaning are key elements of this thesis, and in particular during the focus groups, attention will be paid to how the participants interpret and give meaning to the various signs they are exposed to in the media texts. Throughout the analysis of the media texts, the various denotations and connotations suggested through the viewings will be explicitly identified wherever possible and suitable. This could be a complex process, as people are constantly interpreting what they see and hear all the time, and it is common practice to take these judgements and evaluations for granted (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998). From the perspective of the researcher, one must take an objective step back so that their own assumptions and interpretations that are

taken for granted could be influencing how the texts meaning and focus group participant interpretations are understood.

Efforts will also be taken to identify and contrast the connotations and denotations the focus groups express while watching the texts. As Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) point out, when it comes to the understanding of meaning, different audience members are likely to interpret and evaluate the text in a variety of ways. These authors expand on this key point;

Whatever the text- a film, an album, or a comic book - different readers are likely to have different interpretations and evaluations. Some people may find a particular text aesthetically progressive and engaging; others may find it boring, derivative, unoriginal. Some people will argue that a particular text is somehow subversive and rebellious, others that it is more of the same old message (about war, politics, money, or social relations of gender, race) (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998, p. 147).

In a similar vein, examining the differences between encoding and decoding is a central element of both the meaning-making process, and also the communication process. Olson (1999) points to Hall's seminal work on encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980 as cited in Olson, 1999, p. 19-20).

According to Hall, every act of communication has to go through a process of encoding and decoding in order for it to be transmitted. Similarly, audience members can chose not only to decode media messages in a certain way, but there are pockets of society which opts to not only reject the message, but also rejects the wider system that created it (i.e. capitalism, or the Hollywood industry). This group of audience members are said to practice oppositional decoding, and will "interpret the message in a manner critical of its originator" (Olson, 1999, p. 20). Lull (1995) suggests another noteworthy point about meaning-making, that of the polysemic (or open-ended) text. Polysemy, or many meanings, is the idea that one text, sign, or character can hold multiple and varied meanings for the audience, and that the more polysemic the text, the more popular it is likely to be.

People choose, combine, and circulate media representations and other cultural forms in their everyday communicative interactions and in doing so produce meaning and popularity (Lull, 1995, p. 140).

Keeping this in mind, one might associate polysemy with the act of decoding, and connotations, as these are the processes by which audience members interpret and understand the meaning conveyed through texts they consume.

2.10 Understanding and reading the texts: The audience

While the scope of this thesis necessitates that not all subjects can be covered in-depth, it is nonetheless helpful to acknowledge the role that elements such as the audience plays in any study examining the media and its effects on society.

Central to any research that incorporates media studies, like the present thesis, is the concept of the audience, and the interaction with media messages. Burton (1997) theorises that the concept of the audience as “huge numbers of people all reading or viewing the same product” (p. 184), is a particular phenomenon of the twentieth century. Now that we have entered the 21st century, one might consider that another phenomenon could be underway. Branston and Stafford (2006) provide a clear explanation of the several different models of media effects that have been developed in academia over the past century (see Branston & Stafford, 2006, p. 268-295).

Moving on from the models of media effects, the relationship between the semiotics of film (and television) and the way those signs interact and influence how audiences view the public relations characters depicted, is also of central importance to this thesis. Indeed, the arbitrary nature of signs and how they are understood, is of critical importance to the analysis of any media text. The arbitrary nature of signs (as theorised by Saussure, see Copley & Jansz, 2007, p. 13), is the idea that there is no set meaning of a sign, but rather that the audience agrees on the meaning, therefore the sign takes on whatever meaning is predetermined by the audience to which it is displayed or viewed. It will be interesting to note if the audience/participants in the focus group interviews convey similar understandings and interpretations of the public relations characters represented in the media texts they are shown.

With this in mind, Cowdery and Selby (1995) advise that there are several questions that the researcher can ask about the intended audience of the media text.

Some of the key questions include the audiences' likely educational background, their likely age, gender and economic status and their likely social class. Asking questions about the audience such as these can serve as a useful starting point for the way in which the meaning of the media text might be understood by those watching it. Writing about the study of media effects (see Chapter 2 for discussion of media effects and developments), Burton (1997) states that;

...It is worth saying now that this matters because of the possibility of informing or persuading or influencing such a large proportion of the population at one time. It matters because, given this scale we can reasonably talk about the media as a socializing influence (Burton, 1997, p. 184).

Furthermore, as this research investigates the public perception of public relations, as well as the entertainment media's representation of the profession, it is pertinent to examine how the characteristics of the audience are related to the understanding and perception of public relations, and if aspects such as media consumption and media literacy skills are a variable factor in how people interpret media representation and stereotypes.

Moreover, and as previously touched upon in this section, a key issue when selecting participants to take part in this research, is the exposure that they already have to the media texts. This issue is one that requires close attention when it comes to designing the research design and method that will be used for the empirical data gathering for this thesis. Specifically, questions about the participants' media consumption and exposure will be incorporated into the indicative question list provided when this researcher seeks ethical approval for the second stage of this research (the focus group and entertainment media viewing session). Similarly, attention will be paid to the amount of television and film that participants normally watch each week, as a key point of the cultivation hypothesis (Gerbner & Gross, 1976, as cited in Mastro & Robinson, 2000) is how much television (and in this research, film), the audience is exposed to.

Burton (1997, p. 186) offers three key factors about audiences that are helpful to take into account for the present research.

The first is that audiences are defined by the particular magazine, film, television program or radio show that they consume (so for example the audience for *Time* magazine, or the audience for the *Sex in the City* series). Secondly, Burton (1997) advises that there is specific audiences for specific types of media project (or mediums, so for example science-fiction novels, or romantic-comedy films). And lastly, Burton says that audiences can be specified by an audience profile, which is comprised of the more generic and standard factors (such as age, gender, income, lifestyle).

Audiences are the opium of television- it craves them, longing to control their time and space (Miller, 2010, p. 2).

Cowdery and Selby (1995) advise that none of the concepts of media analysis can be discussed in isolation, and that the effect that the media text has on the audience is always going to be a prime reason for research. Furthermore, these authors explain that there can never be one definitive 'meaning', because audience members will always bring their own understanding and interpretation to the media text being observed. For example Hall (2001) points to interpretations of *The Cosby Show*, and argues that understanding of the representations in the program varied depending on who the audience was. This type of rhetoric is both echoed and questioned by Burton (1997) who questions the way audiences can read the same media text differently, but can also read the same media text the same as others. This factor will be taken into account during this research, as there are multiple ways that an audience member can interpret and understand the representation of public relations characters in the film and television texts shown to them.

2.11 Summary

This chapter has explored the existing literature surrounding a number of topics and concepts. Of central importance to the present study are topics such as stereotyping, film theory, semiotics, entertainment media, media effects and audience theory. Efforts have been made to incorporate both current research and more classical or foundational theories of communication and media studies. Doing an extensive and exploratory literature review is a good starting point for a research project, as one can look back to previous research and knowledge in order to inform the present debate.

Chapter 3: Research methodology

3.1 Introduction

As detailed in the previous chapter, elements of a semiotic approach to the media texts under study will be applied for this thesis. This is largely so the film and television texts may be broken down into more manageable units, and then reconstituted in order to be understood and analysed as a whole (for example examining dialogue, costume, setting and so on). However, while that is the theoretical approach that is being employed, it is also essential to provide an in-depth exploration of the research method and design that forms the practical side of this work.

This research aims to achieve several academic goals. Firstly, it is hoped a comprehensive explanation of how public relations characters are represented and perhaps stereotyped in popular entertainment media texts can be formed. And secondly, to create an understanding of the intersection between media representation and people's perception of public relations characters. And lastly, it is anticipated that the findings from the film/television analysis, the focus group discussion, the concepts drawn from the media diary, and comments given by a leader in public relations can all be integrated to provide the reader with a wide ranging and inclusive view of the contemporary representation and perception of public relations in the 21st century.

Cowdery and Selby (1995) advise that while it is easy for people to watch and enjoy television, it is somewhat more challenging to step back and take a more analytical approach to the media text under study. As Kruger, Rayner and Wall (2001) explain, in media studies, the term 'text' is a more expansive concept than something that is merely printed or written.

In Media Studies, however, the word 'text' is used to describe any media product such as television programmes, photographs, films either on video or in cinema, newspaper articles, radio programmes, advertisements, video games and web pages. 'Texts' are, therefore, the main point of our study in understanding how media languages create meaning. (Kruger, Rayner & Wall, 2001, p. 29).

In this case, watching television programs and films from a more critical and analytical approach is a skill that needs to be acquired and developed in order to gain the most in-depth understanding of the visual and narrative portrayal of the public relations characters. Furthermore, Cowdery and Selby (1995) argue that due to the complex nature of producing television, it can often be difficult for the researcher to know exactly which elements will be focused upon. However, for the purposes of this research, the key element that will be observed, analysed, and commented upon, will be the way in which public relations characters are represented in the media texts, and this will be analysed using a semiotic approach. While production components and historical contexts are important aspects of media texts, the representation and stereotype of these characters, and the relationship these depictions have with the public perception of the profession is the most relevant area of study for this thesis.

The use of a clear method to analyse media texts with is an important step in understanding the meaning and symbols within the text.

Indeed, without a clear method from which to work, you probably will not have anything coherent to say about the television programme at all (Cowdery & Selby, 1995, p. 2).

With particular reference to the construction of representation in film and television, Trebic (2007) offers several points to keep in mind when analysing media. For example, the author asserts that it is imperative to identify representations, critique them, and lastly (and perhaps most importantly), to understand why certain patterns of representation recur (p. 87).

3.2 Constructive feedback and refining the research design

In the initial stages of the design of this research, the researcher presented her ideas to a group of university peers, in a bid to solicit feedback and critique about the proposed research project. This focused feedback gave the researcher an opportunity to reconsider her perspective, and reformulate the research design to be more consistent with the insight gained.

The group gave a range of suggestions about the portrayal of public relations characters in entertainment media, and lead this researcher to consider several poignant points that had not previously been taken into account. Some of the key statements made by the group included the idea that perhaps public relations practitioners see the stereotypes in film and television, and then internalise those portrayals, and in the process confirm the entertainment media's representation of their field.

Another idea, with more of a focus on the research method utilised for this study, was to closely examine the way in which the public relations characters in the media texts interact with others in 'real life' situations. It was suggested that close attention should be paid to how the public relations characters deal with scenarios that occur in the public relations field off-screen. For example, one might pay close attention to how the character acts towards others when information gets into the public domain that wasn't meant to, or how the character acts during a media conference or sponsorship event. This suggestion is particularly relevant and useful to this thesis study, as the representations of real life public relations scenarios and how the characters act during them, is likely to provide a clear account of how the entertainment media (and by extension, the audience) understands, interprets, and then portrays the real mechanisms of the public relations profession.

Similarly, another proposal put forward during the discussion was to include documentaries in the selection of entertainment media texts. This is a thoughtful suggestion, and one that will certainly be taken into account during the text selection and justification, as it is highly likely that the representations of public relations practitioners in documentary style texts would be closer to the truth than other texts (for example 'reality' television shows). However, there could be issues in the justification of including documentary style texts in the final group of texts for analysis, as some might argue that documentary is more educational or informative than fictional films and television programmes.

To continue, after showing the group a few video clips of public relations characters (*Kell on Earth; The Spin Crowd*) the researcher gauged how the students felt the characters were represented in the texts they were shown.

The group agreed that the representations were generally negative, with the characters being portrayed as strong-minded and bold. However, additional comments made by the group suggested that the representations were not taken to be accurate portrayals of what public relations practitioners are like in unmediated, 'real life', and that even the reality television shows are very scripted and constructed in how they present what is meant to be an authentic and accurate display of the characters under study. Furthermore, the group suggested that the context of each media text needs to be taken into account during the analysis (which is something that would obviously be done using the in-depth semiotic approach to film theory), but it was interesting that the class viewed the context of the text as a crucial element for observation and analysis. As the reader will note in the methodology employed for the text analysis, the social, political and historical context of each film or program is given considerable attention, in an attempt to locate the entertainment media in the wider contextual environment.

3.3 Ethical consideration

A central aspect of research that must always be addressed and kept in mind, is ethics. While there are no apparent ethical issues when it comes to analysing the media texts, for the second research method (focus group), there are a range of ethical issues that need to be clearly stated and addressed. Of particular concern when research involves human participants are questions of informed consent, the right to withdraw without adverse consequences, and the storing of data after it has been collected. The formal AUT ethics application was submitted and approved for this research, which allows the researcher the opportunity to give due consideration to the human participants who make first hand qualitative research possible.

The indicative questions asked of the focus group and the themes that emerged as a result of the group interviews will be covered in more depth later in this work, and are included in the appendix (see Appendix C).

3.4 Stage One: Analysis of film and television programs

A key research issue is how the researcher selects the media texts that will be analysed for the use of this investigation. As previously illustrated in this work, media texts must be understood in a wider context than just print and written texts (Kruger, Rayner & Wall, 2001). In fact, this thesis posits that the impact of representations could be stronger when portrayed via a visual medium such as television or film, than it might be via a book or newspaper. In fact, Adaval and Wyer (2004) argue that the combined effect of verbal and non-verbal media communication on audiences is far greater than the effect of verbal communication alone. These authors conducted research which investigated the differing effects of verbal and nonverbal messages about a politician, and found that;

The results we obtained suggest that even though the verbal descriptions of an individual might provide an accurate characterization of him or her, nonverbal components of media communications (presented either simultaneously or separately) can affect the impact of these descriptions (Adaval & Wyer, 2004, p. 153).

The research population must be a size that is realistic and manageable for the present project, but also needs to be wide enough to provide an accurate and representative sample of how the public relations profession and practitioners are portrayed and stereotyped in entertainment media. The most effective and simple way to create the research sample is to draw up a list of criteria for the media texts, and reasons for excluding other texts. It is anticipated that a variety of mediums will be used to collect the sample, particularly instruments such as The Internet Movie Database will be used to gain an exploratory look at which films and television programs feature public relations characters.

The final text selection for analysis was made based on a decision by the researcher, after short listing more than ten titles, the list was narrowed down to the four most well-known and mainstream films and television programs that explicitly dealt with a public relations character. All texts were made after 2000, making them a current portrayal of public relations.

The images created by the entertainment media, whether encountered in a darkened movie theatre or in sitcoms, soaps, news reports, and advertising, do appear to blur the lines between reality and what we perceive it to be. These images can have a persisting influence on people's attitudes, beliefs, and behavior in ways that we have only recently begun to uncover (Adaval & Wyer, 2004, p. 137).

In order to gain an in-depth and accurate understanding of how the public relations profession is represented and stereotyped in entertainment media, it is essential to first examine how one might study film and television. Of course, it must be noted that there are some obvious differences between television texts and film texts, but these two mediums are certainly more similar than, for example, television and print, or film and radio. For this reason, it is both logical and appropriate to study both television *and* film representations of public relations practitioners. Looking to the history of television and film, Betts (2004) points out that since the 1950s, television and film have transformed from a relationship in which each medium had to compete for viewers, to an alternative solution, where these two mediums in fact cooperate in increasing each other's audience size and scope.

Selecting a group of entertainment media texts for this thesis is a key element of the overall study, and its validity. There are multiple ways one might create a sample for the analysis, for example by genre, date of release, the country of release, whether documentary and reality TV shows can be included, how many public relations characters have to be featured in the texts to warrant inclusion in the sample, or even the specific titles given to public relations people as being a reason to include or exclude a text from the final group for analysis.

The key justifications for selecting the sample of texts are important in the wider context of the semiotic analysis. By this, it is meant that the selection of media texts, be they feature length films or shorter length television programs, has been developed with a mainstream audience in mind. The titles of all the chosen texts are common knowledge, and even without knowing they are related to public relations, this author was aware of the titles long before selecting this sample.

One of the contributing factors to the mainstream knowledge of the chosen texts could be the high profile actors who appear in the films or programs (for example Stephen Fry in *Absolute Power*, Will Smith and Charlize Theron in *Hancock*, James Gandolfini in *In the Loop*, and Aaron Eckhart in *Thank You for Smoking*). The 'star power' of actors and actresses is often a major deciding factor in people choosing to watch one film or program over another that perhaps has less recognisable actors in the cast. This links back to the discussion about audiences needing to relate to the character they see on screen in order to have a connection with them (see Chapter 2).

Another factor that led to these texts being selected for the final sample, is the year of publication or distribution (whether through cinemas then DVD release, or airing on television). Films and programs in the sample are from the year 2000 or later, with the majority made and released in the last five years. It was a deliberate choice by this researcher to have an up-to-date sample of texts, as this thesis is extensively concerned with the relationship between entertainment media representation and how audiences in society view the public relations profession as a result of those media images. Therefore, in a bid to be timely and relevant, it is imperative to analyse popular culture texts that reflect the true nature and environment that audiences are part of, and spectator to. In more simple terms, there is little point in asking an audience to examine a film from the 1980s and apply their 2011 judgements and contexts to that same text, because the meanings and symbols are likely to be misaligned due to societal and technological developments that have shifted how people view the world and themselves. Lee (2001) points to numerous films made over the years that feature public relations characters, from as early as the 1940s, and many of these films have been analysed by the handful of researchers who are interested in the complex depiction of the profession and practitioners.

Tied up in the concept of the power of the sign, is the different *types* of signs that convey meaning to audiences. Branston and Stafford (2006, p. 20) point to the three types of signs that were initially developed by the American philosopher and early pioneer in semiotics, Peirce. This theorist distinguished between iconic, indexical, symbolic and arbitrary signs.

These distinctions play an important role in semiotic analysis, and hence will be incorporated as part of the breakdown of the entertainment media texts selected for this thesis.

3.5 Practical approach to analysis

In order to approach the media texts in a systematic and methodological manner, a template will be created with the same categories for each text. This template will be used to organise the media text analysis, and the charts will serve as the starting point for drawing out the social significance of the films and television programs. The public relations characters in the films will be clearly identified and given priority attention, however other important signifiers like context and plot will be closely analysed as well. Using a systematic approach such as the chart mentioned above, will allow this the researcher to be as consistent as possible with the analysis of the text sample.

Furthermore, Buckland (1991, p. 199) points out that the reification of the filmic text has allowed films to be analysed by fragmenting the text into quantifiable units, therefore giving the researcher the opportunity to reconstitute the separate components of the film and then reconstitute them all to provide a 'bigger picture' understanding. In more simple terms, by breaking down a film or program into smaller sections, which can be analysed piece by piece and then put back together and understood as a whole, the researcher is able to locate the text in a wider context, and can point to the specific pieces that convey meaning. Buckland provides a helpful explanation;

The narrative codes and techniques of film, together with the continuity script, reified the filmic text by fragmenting it into quantifiable units and reconstituting it, according to a rigorous system of rules of combination, into an efficient, rationalised form (Buckland, 1991, p. 199).

Therefore, in the interest of validity and consistency, the same table template will be used to analyse each text, and subsequently, the same elements of each text will be given attention. For example the dialogue between characters will be given equal attention in each analysis, rather than giving half the sample a close examination of dialogue, but neglecting the other half, which would result in an uneven and unrepresentative data collection.

By breaking down the films and programs into separate elements, it becomes possible for the researcher to draw meaning from these parts, and then make observations on the texts as a whole. Without a cohesive and systematic method of analysing the texts, the researcher is left with hours of visual and audio data (the films and programs), and little chance of gaining any in-depth and analytical meaning from them.

Before applying the template, all the texts will be viewed two times to allow this researcher a general overview and precursory introduction to the major themes of each text. Taking down notes and summarising the basic narratives and key public relations characters is a useful step as it eases the researcher into the world of each text, as opposed to beginning with detailed and analytical observations, which might prevent the researcher in understanding the bigger picture the text is trying to communicate to viewers.

Prior to analysing the qualitative data that emerges from the semiotic text analysis, it is imperative to incorporate how elements of grounded theory are being applied to the present research. As Charmaz (2006) asserts, “Grounded theorists start with data” (p. 3). While other methodological approaches make use of a framework (or lens) through which to understand and interpret the data (for example Marxism or feminism), grounded theory instead uses the resulting data to create a conceptual/theoretical statement, which can then be used to discuss the significance of the research and to pave the way for future study. In this research specifically, the data from both the analysis of the texts, and the analysis of the focus group questionnaire and discussions will be examined separately, and then combined in order to allow the researcher the opportunity to make observations and draw a tentative theoretical or descriptive statement about what the data suggests.

Birks and Mills (2011) elucidate one of the most central characteristics of grounded theory;

Grounded theory differs from other approaches to research in that it serves to explain the phenomenon being studied. The strategies used in data collection and analysis result in the generation of theory that explicates a phenomenon from the perspective and in the context of those who experience it. Theory as the product of the investigative processes is the hallmark of grounded theory research (Birks & Mills, 2011, p. 16).

While it must be acknowledged that due to the short time frame and space allowed for a Master's thesis, a definitive theoretical statement based on grounded theory is unlikely to be made as a result of this study, it is still possible for the researcher to take the emerging data and make tentative and descriptive statements about the meaning of this study. As previously stated, grounded theory is often utilised when a research subject is in its early stages, as the resulting theoretical statement is helpful to subsequent researchers. For that reason, and with the acknowledgement that there is very little research into the entertainment media representation of public relations and the media effect of those representations, using elements of grounded theory is not only appropriate, but can be highly useful as a guide for later studies.

It is important to understand the components of the texts that are being analysed, and more importantly, why those components are being studied, therefore the next section of this chapter will examine narrative and storytelling as powerful elements for analysis.

3.6 Narrative and storytelling

Narrative is a crucial element in the media text, and understanding the overall story of the text is central to the researchers' (and audiences) interpretation of the meaning conveyed. Cohen and Tal-Or (2010) explain that "Narrative texts, whether in the form of a novel, a play or a film, create an imaginary and closed world and invite us to forget ourselves and to become involved with the story" (p. 403). Nowhere can Cohen and Tal-Or's statement be as relevant as in the context of films and television programs. Offering audiences the chance to escape reality and get lost inside the story and its characters is an attractive and compelling reason for contemporary media consumers to engage with a certain text, with Chandler stating that "narratives help make the strange familiar" (2002, p. 90). Metz (1974 as cited in Chandler, 2002, p. 90) has argued that reality has no narrative structure, but that texts such as film utilise narrative to make sense of time and temporality.

There are no 'events' in the world. Reality cannot be reduced objectively to discrete temporal units; what counts as an 'event' is determined by one's purposes. It is narrative from which creates events (Chandler, 2002, p. 90).

Furthermore, not only do theorists argue that reality has no narrative, but there are ways of organising and understanding the narrative structures that are experienced through texts and stories. One might consider the act of storytelling in interpersonal communication, where chronological order and characters often play a key part in developing and communicating the sequence of events to the listener. The same could be said for retelling dreams to someone else, these very rarely happen in the chronological order in which people describe them, but there is something innately human and comforting to hear a story retold in an ordered and coherent manner. Even in entertainment media examples, when a film is purposely filmed and edited to be out of order chronologically, it can be quite confusing and disorientating for the viewer to try and make sense of the overall story (of course, this is a editing mechanism that will be very thoroughly planned and executed by the director involved).

Chandler (2002) advises that the most basic narrative syntagm is one commonly seen in mainstream films, that of the linear temporal model; equilibrium-disruption-equilibrium. In more simple terms, this linear model can be described as the beginning-middle-end structure. This three-phase model can be identified in countless narratives, from the folk or fairy tale story, to the more complex feature length films that are shown in cinemas, watched on television, and downloaded from the internet. It is interesting to consider the confusion or dissatisfaction audience members can be left with if the film they are watching is not resolved by the texts conclusion. One might argue that this feeling of uncertainty occurs because mainstream audiences are somewhat accustomed to the traditional narrative where any problem is solved by the end of the film.

Barthes (1977 as cited in Chandler, 2002, p. 90) theorised that the aforementioned model is transferrable not only between mediums (so between film, novel, radio etc), but also that the model is 'international, transhistorical, transcultural' (Barthes, 1977, as cited in Chandler, 2002, p. 90). Approaching narrative from the semiotic perspective, it is useful to understand how narrative helps to create meaning for the audience. Chandler suggests that "Turning experience into narratives seems to be a fundamental feature of the human drive to make meaning" (2002, p. 90).

One might recall the quote from Watson (2003) earlier in this thesis, which referred to the act of storytelling-narrative as one of the most natural things people do, and is a process almost as automatic as breathing (see Chapter 1).

3.7 Characterisation

Looking to the work of Miller (1980), the importance of developing effective and interesting characters is crucial to the audiences understanding and engagement with the text. In addition to having a strong sense of person (i.e. be based on a real person), characters on screen also need to be highly credible and believable. Therefore, all of the characters actions within the text have to be consistent in order for the audience to believe not only the character, but also the story itself. Miller explains, “Credibility in a story means depends largely on the credible actions of the characters in that story” (1980, p. 83). Miller’s work is very useful in the present study, as it provides a lens through which the researcher can analyse the characters in the selected media texts.

Furthermore, justification, ambiguity and motivation are also key elements of a successful and effective character. Without actions being justified, and a certain amount of fuzziness around particular characters, and without understanding the motivation behind a character, the storyline can suffer and as a result, the text loses credibility with the all-important audience members. Miller’s (1980) full list of points to consider when creating a character is included in this thesis as an appendix (please see Appendix 1 for the full list). Some examples of the points to consider include: Occupation (and how do they feel about their job? What are his/her satisfactions and dissatisfactions), Aspects of own character they deny or not accept, Clothing/Dress and Appearance.

Miller (1980) also notes another area of importance when developing a character for the screen, that is, to avoid relying on stereotyped characters, and embracing a non-stereotype instead. Miller says that while it is easy and tempting to create stereotyped characters, any truth these characterisations once possessed has now been replaced with overexposure and distortion, arguing, “They are not so much typical and representative as they are exaggerated and fantasied” (p. 86).

One might explore the possibility that stereotypes can be used as a benchmark for understanding characters, so that new, non-stereotyped characters can have something to anchor any new characteristics to. For example, if a stereotype of the public relations professional is one of corrupt morals and a penchant for being bossy, then the non-stereotyped character may emerge as a naïve and optimistic public relations person, like the publicist in *Hancock*. This character might challenge the so-called dominant code that theorists like Hall (1970 as cited in Olson, 1999) say exists within texts. Whether audiences negotiate the meaning represented in the text, while simultaneously accepting the basic legitimacy of the hegemonic capitalist system, or they chose to take an oppositional decoding of the text, the fact remains that there can be multiple understandings of the same code. These key ideas link back to the denotation-connotation theory (see Chapter 2), which is concerned with the meaning and understanding of a sign, and with specific regard to the connotations that any given audience member may apply to a character or text. When one understands that a text can have multiple connotations, in that audience members may choose to interpret meaning in a variety of ways, Hall's theory of encoding and decoding is brought into focus.

The way in which audience members create and understand meaning from watching entertainment media is often not as straightforward and clear cut as some theorists and media critics might like to claim. Weimann (2000) presents a compelling case for variations in meaning often being context dependent, for example, prior contact with real life professionals or exposure to media texts, might change the way in which the audience member deciphers the text. Similarly, Weimann explains the school of thought surrounding the active audience, which questions the audiences' understanding, engagement, use or need for media, prior knowledge of a subject, attention to the text and so on. This author also argues that even though the Powerful Media Effect might not be an appropriate description of the process, it is still clear that changes in attitude and perception can occur after viewing a media text, which brings into question just how limited media effects can be.

The following page illustrates the table that will be used to analyse each film and character, in a bid to extrapolate common themes or characterisation techniques.

Table 1: Template for Semiotic Analysis of Sample Texts

Film/Sign	
Setting	
Plot	
Pivotal moments in the plot	
PR Characters	
Costume, makeup and accessories	
Interaction with other characters	
Key Dialogue	
Symbols	
Historical/cultural/political context of film:	

Because such in depth attention is being paid to the characterisation of public relations professionals on the screen, it is useful to employ a systematic format or checklist with which those characters can be more effectively studied. Miller (1980) provides an older but nonetheless useful checklist for screenwriters, which offers numerous different elements one should keep in mind when creating a character for film or television. The list ranges from physical and biological characteristics, to psychological, interpersonal and cultural characteristics.

Miller's checklist is particularly useful for an analysis of public relations professionals in entertainment media such as the present study, because of the high level of detail that needs to be applied to the creation and understanding of characters on screen. Due to the fact that this research is examining how the public relations character is brought to life on screen and represented (and as a result how the characters are interpreted by audiences), the character checklist is of great use to this study. Although the texts vary in date of distribution, genre, country of origin and the storylines, it is nevertheless important to extract information about common elements (in this case, characterisation) in order to draw comparisons and make comment on any significant points. Therefore, as the scriptwriter or author is the individual who brings the character to life, borrowing from how that character is created is particularly useful for an in-depth analysis and interpretation.

3.8 Stage Two: Focus groups

A critical component of this investigation is the interaction for this researcher with a panel of 'real life' spectators, to explore the complex relationship between media and audience. This will be done by conducting a series of small focus groups. Casey and Krueger (2000) advise that;

The purpose of a focus group is to listen and gather information. It is a way to better understand how people feel or think about an issue, product or service... The researcher creates a permissive environment in the focus group that encourages participants to share perceptions and points of view, without pressuring participants to vote or reach consensus (Casey & Krueger, 2000, p. 4).

While the use of focus groups as research has its origins in marketing, the method is increasingly being adopted and appropriated by social science researchers (for example see Morgan, 1993). Indeed, Morgan (1993, p. 3-4) points out that the reasons that marketers use focus groups differs from evaluation researchers, which differs again from those using the method for academic purposes (like the present study). In simple terms, a group of participants will be asked a series of questions (see Appendix for list of indicative questions) about their views on public relations people, and will then watch a series of media clips featuring public relations characters.

During the clips, participants will discuss (with the researcher and each other) the public relations characters, and the clips in general. After watching the clips, the participants will be asked the same questions from the start of the group interview, which will be used to gauge if there has been any change in views or understanding of the profession as a result of being exposed to the public relations characters in the clips.

Casey and Krueger (2000) point out that the difference between a focus group that is fun and fruitful, and one that is unnecessary and unproductive is the role of the moderator in the group interview environment. These authors posit that the moderator needs to be clear about both the process and purpose of the focus group in order to get the optimal results from the ensuing discussion. Indeed, Casey and Krueger advise that even if the moderator (or leader as they refer to the moderator) is clear on the purpose, without a sound working knowledge of group processes and focus group moderation, the participants will soon become frustrated and confused.

While it should be acknowledged from the outset that this is in no way a conclusive study, it is nonetheless significant in that it attempts to sketch the relationship between not only media and the representation of public relations, but also the way that media representation interacts and possibly impacts the perception of PR that mainstream audiences hold of the profession. The present study addresses a perceived gap in the research, with regards to the fact some studies have examined how the characters are depicted in film (for example see Lee, 2001), or how the image of public relations people in movies has changed over time (for example see Ames, 2010). Furthermore, while a few studies have attempted to bridge the gap between representation and perception (in particular White & Park, 2010), there are still limitations of these papers that the present research seeks to address.

One aspect to keep in mind while recruiting potential research participants, is the possibility of bias within the sample itself. By this, it is meant that a certain type of person is willing to give up their time, in return for no monetary reimbursement or payment.

For example, perhaps this recruitment is more attractive to people with expendable time and income, in that the two hours needed to take part is not an issue, and that the lack of monetary reimbursement is not an off-putting factor for the respondents. This is a two-sided argument however; as one might just as easily claim that if money was offered to participants in exchange for them taking part in the research, that this monetary motivation would influence their answers and overall participation in the study. In the flyers advertising the need for participants for the focus group, the benefits aimed at any potential participants was firstly, to gain an insight into how focus groups are conducted and to get a better understanding of film and television, and secondly, the flyer stated that popcorn, juice and biscuits would be offered during the focus group. A small gesture of hospitality for research participants can be very helpful and conducive in making the group feel welcome and more comfortable in what can often be a strange and perhaps awkward social environment.

Efforts were made with the study to avoid a convenience sample for the group (for example family and friends, or colleagues/students) in a bid to keep the data as credible and accurate as possible. With a convenience sample, one might argue that the interpersonal relationship between the moderator (the researcher in this case) and the participants might well influence the accuracy and neutrality of the discussions. However, one might also then assume that if the participants are not previously known to the moderator (the researcher), then the neutrality, authenticity, and therefore validity of the focus group data will be strengthened.

As it happens, the final focus group participant sample was made up of 13 individuals with no personal relationship with the researcher. This meant that the neutrality and authenticity of the focus group discussions were enhanced, as there was no preferential treatment given to anyone, nor were there any significant relationships between the focus group participants that might have impacted on the quality of the research data. Indeed, Bloor et al. (2001) explain that selecting participants for the focus group is often one of the most challenging and significant steps in the research process, and that there has to be sufficient diversity within each focus group in order to encourage discussion.

If all the participants come from the same social, gender, ethnic, economic and religious groups, then the discussion that ensues is likely to be heavily biased and largely only representative of a certain section of society. Conversely however, Bloor et al. (2001) also state that having a focus group made up of participants that have completely opposing views or demographics can also be problematic in the research process, as radically opposing views within the focus group could result in high levels of conflict and heated debate. Bloor et al (2001) use the example of having an abortion clinician in the same focus group as an anti-abortion activist. Therefore, the balance between homogeneity and diversity needs to be kept in mind when the researcher is composing the focus group make-up, in order to allow unbiased and relatively diverse data to emerge from the focus group discussions.

3.9 Advantages and disadvantages of the focus group

Morgan (1993) points out that there are many myths surrounding focus groups, one of the most often repeated is that the method is cheap and quick. However, any individual or organisation who has carried out a series of focus groups knows the time and preparation that a successful focus group requires, from the initial planning of the group, to recruitment, ethics approval, advertising, questions, booking a location, and then the process of analysing and making sense of the data collected is another stage in itself. Furthermore, Morgan exposes the fallacy that focus groups always require moderators with highly developed professional skills. The author contends that far from this, a moderator with a sound knowledge of the research project and its aims is more useful and appropriate than someone who may possess highly developed professional skills, but may lack the understanding of the specific project and purpose at hand. In this light, one might view the moderator as a key data-collection instrument in the research process, and that in order to gain sufficient results, that moderator needs to be well-prepared, attentive and have the basic group processing skills needed to conduct the focus group interview in an efficient and useful manner.

Bloor et al (2001) state that one factor which makes focus groups so distinctive and significant is how the participants interact with each other. This interactive effect results in data which may include instances where people talk at once, where sentences remain unfinished, where people go on to contradict themselves and others, where people's arguments develop as they discuss the topic with others, and where people misinterpret other's comments and take the discussion off in another direction (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 58)

This interaction between participants is noteworthy for a number of reasons, particularly because it creates such a different set of data than conducting a series of individual interviews would result in. Whereas with a one on one interview, the respondent is largely unaided in offering their thoughts on the subject, in the focus group environment, participants feed off each other, and will often refer to a previously made statement and relate their own thoughts to a comment made by another participant. This is a fascinating phenomenon, as it creates not only a kind of kinship between the participants (who are generally strangers to each other prior to the focus group), but also offers participants a foundation upon which they can lay their own thoughts. This is a concept that will be discussed in more depth in the data and findings chapters, as the interaction between participants in the focus groups for this research was indeed a notable element that is worthy of more attention.

3.10 Issues within focus groups

Recruitment of willing participants is a time consuming and complex process, particularly when the research sample is made up of random, unpaid participants rather than personal contacts or paid participants. As such, three small focus groups of three to six people were conducted for this study, in order to gain an in-depth and closely analysed data set. When combined with another research method (as illustrated in the present investigation with a thematic and semiotic analysis of entertainment media characters), the qualitative and rich data that emerges from the methodology should not be compromised for quantitative data that will not necessarily add value to the knowledge created.

Not only is the recruitment a time intensive process, but as Bloor et al. (2001) point out, “Focus groups are labour intensive in recruitment, transcription and analysis, therefore, where possible, numbers should be kept down to the bare minimum” (p. 28). Each of the focus groups for this research had between three and six participants, and three focus groups were conducted (creating a total of 13 participant responses). While this may seem a relatively low figure, focus group theorists such as Liamputtong (2011) point to saturation theory, which explains that saturation occurs when additional information no longer generates new understanding, and that after conducting several focus groups, often there is no significant new understanding to be gained from continuing to recruit and engage participants. Of course, if time, money, and resources were less limited, this research would conduct as many focus groups as possible, However, in academic research, practicalities are important, and therefore the amount of focus groups held must be kept to a manageable and appropriate size for the scale of the research project.

Bloor et al (2001) also argue that researchers need to take care when conducting focus groups that no individual view is silenced because of other more vocal or dominant participants. Previous research undertaken by the author of this thesis (see Dennison, 2010) highlighted how the dynamics of a focus group can be influenced when one or two participants are more vocal and effective at getting their voice heard in the group setting than others. This can often have a significant impact on the data, as the majority of views and poignant statements will come from a small minority of the group, and therefore raises issues about how representative and accurate the data really is. Bloor et al. (2001) point to research done in the late 1990s by Lynn Michell, who found that when investigating adolescent smoking in high schools, participants from lower status groups were often shut out of the discussions, with the participants from the higher status groups dominating the discussion (Michell, 1999, as cited in Bloor et al., 2001, p. 20-21). This example illustrates the importance of having a well-balanced and equal power focus group, and it is hoped that the three focus groups which make up the research sample for this thesis are representative and that participants felt they were heard equally in the discussions.

Transcribing is a useful tool for researchers, as it offers a detailed and accurate record of what was discussed during the focus group and can often add an extra layer of understanding for the researcher who might otherwise rely solely on notes and memory. While transcription can often be a time-consuming and tedious activity, the usefulness of a written record of what was said is invaluable when it comes to analysis, comparison and commentary.

Bloor et al (2001) argues that the significance of transcription is underestimated, and that neglecting to transcribe ones research data is not satisfactory for academic research projects. The authors add that when academic research fails to do transcribing for analysis, this leads to a loss of much of the richness of the data collected, and furthermore, this runs the risk of finishing as a selective and superficial representation of the research findings, stating that “In order for a detailed and rigorous analysis to be conducted, a thorough transcription of the tape recording of the focus group is required” (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 59).

Bloor et al (2001) explains that one of the most complex elements of transcribing focus group data is that people often speak over each other, which results in problems at the analysis stage. This potential overlap of conversation can often happen in the focus group setting, even if it is other participants mumbling contributions while others speak, such as “Yes” or “I agree” or even nodding their heads to show their agreement. In all three focus groups, because each of the participants was passed the recording microphone and asked to comment on what they had just viewed, this limited the amount of interruptions by other participants. However, the transcripts do indicate if another participant has interrupted or contributed to the speaking participants own contribution. Bloor et al (2001) conclude succinctly;

In summary, the transcript needs to reproduce as near as possible the group as it happened, so that anyone reading the transcript can really ‘see’ how the group went (Bloor et al., 2001, p. 61).

3.11 Stage 3: Media and popular culture diary

The media diary is a record of how public relations is experienced in popular culture, without necessarily seeking out public relations characters for formal analysis (as opposed to the selection of media texts that were analysed using a semiotic approach for the body of this thesis). While the semiotic analysis and focus group form the formal and methodological foundations of this research, this researcher found it worthwhile and interesting to also take a more exploratory look at how public relations comes up in the day-to-day consumption of popular culture. Taking an ethnographic approach to research, this diary is an attempt to illustrate to the reader how often public relations is mentioned in magazines, books, the internet, television shows, films, and news items.

It should be noted that while the diary was not intended nor enacted through a formal process of research (for example following structured charts for film analysis or a set of questions for the focus groups), diary keeping in social research has a rich background, and can provide a level of insight and unfiltered qualitative data that can greatly enhance the more methodological and traditional research practices. Diary keeping in research is often used in concert with other forms of data collection (Altrichter & Holly, 2011), in this case film/television analysis and focus groups. In fact, the use of the popular culture diary was started more as a way of tracking any interesting issues that arose while the research was taking place, but ones that perhaps did not quite fit into the focus of entertainment media representation and audience understanding.

However, as the thesis grew in size, and the scope of the discussion was necessarily widened to capture the importance of popular culture and media consumption, it became clear to the researcher that the diary was more substantial and significant than a mere note-taking activity.

Indeed, Altrichter and Holly (2011) provide a succinct and eloquent description of the usefulness of research diaries;

While research diaries have long been the site of rich description and conjecture, the tools to capture, record, analyse and portray the researcher's story have expanded greatly in recent years. With the advent of digital media, research diaries acquire multiple modes of capture and analytical strength, moving from black and white to Technicolor, from static to dynamic. Whether they are called diaries, log books, journals, blogs, field notes or lab books, 'external memory' has been used by researchers in many disciplines for recording their daily observations in the field (Altrichter & Holly, 2011, p. 43).

As part of an ethnographic approach to this study, the diary acts as a descriptive and extensive guide as to how popular culture might affect how people view public relations. Furthermore, as it is argued that if the representations of public relations in popular culture are as pervasive and wide-ranging as they are documented in this informal diary, then one might reasonably argue that the writers, producers, directors, and even actors themselves might also be exposed to those popular culture representations. Particularly in the context of Hollywood (where the majority of the texts are crafted), the entertainment industry and popular culture are closely intertwined, and as a result, the public relations characters in film and on television could well be influenced by the popular culture depictions of the profession in real life. In simpler terms, one might query; Are public relations characters represented in a certain way on screen because that is a reflection of the way they are represented off-screen, in popular culture?

With regards to theory, this type of intellectual meandering down another path of inquiry is not always as far removed as one might first assume. For example, Altrichter and Holly (2011) theorise that;

Diaries can be particularly useful for making detours, for taking side roads that offer possible insights into phenomena that were not obvious or predictable when the research journey began. What seemed a diversion may become an important discovery in the light of new information (Altrichter & Holly, 2011, p. 46).

Pictures and other visual depictions have also been included in this diary, as a means of illustrating to the reader the ways in which popular culture often includes content about public relations. In presenting these visual images, it is hoped that the reader gets an idea of how pervasive this subject is in contemporary popular culture, while the format simultaneously offers this researcher the chance to be slightly more creative with how this thesis can be developed and presented. As Altrichter and Holly (2011) note, the ways in which research diaries can now be recorded and presented are increasing, with some diaries even incorporating (or taking the form of) videoed entries or blog postings. While the diary for this research makes use of typed text and several colour photographs, book covers and magazine covers, so it is still a static diary in that sense, there are several entries which track issues and events that have unfolded in real time on the internet, which adds a somewhat unique element to the mix. Be that through gossip websites, micro-blogging sites such as Twitter, or more traditional mainstream news items from online publications, this diary takes into account multiple areas of popular culture that can inform the present academic discussion, and ground it in a time-based and chronologically ordered journal.

With around 20 diary entries, spanning some four thousand words in count, this diary is by no means a hurriedly put together account of some magazine covers and gossip items, rather, it is a descriptive and experiential journal of the many ways in which the public relations profession is present in popular culture, and by extent the public domain. Indeed, this diary seems to be a mixture of both descriptive sequences and interpretative sequences, meaning not only is there descriptions of events, dialogues, and news items (descriptive sequences such as what, who, when, where and how), but also takes an interpretative approach to sequences, such as speculations, ideas, hunches, assumptions, and even developments of theories (for example that the relationship between the entertainment industry and public relations is stronger and more explicit than most might imagine).

If the researcher's diary is a rich 'dialogue with a cruel partner' (Canetti, 1981) it is also the site of discovery and creativity, where the terrain can become a rich, evolving, heuristic map the researcher draws in conversation with other researchers and the 'facts' (Altrichter & Holly, 2011, p. 50).

3.12 Summary

In summary, this research methodology chapter has examined the key methods employed for this study. Close thematic/character analysis of film and television allows the researcher to examine how public relations characters are portrayed in entertainment media, and a series of focus groups provide the opportunity to better understand audiences' views of public relations and if that is effected by entertainment media. The advantages and disadvantages of these research methods have been discussed, in order to provide a clear and balanced account of the methods being utilised for this project. The popular culture/media diary has also been discussed as a research method, and has outlined why the use of diary-keeping in research is an innovative and meaningful technique for contributing additional layers of meaning to a study.

Chapter 4: Data analysis and findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the research findings that have emerged from this project. The first section will engage with the film and television analysis findings, by providing detailed accounts of each text and the public relations character, and then having a more fluent discussion about the characters and comparisons or differences that can be drawn. The second part of this chapter will explore the rich qualitative data that emerged from the focus groups, and will extrapolate insight into how public relations is viewed and if exposure to the entertainment media texts has any immediate and noticeable effect on the audiences' perceptions of the characters and the profession. Each of the screenshot images of the characters has been included following the analysis table, in order to illustrate the visual signs relating to each public relations figure on film. The images were selected because they focus on the character of interest, and are representative of how the character is portrayed in each text.

4.2 In the Loop

This section will focus on the 2009 film *In the Loop*, which is in fact an extended version of a popular British television series *The Thick of It*. The central public relations figure in the film is Malcolm Tucker, who is perhaps the most unlikable character of the four texts.

Table 2: In the Loop (Text and character analysis)

Film/Sign	<p>In the Loop</p> <p>Director: Armando Iannucci</p> <p>Year of publication: 2009</p> <p>Genre: Political satire comedy</p>
Setting	<p>Present day. The movie takes place in both London, UK and Washington, US. Most of the film takes place within government buildings or follows the characters in transit (i.e. taxis or walking). The film is set in a post-9/11 political landscape, and co-operation between the United States and the United Kingdom is a high priority for some sides.</p>

<p>Plot</p>	<p>“The US President and UK Prime Minister fancy a war. But not everyone agrees that war is a good thing. The US General Miller doesn't think so and neither does the British Secretary of State for International Development, Simon Foster. But, after Simon accidentally backs military action on TV, he suddenly has a lot of friends in Washington, DC. If Simon can get in with the right DC people, if his entourage of one can sleep with the right intern, and if they can both stop the Prime Minister's chief spin-doctor Malcolm Tucker rigging the vote at the UN, they can halt the war. If they don't... well, they can always sack their Director of Communications Judy, whom they never liked anyway and who's back home dealing with voters with blocked drains and a man who's angry about a collapsing wall” (IMDB, 2011, online).</p> <p>This is the plot line from the Internet Movie Database, and succinctly describes the films story. Note that the IMDB refers to Malcolm Tucker’s character as the UK Prime Ministers chief spin-doctor.</p>
<p>Pivotal moments in the plot</p>	<p>The pivotal moment that sets the storyline up for this film comes early on, when the Director of Communications (Malcolm Tucker) for the UK Government is listening to recordings of the various Cabinet Ministers. The Minister for International Development Simon Foster is on the BBC and is drawn into answering a question about whether the UK will go to War with Iraq. He says war is “unforeseeable”, which sends Tucker into a tailspin, as he knows the Government is in fact going to go to War.</p> <p>Another pivotal moment in the film is when a new staffer in the communications team (Toby) accidentally tells an acquaintance in the media that he is attending a War Committee in the White House. The story takes off in the national US media, and soon the committee is bombarded with curious journalists and politicians.</p> <p>The final turning point of the film comes at the end, when the US and UK declare war on Iraq, and all the characters reactions are shown. Some lose their jobs, others switch sides, and Simon Foster is sent back to his hum-drum electorate to deal with angry constituents.</p>

PR Characters	<p>Malcolm Tucker: The character focus of this text from a semiotic point of view is the lead role of Malcolm Tucker (played by Peter Capaldi). As the Minister for Communications, Tucker is a foul-mouthed and somewhat tyrannical character, who is shouting and swearing in basically every scene he appears in.</p>
Costume, makeup and accessories	<p>Malcolm is never seen out of a business suit and shirt. At times he looks ruffled, and the suit is less than perfectly pressed, but he nevertheless does not appear in any other type of clothing (i.e. casual, sports clothes etc, pyjamas, etc). His key accessory is the cell phone, and at times he even speaks into two cell phones.</p> <p>The makeup or effects used on Malcolm make him look haggard and almost exhausted, with large bags under his eyes and a closely shorn hair cut.</p>
Interaction with other characters	<p>In all his interactions with other characters, Tucker uses threats and aggressive behaviour to keep people in line. He is bossy and demanding, and uses personal insults to everyone he comes across.</p> <p>The only other character Tucker seems to get along with is another communications character (Jamie), who makes Tucker seem timid in comparison with his own foul language and demeanour.</p> <p>At no time is Tucker's life outside work shown, so the audience is never given the opportunity to see him with family or friends. By doing this, the director ensures that Tucker maintains the aura of a driven man whose job is his life.</p>
Key Dialogue	<p>Malcolm listening to pre-recorded tapes of the Minister for International Developments interview</p> <p>Simon Foster MP: [On Radio] Well, personally, I think that war is unforeseeable.</p> <p>Malcolm Tucker: [Listening to the radio] Sam! Sam!</p> <p>Eddie Mair: [On Radio] Unforeseeable?</p> <p>Simon Foster: [On Radio] Yes.</p> <p>Malcolm Tucker: No, you do not think that! Sam, I'm going to have to go to International Development and pull Simon Foster's fucking hair.</p> <p>Malcolm threatening a journalist who is planning to run with a story about the Minister saying the war is unforeseeable</p>

	<p>Malcolm Tucker: [On Mobile Phone] Ok, Ok, Go ahead and print "Unforeseeable". See when I tell your wife about you and Angela Heaney at the Blackpool conference, what would be best? An e-mail, a phone call, what? Hey! I could write it on a cake with those little silver balls: "Your Hack husband betrayed you on October the 4th and congratulations on the new baby."... Yeah, maybe it's better to spike it. Yeah, Fuckety-Bye</p> <p>Malcolm to General Miller: "I'm not an expert on spin, but that could hurt your career"</p> <p>Malcolm to Judy, trying to find out where the War Committee is being held</p> <p>Malcolm Tucker: [On mobile to Judy] Where's the War Committee? I thought I was going to the war committee.</p> <p>Judy: Simon's going to the war committee; I thought you were doing your one-to-one.</p> <p>Malcolm Tucker: Just tell me where the fuck it's happening.</p> <p>Judy: The State Department, seventh floor. Malcolm, do you like how I'm telling you what's going on where you are?</p>
Symbols	<p>Malcolm's cell phone is a strong recurring symbol in the film, and alludes to the importance of information, communication, control, and most of all, keeping people in line (which seems to be Malcolm's main concern).</p>
Historical/cultural/political context of film:	<p>The political and historical context of this film is particularly interesting, and adds greatly to the social significance of the text. The film is set in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq by the Allies (US and UK), and focuses largely on the Communications Minister for the British government Malcolm Tucker. The sometimes complex relationship between the United States and the United Kingdom is highlighted in this film, as are the often underhanded tactics used by the various governmental parties in order to control information and public opinion.</p>

	Furthermore, the central character Malcolm Tucker is widely said to be based on the real life Communications Minister of the Tony Blair Government, Alistair Campbell. Campbell is often credited as being a modern-day spin doctor, and his role in the lead up to Iraq has been the subject of countless public debate and popular culture references.
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Figure 1: Screenshot of Malcolm Tucker



Semiotic analysis of image

- Middle aged Caucasian male
- Holding a cell phone to right ear
- Facial expressions are angry, tired, and somewhat menacing
- Wearing a suit with an unbuttoned shirt
- Books in background and frame in background on wall

Symbolic elements

- Angry distorted face= stress/anger/frustration
- Cell phone=connected= decisions= power
- Suit= professional =
- Books in background= information= knowledge= tradition

Several inferences can be made as a result of analysing this image. For example, the character is in the dominant social and gender group, as a white male, he is automatically categorised in the position of power over others. The cell phone pressed firmly to the ear suggests this man is connected, and perhaps needs information to be successful. The facial expressions suggest a man under stress, and perhaps someone who responds in an aggressive way when challenged or frustrated. The background items suggest a wealthy location, with the set of books or tomes suggestive of an educated and intellectual individual.

The central public relations character in the film *In the Loop* is the foul-mouthed, tyrannical Director of Communications for the British Government, Malcolm Tucker. Tucker is a middle aged (45-50 years old) male, of a slender build. He is portrayed as taller than most other characters in the film, and is quite athletic – this is illustrated as Tucker runs through London and Washington in an effort to control the flow of information. Making actors appear taller than they really are is a technique employed often in the film and television industry, presumably because it gives the character a dominant physical presence over other characters. Tucker has silver-greyish hair, green-blue eyes, and is generally quite well-presented, and is always shown in a business suit and shirt. Tucker walks and acts with a sense of purpose, whether that is going to find someone to yell at, or attempting to shift the time of a United Nations vote. Tucker possesses an above-average intelligence, a quick wit, and is very blunt with others. He seems to act a few steps ahead of everyone he comes across; this is particularly well-illustrated through his dealings with the media (i.e. leaking stories, blackmailing journalists etc). It is clear from these actions that ethics (either professional or personal) are not a concern for this character.

Disposition wise, Tucker is aggressive, constantly and consistently uses swear words and offensive language, and is grouchy and blunt with everyone he comes across. He has rather bad social skills, and has a penchant for humiliating others. Tucker thinks of himself quite highly, and as shown towards the end of the film, the power he holds over media and government bodies is immense (though behind-the-scenes). The character is at his most stressed and vulnerable when he has to rely on others for information or to take action, or when people try to tell him what to do. This is a man who is used to being in charge of any situation, and doesn't hesitate in telling others what the course of action needs to be.

With regards to interpersonal and cultural characteristics, Tucker is of Scottish descent, which is illustrated through his accent and his assertion to another character that he is not Irish. While his level of education is never revealed, one can assume from the level of his job and the success of his actions that Tucker either trained in public relations or journalism, or has learned a great deal on the job over the years. Nothing outside Tucker's work life is shown in the film, the audience doesn't see him at home, or with any family or friends, which suggests his life revolves heavily around his job. The only other character Tucker is somewhat friendly to is another Scottish man called Jamie, whose foul language and aggressive and violent behaviour makes Tucker seem almost timid in comparison. The audience quickly understands why the two men get along. In his relationships and interaction with other characters and co-workers, Tucker is brutally honest, bossy, and isn't beyond using threats to get what he needs. He seems to have mean and mocking nicknames for most of his co-workers, a fact that is not lost on his workmates.

Tucker performs a range of public relations activities throughout the movie, and the inclusion of some specific public relations terms are accurate about real life practice. There are discussions about scheduled media appearances, interviews, the Minister getting reined in by Tucker after he fails to toe the line. Tucker is shown at the beginning of the movie reviewing tape interviews, which falls under media monitoring and issues management. Throughout the whole film, Tucker (and the whole communications department) is engaged in major damage control, which ranges from Tucker threatening a journalist, saying he will expose his extra marital affair to his wife if a damaging story isn't removed from the news agenda, to documents being changed and leaked. It seems as though the ends justifies the

means for this character, and to get everyone to stick to the party line and do what he wants, Tucker will do whatever it takes to achieve his goals.

4.3 *Thank You for Smoking*

The following section will analyse the US film *Thank You for Smoking*. This movie received many positive reviews, and is seen to be quite representative of the high-pressure, high-stake lobbying industry in the United States. Interestingly, movie trivia buffs state that at no point in this film is anyone actually shown smoking a cigarette.

Table 3: Thank You for Smoking (Text and character analysis)

Film/Sign	<p>Thank You for Smoking</p> <p>Genre: Comedy/Drama</p> <p>Director: Jason Reitman</p> <p>Released: April 2006</p>
Setting	<p>The setting of the film is mainly in Washington DC, and various landmarks are shown in the film to indicate its location and political/cultural significance. At one point in the film, Nick has to travel to Hollywood to meet a big shot entertainment agent, and takes his son Joey with him. They also go out to meet the Marlborough Man and Nick bribes the old man, giving him a brief case full of money in return for the man's silence.</p>
Plot	<p>"Satirical comedy follows the machinations of Big Tobacco's chief spokesman, Nick Naylor, who spins on behalf of cigarettes while trying to remain a role model for his twelve-year-old son" (IMDB, 2011, online).</p>
Pivotal moments in the plot	<p>The moral development of NN character throughout the film drives the text forward</p> <p>The trip to Marlborough Man's house with NN's son shows that the son is learning about his dad's work</p>

	<p>When NN is kidnapped, and the Tobacco company stands him down, NN is aimless and loses motivation</p> <p>JR hiring NN back at end of Senate hearing shows that everyone realises NN's talent as an orator and persuader</p> <p>When NN is shown pitching to the cell-phone industry at conclusion of film, the audience sees that he hasn't really changed at all and that he will still talk on behalf of the highest bidder</p>
PR Characters	<p>The central public relations character is Nick Naylor, who is the chief lobbyist and spokesperson (and self-titled spin doctor) for Big Tobacco. Naylor says that his job is 'spin control', so while he is never explicitly called a public relations person, the audience understands that he is the face of the organisation and the individual who liaises with the media on Big Tobaccos behalf.</p>
Costume, makeup and accessories	<p>The actor Aaron Eckhart who plays the main character Nick Naylor is what some would call a 'heart throb'. He is very good looking, with chiselled features, and this off-screen good look crosses over into his appearance in the film too.</p> <p>Nick is usually shown in a business suit and tie, and is very tidy and well-groomed. However, his suits are not so well tailored that he appears superior (which surely he could afford considering who he works for), and this tactic seems to work in his favour, as he appears like a normal guy, rather than the chief spokesperson for big tobacco.</p>
Interaction with other characters	<p>In all his interactions with other characters, Nick is polite, funny, and most of all, charming. He seems to be at his most real and vulnerable when he is with his son Joey, who questions him about his job of representing big tobacco.</p> <p>In his interactions with the overzealous reporter Heather Holloway, Nick falls for her and ends up telling her all his trade secrets. For such a professional and successful PR person, he seems to forget that she is just doing her job too. He gets revenge on her by ousting their sexual relationship, and as professional punishment, Heather is shown at the end of the film, in stormy Florida as a weather reporter.</p>

Key Dialogue	<p>When Nick is talking to Jeff Magall about getting cigarettes strategically placed in movies to make smoking socially acceptable and desirable again</p> <p>Nick Naylor: The message Hollywood needs to send out is 'Smoking Is Cool!' We can put the sex back into cigarettes</p> <p>Nick also justifies his work as a spin doctor, by claiming he has to work and pay his mortgage</p> <p>Nick Naylor: [out loud] "I just need to pay the mortgage."</p> <p>Nick Naylor: [to self] The Yuppie Nuremberg defense</p> <p>Nick: I don't have an M.D. or Law degree. I have a bachelors in kicking ass and taking names</p> <p>Nick: I front an organization that kills 1,200 people a day</p> <p>Nick: Michael Jordan plays ball. Charles Manson kills people. I talk. Everyone has a talent.</p> <p>Nick: The number 1 killer in America is cholesterol, and here comes Senator Finisterre who's clogging the nation's arteries with Vermont cheddar cheese</p> <p>Nick Naylor: You know that guy that can get any girl? I'm him ... on crack.</p> <p>Nick Naylor: I speak on behalf of cigarettes.</p> <p>Heather Holloway: My other interviews have pinned you as a mass murderer, blood sucker, pimp, profiteer and my personal favorite, yuppie Mephistopheles.</p> <p>Joey Naylor: It's like you always said, Dad, "If you want an easy job, go work for the Red Cross."</p> <p>Nick Naylor speaking at his sons school about his job:</p> <p>Nick Naylor: Look at it this way. How many you want to be lawyers? Lawyers earn money to talk.</p> <p>One little boy raises his hand</p> <p>Nick Naylor: OK, let me try this again. How many of you want to be movie stars?</p> <p>Multiple children: Yes!</p>
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	<p>Nick Naylor: Movie stars get paid to talk! That is what I do, I talk</p> <p>Nick talking to his son Joey about his work and the value of a good argument</p> <p>Joey: What happens when you're wrong?</p> <p>Nick Naylor: See, Joey, that's the beauty of argument. When you argue correctly, you're never wrong.</p> <p>Joey saying to his dad Nick what he has heard about his PR/lobbyist work</p> <p>Joey: You're The Sultan of Spin!</p> <p>Nick: "The Sultan of Spin"?</p> <p>Joey: Mom subscribes to Newsweek</p>
Symbols	<p>The brief case filled with money that Nick takes to the old Marlborough Man (who, after being supplied with free cigarettes his whole life is now dying of lung cancer) is a significant symbol to the film. Nick takes his son Joey with him to the old man's house, and they talk about the money in the suitcase on the way back (the briefcase is notable in its absence).</p> <p>The symbolism behind the money in the case is that everyone eventually sells out their morals or ethics when there is lots of money involved, because people are essentially just trying to make a living. It is a metaphor for Nick Naylor's own moral void, and he repeatedly defends his work as a tobacco spin doctor by saying he has to pay his mortgage and that's why he does the job.</p>
Historical/cultural/political context of film:	<p>The context of this film is particularly interesting as it is based on true events and legal proceedings. Most people are aware of the major law suits against tobacco companies, highly publicised scandals about the addictiveness of cigarettes, and the many laws and policies surrounding tobacco and smoking. With regards to other films that created precedence for <i>Thank You for Smoking</i>, the critically acclaimed film <i>The Insider</i> documented the story of Big Tobacco trying to conceal the harmful and addictive effects of smoking. In a way, <i>Thank You for Smoking</i> is similar to <i>The Insider</i>, as it exposes the practices that go on behind the scenes of Big Tobacco, while simultaneously depicting the role of lobbying and media relations in the tobacco industry.</p>

Figure 2: Screenshot of Nick Naylor



Semiotic analysis of image

- 30-40 year old Caucasian male
- Business suit with shirt and tie (lightly coloured suit, blue tie)
- Several microphones in front of him, displaying various news station logos
- Character has his index finger pointing at the media scrum and his mouth is open, he is mid-sentence
- Photograph is taken from a low angle, making the character appear more authoritative and physically more dominant
- Facial expression shows that character is saying something serious, but his eyes seem to be alight and passionate about his cause
- In the background is another Pakeha male, with his head cocked towards NN, he appears to be listening intently

- Also in the background is a large off-white stone/marble building wall, there is some detailing on a ledge

Symbolic elements

- Microphones=information= commodity
- Microphones and media scrum= Indicates newsworthiness and NN's celebrity status
- Well presented male=position of power=style over substance
- Suit= business= profession= money= power + motivation
- Lightly coloured suit= more approachable
- Blue tie= Reliable, business colour
- Low angle= authoritative = power + leadership

There are several inferences that can be made after viewing this photograph, which illustrate the researchers thought process to attribute these meanings to the character. Firstly, the character is courting the press, and he looks as though he is chastising or trying to persuade the journalists of something (illustrated by the pointed figure and expression on his face). The use of the pointed finger can be seen as aggressive and challenging, and is a very Western mannerism. The microphones thrust in the characters face suggest he has something (information, statement, reaction, announcement) that the media wants. The character is good looking, and seems like he has a strong (and perhaps even domineering) presence over others.

At the beginning of the film, Nick Naylor is shown on a television chat show, and he successfully turns the situation around, so that he (and by extension, Big Tobacco) looks like the good guy. This context illustrates media relations, interviews, agenda-setting, target audiences, and persuasion. It illustrates that Nick Naylor's strength lies in persuading people and arguing his case effectively. Nick also announces that Big Tobacco will be donating \$50 million to launch a campaign to educate kids about the dangers of smoking. This move is a combination of damage control, image management, sponsorship, and corporate social responsibility (albeit in a superficial manner).

By flying in economy/coach class on his flights around the US, Nick makes a purposeful effort to chat with his fellow passengers, reasoning that in order to reach and persuade new customers, one must know how they are talking to (research and targeting publics). In addition, Naylor extensively networks with other lobbyists, specifically from the firearms and gun industry, and the alcohol industry. He also releases statements and gives statements to the media outside the Congressional Hearing, and throughout the film, he is also the subject of an in-depth interview and article with the reporter Heather Holloway.

4.4 *Absolute Power*

This section will examine the BBC television series *Absolute Power*. This series is interesting, in that it is the only text in the sample that is focused on the inner workings of a public relations consultancy (as opposed to freelance or in-house). This illustrates the high-paced environment of a consultancy, as well as showing the range of clients and portfolios that come to the business.

Table 4: *Absolute Power* (Text and character analysis)

Film/Sign	<i>Absolute Power</i> (Television series) BBC Director: John Morton Date: 2003 Genre: Comedy series
Setting	<i>Absolute Power</i> is set in modern day England, in the early 2000s. The series is mainly set in the offices of the public relations agency Prentiss-McCabe, but often features scenes filmed around London (i.e. events, restaurants, client meetings, countryside).
Plot	“The inner workings of a successful PR firm - lying for a living” (IMDB, 2011, online) The plot of <i>Absolute Power</i> is the daily happenings of a busy and high-profile public relations agency in London. With the tagline “Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely”, this series largely focuses on the extraordinary influence that PR has on British society, at business, sports, entertainment, and political levels.

Pivotal moments in the plot	<p>As there are six episodes in the first season, and each of the episodes can be watched and understood on its own, there is no significant pivotal moments as such.</p> <p>However, towards the end of the first season, Charles seems to be struck with a moral conscience after indirectly causing the suicide of a man, and the audience momentarily thinks he might change his ways. After a sneaky comment to Martin however, the audience sees that Charles is merely spinning the situation just as he would for a client in trouble.</p>
PR Characters	<p>The key character analysed for this study is Charles Prentiss. While the series does in fact take place within a public relations agency, and therefore there are several PR characters that could be analysed, in the interest of giving a detailed description and analysis of just one character is more manageable and appropriate for the size and scope of this thesis. Also, as co-owner of the agency, and a larger than life persona, Charles is given the most screen-time, and therefore it makes sense that he should be the character for close analysis.</p>
Costume, makeup and accessories	<p>Charles is a large man, both in stature, size, and personality. He dresses extremely well, with beautifully made, and perfectly tailored business suits. He often wears brightly coloured shirts, and loud patterned ties. He is only seen twice out of the business attire, once when the Prentiss-McCabe team is playing indoor soccer, and another time when he and Martin head out to the country side dressed in their shooting gear, to meet a potential client who turns out to be a neo-Nazi.</p> <p>Charles has impeccable grooming and well-coiffed hair, and there is no visible makeup, other than to make him appear bright eyed and energetic. This could be because of the British nature of the program, as generally speaking, British entertainment media features less made-up characters than their Hollywood equivalents. British characters tend to look more realistic, 'like us', and not as artificially perfect as US characters. Charles doesn't have any significant accessories.</p>
Interaction with other characters	<p>In his interaction with other characters, Charles is reasonably charming and polite, however he seems to have a slightly irritable nature, and often comes across as pompous, arrogant and cocky. If it suits him, he will turn the charm up and knows exactly what to say to get what he wants.</p>

	<p>He will often deny responsibility for his actions, blaming anyone else but himself. For example, when meeting with a journalist, he denies misleading the media, and insists that it's the journalists' role to check the facts with his client.</p> <p>Interestingly, Charles is never shown with his family, so one assumes that he is married to his work. There isn't even a mention of a wife, partner or children, and this seems generally in line with his eccentric and often self-interested actions.</p>
Key Dialogue	<p>Charles: "Never ask a PR man for the truth, never shake hands with a gynaecologist, these are basic professional rules"</p> <p>"I'm only a spin-doctor"</p> <p>"PR means never having to say you're wrong"</p> <p>"People don't want to know how much you make, but how much you give away"</p> <p>"How many times do I have to tell you? Nobody gives a shit about the truth. That is why you employ me"</p> <p>"Everything we do is predicated on deceit. Everything"</p> <p>"Authenticity is not a currency we necessarily deal in"</p> <p>Government PR guy to Charles: "You're very good at this, you should have gone into politics"</p> <p>Charles to Govt PR guy: "Well they did ask me, but I wanted to work where the real money and power lie"</p> <p>Alan (on his arrival at Prentiss-McCabe offices): "I'm here to see the Dark Prince, the Lord and Master of the netherworld that is public relations, the Machiavellian core"</p> <p>Martin: "No self-respecting PR of any authority sits in the window of a restaurant"</p> <p>Jamie: "I'm feeding the rumour mill"</p> <p>Jamie: "The public's used to people pushing philanthropy when things go pear-shaped"</p> <p>Joanne to Charles: "I hope you're not going to tart me up"</p>

	<p>“They’ll buy it Martin because we’re selling it. Because no matter who they think is in charge, it’s actually us”</p> <p>“Because since Jamie Oliver turned all those juvenile delinquents into chefs, everyone in the media has to be seen to be rattling the bucket”</p> <p>“Sometimes, good PR means being clever enough to change nothing”</p> <p>Cat to Charles: “I can’t just tell my client bollocks”</p> <p>Charles to Cat: “But that’s your job”</p> <p>Charles to Joane: “Your ascendancy is what I live for”</p> <p>Charles to Martin on taking on a neo-Nazi as a client: “That’s the ultimate PR challenge!”</p> <p>Martin to Charles: “You cannot spin the Final Solution. You cannot spin the Holocaust!”</p> <p>Charles to Martin: “Think of the money. The money’s going to be bloody outrageous”</p>
Symbols	<p>The Prentiss-McCabe agency regularly hold brainstorming sessions in what they call the Round Room. In these sessions, the team dream up different strategies, ideas, names and plans for their clients. The room and the process itself are quite symbolic, in that it creates an environment where everyone’s ideas are heard, and even the most outlandish ones can sometimes get adopted and put into play.</p> <p>The tabloid newspaper also seems to be a strong symbolic element of the series, and is featured in most (if not all of the episodes). The tabloid (or red tops as they are referred to in the UK) industry is particularly large and zealous in the UK, and the integration of images of the newspapers in the series suggest that the PR efforts of the agency are often done in a bid to influence the coverage of those tabloids. Tabloids symbolise not only the speed and size of the influence they’re coverage carries, but it also suggests how superficial and easily manipulated the information that appears in those papers can be- particularly when one sees the inner workings of the Prentiss-McCabe agency.</p>

<p>Historical/cultural/political context of film:</p>	<p>The political context of this series is particularly noteworthy, as it comes under the time when Tony Blair was in Government, and lead under a political and strategic ideology known as “New Labour”.</p> <p>This is alluded to at different times during the series, for example when Prentiss-McCabe takes on two separate clients who are both hoping to become the Bishop of London (a highly sought-after position within the Church). The agency undergoes different tactics to get the respective clients popular with the public, and at one time, Charles remarks “New Labour, New Jesus”.</p> <p>There are some far wider ranging political and historical elements to the context of this series, particularly being set in that time of the New Labour movement. During the discussion chapter of this thesis, more attention will be given to the rise of the modern day spin-doctor (who was the communications advisor to Tony Blair).</p>
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Figure 3: Screenshot of Charles Prentiss and Martin McCabe



Semiotic analysis of image

- Two Caucasian males, one middle aged and one slightly older
- A media scrum is formed around the two men
- Multiple cameras and microphones are being thrust in the men's faces
- Both men appear slightly pleased or even bemused
- Both are dressed well, with well made/tailored suits and ties

Symbolic elements

- Cameras and microphones= information= commodity= competition
- Suits= business= profession= money= power + influence
- Loud ties= Slightly ostentatious, attention grabbing

There are several inferences that can be made from this image. Firstly, the two men are obviously in positions of power as the media converges on them, presumably trying to get a comment or reaction from one or both of the men. Both men are white males, so convey a sense of superiority and prestige. The men look like they are the information holders, and both look ready to face the media pack. Neither looks as frantic as one would imagine a pack of people with cameras and light bulbs surrounding an individual would make them feel. This indicates the two men are used to having this situation, perhaps they court the press on a regular basis. Their nicely made suits and well-groomed appearances suggest money is abundant for the two men, one might assume they are either successful in business or have inherited money and what that lifestyle affords. In the wider context, this could suggest that the public relations men are in the service of big business (a theme that explicitly arose in *Thank You for Smoking*).

Charles Prentiss is the co-owner of the public relations agency Prentiss McCabe. The agency and its business is the focus of the BBC television series *Absolute Power*. The series can be aptly described as satire, in that it exposes the manipulative, unethical, and possibly even illegal practices that go on in a cosmopolitan public relations agency.

Prentiss is a 50-60 year old male, who is a large man in both physical appearance (he towers over his colleagues and clients) and in personality. He has the appearance of a rather stuffy middle aged Londoner, and is extremely well-dressed. Prentiss is consistently depicted wearing fancy three-piece suits, loud and colourful ties, and is always well-groomed. He walks proudly, never rushing, and has the kind of personality that commands attention when he saunters into a room. His voice is very English and posh, conveying a good upbringing and possibly an expensive education.

Psychologically, Prentiss has a very quick wit, and an often-scathing sense of humour. He is very smart, perceptive, and good at reading peoples' behaviour. He is a master of manipulation, and will often do so in such a manner that those being manipulated don't even realise what has happened. Prentiss possesses high self-esteem, and thinks very highly of himself and his public relations prowess. He is simultaneously bossy and cheerful to those he encounters. Nicknames that Prentiss is given by other characters include "The Dark Prince" and "Diabolus". These nicknames are particularly revealing about the nature of the character, as the Dark Prince alludes to supernatural and evil connotations such as Dracula and even the devil. Diabolus is often understood as a reference to the devil, or the work and worship of Satan. If one takes into account that public relations is often referred to as the Dark Arts, these two nicknames can be understood in the context of a professional practice that perhaps leaves much to be desired with regards to ethics and good behaviour.

Prentiss's attitude towards life seems to be that any situation can be spun, and that furthermore, he himself possesses the very abilities that are need to do this. On the alternative side however, Prentiss doesn't admit easily to making mistakes, and has an underlying motivation that he can never lose (presumably at anything). Some of the aspects of the character that are hidden at first, are things like Prentiss blaming others for his mistakes rather than taking responsibility for his own actions, his penchant for acting as though real problems do not affect him (for example when a person commits suicide because of a dodgy public relations campaign Prentiss orchestrates).

However, towards the end of the first season, Prentiss seems to feel some degree of remorse when his actions lead to the death of someone who thinks they have the fictional disease Prentiss McCabe creates, and when the story is made public and the spotlight is on the agency's malpractice, he does seem to be genuinely repentant. Moments later though, the audience sees that this moment of clarity only gives way to Prentiss McCabe changing their company image to tie in with the current tide of support for corporate social responsibility and charity work.

Absolute Power differs from the other texts being analysed for this thesis, as it is the only one in the sample which is based on a public relations agency and all its dealings, as opposed to the other texts, which generally feature a sole public relations practitioner (i.e. *Thank You for Smoking*, *Hancock*) or the public relations department of a wider organisation (i.e. *In the Loop*). This fact allows the researcher to have a more in-depth examination of the day-to-day practices that go on in the profession, and furthermore, adds to the overall representation of the public relations characters being depicted on screen.

Prentiss is very professional when it comes to the day-to-day public relations work, for example after an impromptu press conference, he tells the large crowd of gathered journalists that they will receive transcripts of the statements 'as usual'. This strongly suggests that in his dealings with the media, Prentiss is consistent and upfront with the information journalists require to do their jobs (of course, the extent to which that information is accurate and true is debatable, but the gesture is present nonetheless).

Another element of professional practice depicted in the series is the close relations public relations practitioners have with journalists and media personalities. At multiple times during the first season (which is the season that was analysed), Charles is seen at fancy restaurants, more often than not meeting with an editor or senior journalist about a potential story angle. Charles also takes potential clients out to lunch, but the meetings with media people are far more frequent. This public relations activity is one that is performed in real life, as media relations are often a key component of practitioners' jobs.

Having strong media contacts is often seen as a sign of one's success in public relations, so the fact that Charles Prentiss has such regular and high profile meetings with media people suggests that he is among the top practitioners in his trade. However, this practice in the program is somewhat ironic, as public relations students at university are often told that the image of wining and dining journalists and clients is a thing of the past for public relations, and tutors often go to lengths to debunk such myths. It is noteworthy that this practice is strongly reinforced in *Absolute Power*.

4.5 Hancock

This final analysis section will examine the popular motion picture *Hancock*, which differs from the other texts as the role of public relations is not the central theme of the movie, but is nevertheless explicitly stated and integrated into the storyline. It also differs from the other texts as the public relations character is of a far higher ethical standard than the other characters under study.

Table 5: *Hancock* (Text and character analysis)

Film/Sign	<p>Hancock</p> <p>Genre: Action/comedy</p> <p>Year of release: 2008</p> <p>Director: Peter Berg</p>
Setting	<p>The setting of the film is modern day Los Angeles, which is often seen as the entertainment and popular culture hub of the world (due to the film industry, the Hollywood sign, and the resulting high concentration of actors and singers). In a more implicit sense, the film is set in a time where expectations of business are changing and people want to see business doing good, not just making profit. This is presumably how the All Heart idea that Ray pushes is relevant.</p>
Plot	<p>A hard-living superhero who has fallen out of favor with the public enters into a questionable relationship with the wife of the public relations professional who's trying to repair his image (IMDB, 2011).</p> <p>Hancock is a superhero with a bad attitude, and a drinking problem, who wreaks havoc on Los Angeles while trying to protect its citizens.</p>

	<p>Hancock saves Ray's life one day, and Ray, who is a public relations consultant, is determined to swing public opinion in favour of the burly and unlikely hero. The film is based on Hancock's struggle to help people and to act on a whim, backed by his superhuman abilities.</p>
<p>Pivotal moments in the plot</p>	<p>Prior to meeting Hancock, Ray is seen doing a pitch to a group of corporate executives, trying to sell them his idea of All Heart (a charitable giving program). The executives laugh him off as a crack-pot and he leaves, disheartened. This is a pivotal moment as the audience is introduced to Ray for the first time, and he is depicted as an idealistic, and naïve publicist.</p> <p>Hancock saves Ray from being hit by a train, and when the angry crowd starts to shout at Hancock, Ray steps in and thanks Hancock for saving him. This is a pivotal moment because Ray sees that while Hancock is doing a good thing by saving people in need, his public image leaves much to be desired.</p> <p>Ray offers Hancock some public relations advice, and tells him he could help improve the disgraced superhero's image. Later in the film, Hancock accepts, and the city starts to realise how much they need the superhero's help.</p>
<p>PR Characters</p>	<p>Ray Embrey is the main character for analysis. Ray is a public relations/publicist, who is trying to pitch his idea for a business called All Heart, which encourages big business to do good for the world rather than just making money from it. Ray differs to the other characters analysed for this study, as he is the only practitioner who is trying to raise awareness and support for a cause that would benefit mankind. This image is contrary to the common stereotype of public relations people (that they will do anything for money, publicity and power), and therefore Ray's character becomes somewhat comedic. Ray is genuinely interested in making the world a better place, however this comes across as someone who doesn't understand his job, and therefore Ray often appears naive to the audience.</p>
<p>Costume, makeup and accessories</p>	<p>Ray is dressed quite well, in a tidy business suit and tie. He is clean shaven and his hair is tidy. He doesn't use any significant accessories, apart from a cell-phone and his slides during his pitch/presentation to the potential clients.</p>

Interaction with other characters	<p>Ray's interaction with the executives shows that while his heart is in the right place, he misunderstands how traditional business works (i.e. making profit is all that matters). His personal and professional values are contradictory to the executives' values, and it is hard to connect with his audience. Due to that lack of connection and shared values, Ray is unable to 'sell' his pitch and ideas to the group of executives.</p> <p>In his interaction with his family, Ray is a family man who obviously loves his wife and son.</p> <p>When interacting with Hancock, Ray understands that he has to tread lightly, and realises that Hancock has rarely had someone in his corner. So while Ray has good insight into people, and uses his intuition, he doesn't necessarily manipulate others, which sets him apart from the other public relations characters analysed for this research.</p>
Key Dialogue	<p>Ray trying to pitch All Heart idea to corporate executives:</p> <p>Ray: We at Embrey Publicity would like to offer you the All Heart symbol. Now you would be among a very select group of corporate giants to bear this logo on your product. And what this would say to the public is that your company, Pharmatopsis, had made a radical contribution to helping our world. And here is all you'd have to do to qualify: Your new TB drug, micadin, we would like you to give that product away, for free.</p> <p>Businessman: Did you say free?</p> <p>Ray: I did — only to those who really need it. Only to those who without it would otherwise die.</p> <p>Businessman: Alright. As a concept "free" is kind of up there with lethal side effects—</p> <p>Businessman 2: Mandatory product recall.</p> <p>Businessman: Get indicted, going to jail —</p> <p>Businessman 2: Get out, work at IHOP the rest of your career—</p> <p>Ray: Understandable reactions — a radical concept — but it is the brand that represents a fairer and better world. The brand that everyone is talking about. ...Anyway — we can save the world. Someone's just got to go first. What do you say</p> <p>CEO: Are you a crackpot?</p>

	<p>Ray talking to Hancock after Hancock saves his life:</p> <p>“I’d like to return the favour. Do you know what I do for a living? I’m in public relations; do you know what that is? Of course you do. We’re image consultants, we change the way people see products, companies, people”</p> <p>“It can’t feel good that people...hate you”</p> <p>Ray trying to convince Hancock to accept his image makeover</p> <p>Ray: Stop pretending that you do not care! You have a calling. You're a hero, Hancock. You're going to be miserable the rest of your life until you accept that. Trust me. Trust this plan, this process — you're staying here. When they call, a hero is what we're going to give them.</p>
Symbols	<p>Ray’s All Heart logo is the strongest symbol in the film with regards to his character and the representation of the public relations profession. The All Heart logo is the idea that big corporations should do good as well as make money, and Ray is trying to get corporations like the large pharmaceuticals to sign up and give away their new tuberculosis drug for free. The logo symbolises a shifting commerce and societal paradigm, not only in the film, but in real life too. Increasingly, businesses and corporations are realising that they need to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. This trend is happening alongside in a shift in purchasing power (younger professionals with high expendable income, but more social and environmental consciousness than previous generations), where tools like the internet and social media mean that when businesses do wrong, the world quickly knows about it.</p>
Historical/cultural/political context of film:	<p>The cultural context the film takes place within is arguably the media and celebrity obsessed environment that is often associated with Los Angeles (and more specifically, Hollywood). The use of a public relations company by a prominent public figure (such as Hancock), is in fact a social practice often used off-screen too. Well known people like Chris Brown and Paris Hilton have been known to engage public relations advice when they’ve each had their respective negative circumstances exposed through the news and entertainment media. This theme is a recurring one in entertainment media, whereby the hero falls into disgrace, and only later in the text are they resurrected in the court of public opinion.</p>

	<p>This entertainment theme also crosses over into real life celebrity culture, where scandal can often catapult the celebrity into a more vulnerable and fallible state.</p> <p>As mentioned in the Symbols section of this analysis chart, there are shifting social and business paradigms, which means more companies are getting pressured to adopt social responsible practices.</p>
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Figure 4: Screenshot of Ray Embrey



Semiotic analysis of image

- 30-40 year old Pakeha male
- Business suit and tie, blue shirt slightly unbuttoned
- Steam and cars in background indicate car accident or similar
- Facial expressions suggest stress, frustration, thinking, pursed lips indicate character is trying not to say something
- Hands on hips indicate character is slightly annoyed or making a stance

Symbolic elements

- Smoke=danger/pressure
- Hands on hips=fed up/frustrated=Considering courses of action
- Suit= business= professional
- Blue business shirt= Business like, reliable
- Unbuttoned shirt= non-traditional or more casual

Several inferences can be made from this image. Firstly, the character seems frustrated, perhaps at a lack of control over the situation he is seeing unfold. Unlike the other public relations characters in this analysis, Ray doesn't automatically control the people around him, so in a situation like this, he is not invincible by any means. In nonverbal communication theory, placing one's hands on the hips is an effort to look bigger, and therefore hold more power. However, Ray's shoulders are slightly hunched, and therefore he does not seem to have gained control of the situation yet. He looks like a tired professional worker, perhaps with a lot on his mind (as he looks slightly far away in his eyes). The background of the photo suggests the character is at a car accident scene, or has just witness (or been involved in) something quite out of the ordinary.

Ray Embrey is the idealistic and perhaps naïve publicist from the film *Hancock*. The audience is first introduced to Ray as he pitches his charitable giving concept "All Heart" to a group of cynical executives at a large LA-based pharmaceutical firm. Ray tries to convince the executives to give away their new TB vaccine for free, an idea which is quickly rejected as being up there with a major corporate crisis like a product recall or bankruptcy. Soon after leaving the meeting, a slightly disheartened Ray is saved from being crushed by a train by the superhero Hancock. When a gathering crowd starts to criticise Hancock for destroying the train, Ray steps in and thanks Hancock for saving his life. Later, Ray offers Hancock some public relations-image advice, and says he can make the city of Los Angeles appreciate Hancock, rather than hating him for his often wayward behaviour.

Most significantly is the fact that Ray is highly ethical and understands that corporations and big business at large has a responsibility to do good in the communities in which they operate. Whether that is the people or the environment, Ray's character personifies the growing sentiment off-screen, that businesses must do their part and act in a socially and environmentally responsible manner in order to continue to operate with the consent of the public.

Ray is positive, optimistic, ethical, naïve and idealistic. He is a family man, and defends Hancock to his beautiful wife (who turns out to be a superhero herself). One of Ray's key frustrations seems to be that other people don't understand or support his vision for a socially responsible business network. His appearance is clean, tidy and well-groomed, wearing a business suit when the audience first sees him. Ray is relatively young, under 35 years old and perhaps this has something to do with his boundless enthusiasm and naivety about the business world. He appears to be middle-class, and his sheltered views about public relations and corporations could reflect a middle-class expectation of big business, for example that large companies have a responsibility towards society.

At one point, Ray tries to discourage his young son from reacting to the school bully. He tries to teach his son a lesson in 'conflict resolution', a term that implies a process of resolving a grievance between two parties or more. Ray describes himself as a public relations person, and operates business called Embrey Publicity. It seems that the American use of the job title publicist is perhaps more commonly used than public relations. This is reflected in the popular culture representations of public relations as well (refer to the media diary for examples of publicists in the US).

Another public relations activity Ray carries out during the film, is to pitch for business, as he tries to get businesses to buy into his All Heart idea. One can safely assume that Ray's primary business is trying to use public relations to bring about positive changes in the world, and at the end of the film when Hancock places an All Heart logo on the moon, essentially taking Ray's vision to the world, the audience is left with the sense that a better future could well be possible.

4.6 Comparing and contrasting the texts

After closely analysing each of the four texts, and giving the main public relations character in each film or series a thorough commentary, applying elements of semiotic, content and thematic analysis, it is now pertinent to combine the findings from the separate texts and try to determine if there are any consistent or recurring or contrasting themes across the sampled entertainment media examples. It is certainly noteworthy to acknowledge the different genres that the chosen texts represent. Watson (2003) points out that:

More than ever before, narratives interact and overlap, but for convenience they continue to be classified under the term genre. The word originates from the French, meaning a style, a form...Genres share common characteristics and are governed by codes that regulate content and style (Watson, 2003, p. 158).

For example *Thank You for Smoking* and *In The Loop* both fall under the 'satire' genre. Krutnik and Neale (1990) explain that satire draws and highlights social conventions, and say suggest that satire is similar to parody, as it uses the norms as the basis by which it can measure deviations. However, these authors argue that satire works to mock and attack more insistently than parody does. Using that criteria, the television program *Absolute Power* could also arguably fall under the satire genre, as it shines a light on the high-pace and often highly unethical practices of a contemporary London public relations agency. Furthermore, *Absolute Power* also sheds light on the interesting relationship between public relations and the different sectors of society (ranging from politics, to entertainment, sports, and even religion). In this context, *Absolute Power* goes to great lengths to illustrate the influence and behind-the-scenes nature of public relations, and is particularly noteworthy when viewed in the historical, political and social context of the British Government over the past ten years (for example the rise of New Labour ideology and the use of spin in mainstream media and politics). Similarly, *Thank You for Smoking* sheds light on the significant influence and reach of lobbyists in the United States, an issue which is often covered in news media as well as this entertainment media example. The film *Hancock* is largely an action film, but the role of Ray Embrey as the public relations advisor to the character Hancock is noteworthy, as the troubled super hero undergoes a significant image management process to get the public onside.

In the Loop is a political comedy, with elements of satire, but is largely based on true events, in the lead up to the invasion of Iraq. This text is interesting because it focuses on the inner-workings (and often communication breakdowns) in a government department, and also demonstrates some of the difficulties regarding international relations.

It should be noted that there are several similarities across the texts that need acknowledgement before the more intricate commonalities and differences are explored. Following from Lee's work (2001), who carried out a similar study into the movie depictions of public relations characters working in public administration, several common attributes across the four sample texts are apparent. Firstly, all four of the main public relations characters under scrutiny are male, Pakeha, English speaking, and come from either the United Kingdom or the United States of America. This factor is dictated by the text selection, for example had the series or films *Sex in the City* been included in this study, the public relations character is a well-dressed, well-paid, Pakeha female. However, the selection criteria required that the public relations character needed to be an explicit and central element of the text, and therefore *Sex in the City* was excluded from the selection.

In a similar vein, the fact that each of the selected texts is from an English speaking country (Britain and the United States), means that foreign language films were not included in the sample. Future studies of this nature could include depictions of public relations characters in films from more diverse countries (such as China, India, or European nations). In this vein, it is also noteworthy to see that the representations of public relations characters varied between the UK texts and the US texts. This is common in entertainment media, as British characters are often depicted as more realistic, less glossy, and usually less physically attractive and groomed. This distinction was also noticeable in the popular culture diary, as the US use of the term public relations is heavily associated with celebrity, entertainment and spokespeople. In the UK, the role seems to be more centred on power, politics, and media relations. For a clear difference in the cultural representations of public relations characters, just look at the character Malcolm Tucker from *In the Loop*, in comparison to Nick Naylor from *Thank You for Smoking* (see 4.2 and 4.3).

As Lee (2001) points out, the fact that males are the dominant gender when public relations are portrayed in entertainment films is out of step with the reality of the profession, where the industry is increasingly female-dominated. It will be interesting to see if the role of the public relations practitioner on film becomes increasingly played by women in the future, as popular culture representations of the profession catch up to the reality of the off-screen profession. Of course, one must keep in mind that women being cast in leading film roles is still a relatively recent shift in societal thinking, and even today, the number of movies with only female leads is minimal. Future research into this area would be well-placed to examine the slew of reality television series based on public relations characters, as many of these focus on female practitioners (usually in the fashion and entertainment industries, which is revealing in itself about the roles women play in public relations).

All but one of the characters (the public relations character Malcolm in the film *In the Loop* works for the British Government) works in the private sector. In a similar vein to Lee (2001), all four of the central PR characters in the texts have different titles for their jobs (ranging from publicist in *Hancock*, to Communications Director in *In the Loop*, lobbyist/chief spokesperson in *Thank You for Smoking*, to Public Relations consultant in *Absolute Power*). For a better understanding and insight into the role of public relations in politics, the personal communication with Alistair Campbell has been included as an appendix in this work, and sheds light on the importance of a government communicating with the media and the public (see Appendix E).

One of the recurring similarities in the texts that are noteworthy is the use of intertextuality. For example, in *Absolute Power*, references are made to programs such as *Big Brother* (the world-wide reality television phenomenon), and Jamie (one of the young male public relations people at the agency) is shown reading *PR Week*, which is a popular public relations publication. There is also references to the *Top of the Pops*, and *American Idol* when the agency is trying to make a religious competition newsworthy. This use of 'real life' media texts is interesting as it grounds the entertainment media texts within the realistic context from which they are set. Furthermore, intertextuality is said to be a characteristic element of postmodern society, and ties in with the concept of the fragmented audience.

Text producers increasingly point to other texts as a means of contextualising and supporting the present manifestation, and this also shows the interconnected nature of entertainment and information saturation.

There also seems to be a trend across the texts that differences between male and female characters and young and old characters are intensified. For example, in the television series *Absolute Power*, Alison (one of the central characters) is often delegated the tasks that none of the male practitioners want, such as reading through the memoir manuscript of an ex-Big Brother contestant, or going to fetch beer for a client during a meeting. Similarly, in the film *Thank You for Smoking*, the journalist character Heather is overly sexualised, and ultimately uses her looks and feminine charm to entrap the public relations character Nick Naylor, later writing a damning expose on his unethical practices as a lobbyist for the tobacco industry and his associates from the alcohol and firearms industries (the self-proclaimed Merchants of Death). There is also a noticeable tension set up between the younger generation of practitioners and the characters who have presumably been in the public relations business much longer. This is particularly noticeable in *Absolute Power*, perhaps because this text focuses on a public relations agency rather than individual practitioners, such as *Thank You for Smoking* or *Hancock*. Of note, are the different uses of the internet for public relations purposes, such as tracking the rumour mill or doing research using search engines. In *Absolute Power*, it is always the younger practitioners who are adept at these skills, whereas the older characters seem to be less engaged with Web 2.0 and its potential for communication. Research carried out in New Zealand (Bhargava, 2010) found that this trend is accurate in real life, with older public relations practitioners reporting that the Internet is a tool for younger practitioners, and not the older ones. Interestingly, Bhargava (2010) also found that older practitioners view younger practitioners as less experienced when it comes to strategic know-how. This research highlights just two of the trends in contemporary public relations practice.

Perhaps the most significant is the representation of morals in each of the texts sampled. In all the texts except *Hancock*, the public relations characters have decidedly loose morals, and this is often extended to the various media personalities the public relations characters come across.

For example, in the film *In the Loop*, Malcolm is seen threatening a journalist that he will expose an extramarital affair if the reporter doesn't "spike" (drop) a story that would put the British government in an awkward position. The phone conversation ends with the journalist agreeing to drop the story, which suggests the loose morals are not necessarily confined to the public relations profession.

In addition to the moral predicaments the various public relations characters experience in the texts, there also seems to be a parallel narrative in some of the texts (notably *Thank You for Smoking* and *Absolute Power*), where one of the central characters goes through a pseudo-moral development for a portion of the text. This is highly significant, as it suggests that while loose morals may be characteristic of the public relations profession, there is also room for improvement, and ultimately, the moral standards of the profession are decided by the individuals who work in the industry. In the case of *Thank You for Smoking*, Nick's son is used to track the lobbyist's moral development, which is quite explicit throughout the film. The relationship between father and son is a focal point of the film, and while it seems Nick is teaching the son about 'how to talk', and how to win arguments (and by extension teaching him about the public relations industry), the audience sees that in fact, it is the son who is teaching the father, by questioning him about his work and personal ethics. At the film's end, Nick is seen to leave the tobacco industry, and instead, the audience sees him start up his own agency (Naylor Strategic Relations), and his first clients are from the mobile phone industry. Ironically, Nick is telling the client that no-one has yet conclusively proven a link between cell phone use and brain cancer, and therefore it can be argued that there is no such link. As a result, one might question the extent to which Nick has really changed his ethics for the better, as it seems he has left one dangerous industry for another.

Similarly, in *Absolute Power*, the final episode sees the public relations agency Prentiss-McCabe taking on a comedian client who has publicly assaulted his heavily-pregnant partner. In order to save the comedian's public image, the agency creates a disease which would explain the client's terrible behaviour. As a result of going public with the made-up disease, people start claiming they also have the ailment, which at first is seen within the agency as a public relations coup.

However, when the media reports that one person has committed suicide because they think they have the disease, some of the practitioners at Prentiss-McCabe start to express concerns about the lengths to which they have gone to protect their client. Ultimately, the agency is exposed for making up the disease, and the central character Charles Prentiss has to make an embarrassing public apology. In the final moments of the episode, he expresses his regret to his business partner Martin McCabe, and says he wants to get into charitable work, which leads the audience to think that he does in fact have a conscience. Seconds later however, Charles gives a cheeky grin which signals to the audience that he is only saying what he knows everyone wants to hear, and that of course he isn't sorry for his actions.

The character Ray in *Hancock* is markedly different to the other three characters studied for this research, largely in his ethical and well-intentioned professional manner. This is perhaps one of the most significant differences across the four characters, and the representation of public relations in *Hancock* challenges the traditional and stereotypical view of the profession.

Media relations are also a central theme in each of the four texts analysed, which is not surprising seeing as a key element of public relations is communicating with the media in order to reach the public and by extension influence public opinion. The relationship with the media is illustrated in various forms in the different texts, ranging from close working relationships in *Absolute Power*, to threats, coercion and hiding stories in *In the Loop*, to personal relationships in *Thank You for Smoking*, and of course using the media to change someone's reputation, as seen in *Hancock*. Interestingly, wining and dining journalists and editors seems to be a key trend in the texts, which is somewhat indicative of the off-screen profession as well, as many practitioners foster close relationships with key media personalities in order to get their clients' views represented.

4.7 Data: Focus group findings

As mentioned in the previous section, for the second stage of this research, a series of focus groups were held in order to gain first-hand, qualitative insight into how audiences respond to public relations characters in modern entertainment media texts. The participants were random and had responded to a recruitment flyer that was posted in various areas of the Auckland central business district. All of the participants contacted the researcher via email or telephone and expressed their willingness to take part in the focus group. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Prior to watching short excerpts from the four texts, participants were asked to answer a series of questions about their views and prior knowledge of public relations (see Appendix for full list of questions). This was done to establish a base-line for measurement, and to track any changes in opinion or interpretation after viewing the clips and being exposed to the public relations characters in the films and program.

Asking participants to respond to the same questions before and after watching the film/programs makes gauging any changes in perception a more manageable task. In this case, the 13 focus group participants gave a variety of answers, with the overwhelming majority changing the words they used to describe public relations people after viewing the four clips. Interestingly, only 4 out of 13 people left their second set of answers the same as before viewing. It should be noted that one participant had next to no knowledge of the public relations profession and therefore did not complete the first set of answers to this question, so therefore there was only 12 sets of answers for the pre-viewing question, and then 13 sets of responses to the post-viewing question.

Table 6: Pre and post viewing answers

Question: If you had to sum up public relations people in five words, what would they be?

Participant	1 st word	2 nd word	3 rd word	4 th word	5 th word
1 Pre Post	Confident Confident	Witty Stressful	Well-spoken Arrogant	Eager Smart	Outgoing Risk-taking
2 Pre Post	Knowledgeable Confident	Extrovert Quick thinkers	Confident Persuasive	Clever Knowledgeable	Courteous Clever
3 Pre Post	Persuasive	Confident	Educated	Fashionable	
4 Pre	Very busy people Same as before				
5 Pre Post	Young Manipulative	Opinionated Intelligent	Pushy Verbal	Upwardly mobile Arrogant	Profit-driven Driven
6 Pre Post	Charismatic Same as before				
7 Pre Post	Communicative Bossy	Organised Knowledgeable	Capable Assertive	Knowledgeable Demanding	Confident Talkative
8 Pre Post	Sneaky Charming (but not in a good way)	Unethical Confident (but not in a good way)	Fake Manipulative	The scum of the earth Insincerely sincere	Everything that is wrong with the world
9 Pre Post	Eloquent Same as before	Well-presented	Thoughtful	Pushy	Intelligent
10 Pre Post	Open-minded Open-minded	Problem solvers Controlling of the situation			
11 Pre Post	Manipulative Confident	Unethical Professional	Glamorous Friendly/charming	Organised Convincing (most of the time)	Professional Strategic
12 Pre Post	Can talk a lot of shit Same as before				
13 Pre Post	Mutual relationship between public and organisation Spokesman for an organisation				

Tellingly, for the participant who didn't give any answers for the pre-viewing question, after watching the four clips he gave the following words to describe public relations people:

Persuasive Confident Educated Fashionable

This is a highly significant response for two key reasons. Firstly, this participant can be viewed as a control response for this research. While other participants felt they knew enough about public relations to offer five descriptive words about it, this participant had no ideas to offer (allowing the investigation a 'blank slate' of sorts). However, after watching 5-10 minutes of four separate clips from recent entertainment media products, the participant later offered four words that he felt most aptly describe people who practice public relations. This suggests that the media, in this case, influenced how this individual views a profession and those that practice within it. Secondly, this response is significant because of the words the participant chose to use following the clips, which seem to fit rather consistently with the responses given by other participants who had offered answers before watching the clips. Looking back to the main data collection, 8 out of 13 participants used different words to describe public relations people after watching clips from films and programs that featured public relations characters.

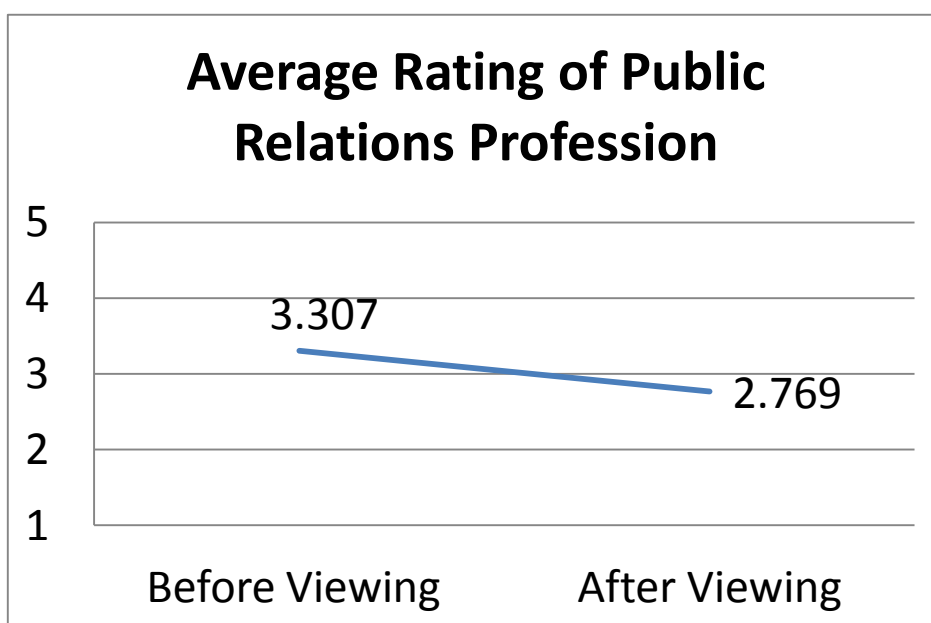
Several words were mentioned multiple times in these questionnaires, both before and after viewing. The most popularly used words to describe public relations people were to do with confidence (words like confident, outgoing, and well-spoken were used) and the intellect of practitioners (words such as smart, educated, knowledgeable, clever, and intelligent were used). These words place the participants' view of public relations people in a somewhat positive light, and suggest that to be successful in public relations, individuals need to display both confidence and intellect. One might contend that because public relations is largely about the relationships between people and organisations, that to be successful (or even to survive) in the industry, a public relations person must be confident enough to talk to new people and engage in conversation. Moreover, the range of words used to describe public relations people as intelligent suggests that there is a commonly held view that people working in the industry either have formal training or at least possess a degree of intelligence that is above average (and therefore worthy of mention in a description of the professions' practitioners).

In addition to the above-mentioned phrases which were largely positive, some participants were more critical in their judgement of public relations people, using words such as arrogant, demanding, bossy, pushy, unethical, manipulative and fake.

A few participants were more descriptive with their answers, often using small phrases or sentences to offer their view on public relations people. One young female participant offered before watching the clips that public relations people are “The scum of the earth” and “Everything that is wrong with the world” and then in brackets “apart from journalists”. A young male gave his only answer as “Can talk a lot of shit”, and repeated that sentiment after watching the clips also. Asking people to describe public relations practitioners in their own words is a useful research tool, which provides rich, meaningful, qualitative data for analysis. While a subsequent question posed to participants asked them to rate the profession on a scale of 1 to 5, reveals a clear indication of any changes in perception after watching the clips, the use of descriptive words and phrases from the participants themselves is perhaps more revealing about each individuals views and attitudes towards the profession (see Graph 1).

Participants were asked to rate the public relations profession on a scale of 1 to 5. By asking participants to rank or rate, in numerical form, this allows a clear indication of any shift in perception after watching the clips. Below is a graph that illustrates each participants’ response, before and after viewing the clips. A snap shot breakdown of the numbers is given underneath the graph.

Figure 5: Average rating of public relations profession, before and after viewing clips



The above chart (see Figure 5) demonstrates the overall change in the rating participants gave of the public relations profession before and after viewing a series of film and television excerpts featuring public relations characters. While the overall change in post viewing ratings is not statistically significant, the fact that it is a clear and cumulative drop in the rating indicates that the entertainment media clips resulted in a more negative view of the public relations profession (if only a short term, immediate effect). Only one of the participants changed their rating to a more positive view after watching the clips, and the other 8 participants negatively downgraded their rating after watching the clips. The average change in rating after viewing the clips was 0.538. The change in rating after viewing the media clips is perhaps one of the most revealing sets of data to emerge from this research, for a number of reasons that will be briefly discussed at this point, and will be expanded on in the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Secondly, the data is significant because not only did more people change their response after watching the clips than those who gave the same response (8 participants changed versus 5 who stayed the same), but those that changed their response gave a more negative rating for the public relations profession after seeing the various public relations characters portrayed in the four clips (7 participants out of 8 gave a more negative rating after watching the clips).

While the short length of the time between the pre viewing questions and the post viewing questions does mean that the research data is only a measure of the immediate (and presumably short term effect) effect of entertainment media on audiences, rather than the long term effect, it is nevertheless a significant and revealing set of data, as it proves that in this small scale research setting, entertainment media has an immediate and measurable effect on the audiences who were exposed to it. Furthermore, the influence of the media on these participants was so significant that it lead to a noticeable downgrade in the way that the participants judged the public relations profession. By extension, one might question the extent to which fictional portrayals in entertainment media over a longer period of time might also influence (and negatively effect) the audiences exposed to them.

However, with regards to the significant short-term effect that media can have on peoples' attitudes and behaviour, DeFleur and Lowery (1995) point to seminal research into media effects, a study called "Short-Term Effects of Televised Aggression on Children's Aggressive Behavior" (Baron & Liberty, as cited in DeFleur & Lowery, 1995, p. 324). This study found that when children witnessed aggressive episodes on television, some of the young participants were increasingly willing to act as the aggressor towards other children immediately after watching the violent material. Although Baron and Liberty's study is investigating the short-term effects on behaviour, it is nevertheless significant to the present findings, which also demonstrate a noticeable and immediate change in participants responses after watching a series of film and television clips.

However, DeFleur and Lowery (1995) also point to an important factor and criticism of laboratory type studies (similar to Baron & Liberty's research and also similar to the focus groups conducted for this thesis). This is an interesting critique (and also a paradox) in the academic arena, in that laboratory experiments are said to be one of the most efficient means of gathering and obtaining information, but at the same time, critics charge that the artificial situation that laboratory experiments create means that any data that emerges cannot be generalised or be seen as representative of everyday life. While this is of course valid criticism, the use of controlled research environments like laboratory experiments is still highly useful as it allows the researcher to examine cause and effect relationships far more effectively (and even successfully) than in an un-controlled and hard to measure situation.

Some of the words participants used to describe the four central public relations characters are listed below, and some of the commonly repeated terms or words will be discussed in further detail after the four characters are examined. Terms and themes from the audio transcripts have also been integrated into the list, in order to give a detailed view of the sentiment of the focus group participants. One of the interesting elements of conducting focus group research is that the ideas mentioned are often compounded, for example if one participant uses a certain word (like arrogant), often the participants who comment after the initial participant will refer back to that (saying "like she said...').

This is noteworthy because it creates a way to track comments and sentiment that is commonly used, and furthermore, the words and terms that are used multiple times in the focus groups are perhaps most crucial for examination, as these are the common themes that offer significant information about the views of the participants.

After reading through the list of descriptive terms and themes, one might be able to build up a general image of how the participants viewed each character featured in the film and program clips. These terms and themes that emerged during the focus groups will be discussed in relation to the thematic analysis of the films (the first part of the research project) during the findings and conclusion sectors of this thesis, in order to provide an additional layer of meaning and understanding of the representation and interpretation of public relations characters in recently made entertainment media films and television programs.

Table 7: Participants' descriptions of characters

Character	Ray Embrey	Malcolm Tucker	Charles Prentiss	Nick Naylor
Text	Hancock	In the Loop	Absolute Power	Thank You for Smoking
Descriptive words and terms used by audience	Sad puppy dog Fighting a losing battle Does his best Modest Not as confident as other PR characters Nice person/Nice guy Likeable His cause makes him more likeable Making change	Controlling communication Keeping people in check Behind the scenes Manages others Changes facts Abrupt Confidence Unpleasant Angry Swearing	Confident Gloating Old fashioned Bends the truth Brash Arrogant Well-presented Professional English gentleman Commanding In-control Pompous	Twists logic and words Doing job well Uses insincere sincerity Presentation Confidence/Confident Seems like a lawyer/talks like a lawyer in a courtroom Talks out of his ass

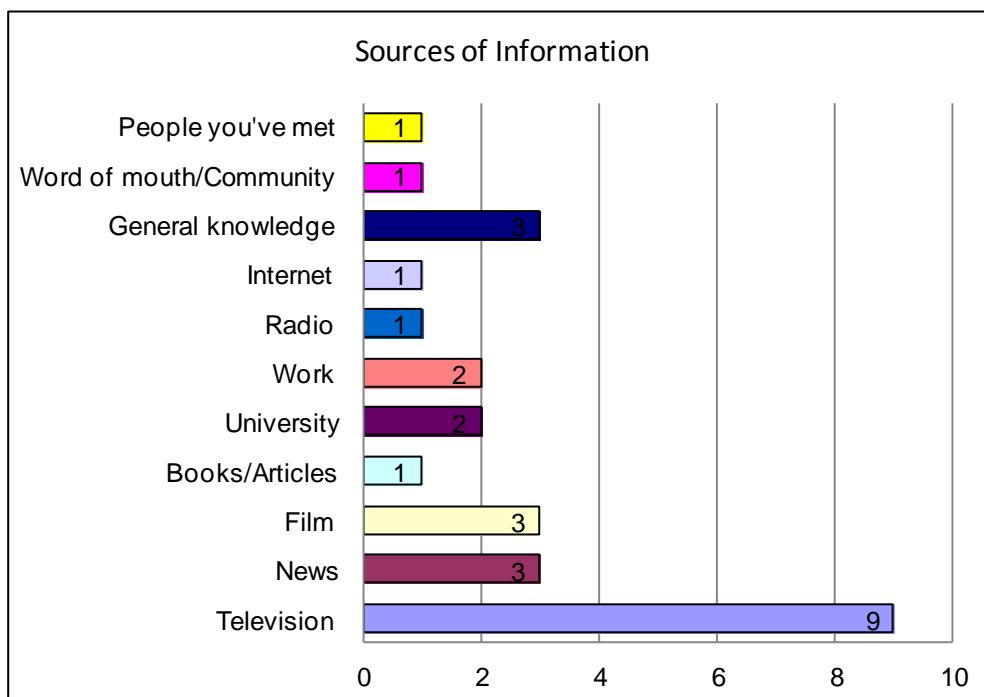
	Polar opposite to other PR characters Idealistic/Idealist Naïve Not as slick as other characters More genuine Trying hard Less/not as confident Not as good at his job Makes his idea sound worthwhile but wasn't effective in conveying it to executives Polar opposite from other characters Not talking crap like the other guys More moral than the other characters Has the same confidence, but cause/identity makes him more likeable	Uses phone conversations not face-to-face Damage control Not friendly Didn't look like he was in PR/Didn't seem to fit the PR role Been in his job too long Looks like a regular guy Not passionate Busy Trying to fix problems Chaotic and thrives in chaotic environment Tough Manages image More presence Older than other PR characters Film is trying to be more realistic	Multiple personalities Smug Not a paper-pusher/not sitting at desk Fits expectations of a PR person Doesn't fit expectations of a PR person Witty Knows what he's talking about Denies responsibility Not genuine Friendly Wouldn't trust him Changed personality depending on situation (i.e. with Maitre'd and editor)	Doesn't care what other people think about what he says Cocky – "I can say anything I want and get away with it" Cool Calm Collected Controlled the situation Slick Has presence Makes you believe him Able to get people on-side Not realistic or credible Arrogant Manipulative Persuasive Makes information up on the spot Well-dressed but not too well-dressed Gorgeous/Easy on the eye Up with the play "Typical American" Clever
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	Doesn't know his public as well as the other characters therefore he is less persuasive	Political setting of film means characters are less flashy and materialistic than other characters working in brand/business settings		"Hollywood" - exaggerated person Can fool people into thinking he's genuine Seems to have a problem with ethics (i.e. working for a tobacco company) Fully represented the tobacco company
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4.8 Sources of information about public relations and practitioners

As a means of gauging where participants got their prior information about public relations and the people that practice it, they were asked to indicate if they recall the source of their information, for example from news, film, books and so on. This method was used to gain a clearer understanding of the places and mediums people receive their information and knowledge about the public relations profession from.

Figure 6: Sources of information for participants



It should be noted that the total number of categories mentioned (27) is far greater than the amount of participants (13). This apparent discrepancy is due to the fact that participants were asked to list any of the sources of information that have informed their view of public relations, and therefore some most participants offered more than one source of information. However, the pie chart is still highly revealing as it locates one predominant source of information and is therefore worthy of further attention and analysis.

From the bar chart above, it is clear that multiple participants got their information from the television (9 participants mentioned this as a source of information). The news, films, and general knowledge were also cited as common sources of information (each category received 3 mentions). While television is a broad category, and could encapsulate many different types of programming (such as documentary, films, regular programs, news, adverts and so on), the data is nevertheless significant as it offers an obvious indication of where the majority of participants have received information about the public relations profession from. One might also extend this data set and the above pie chart to make a reasonable assumption (but nevertheless only an assumption), that television is a central source of information and learning across the board, not just a source of information about the public relations profession. This tentative logic is also endorsed by media theory, such as Gerbner et al., (1994) who surmise about televisions role in socialising and informing audiences;

Transcending historic barriers of literacy and mobility, television has become the primary common source of socialization and everyday information (mostly in the form of entertainment) of otherwise heterogeneous populations (Gerbner et al., 1994, p. 18).

Even if one considers that in 2012 and beyond, the internet is quickly becoming a significant source of information in its own right, television's role in shaping audiences knowledge and perceptions is nevertheless still heralded as a primary source of information for society. While that statement can be made tentatively, as this research did not delve into the source of more general information and knowledge the focus group participants possess, it is a logical progression of thought, particularly when viewed in the social and historical context of an increasing mediated and information-saturated society.

In a lucid attempt to locate the significance of television and its effects on audiences, Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1994) explain;

Television is the source of the most broadly shared images and messages in history. It is the mainstream of the common symbolic environment into which our children are born and in which we all live out our lives. Its mass ritual shows no signs of weakening and its consequences are increasingly felt around the globe (Gerbner et al., 1994, p. 17).

Locating the importance of television within the realms of shared symbols and meaning is a crucial step in understanding the power of the mass media on contemporary audiences, and by extension societal norms and practices.

Participants were asked to indicate if they have or haven't previously met anyone working in the public relations field. The majority of participants had met someone who works in public relations. When participants were asked whether they had ever met a 'real' practitioner, the majority indicated that they had met someone in the industry. 8 out of the 13 participants said "yes" and 5 said "no". This is a key distinction between the focus group participants, as the individuals who have had prior experience in interpersonal interactions with a public relations practitioner could have a different perspective in how they perceive the public relations characters portrayed in the entertainment media clips.

For the sake of clarity, those who have met someone in public relations will be referred to as Group 1, and those who haven't met a practitioner will be called Group 2. Participants in Group 1 all have an interpersonal experience on which they can partially base their understanding of the profession and those that practice it, whereas the 5 participants in Group 2 will only ever be basing their judgements on second hand information and views (be that through film, news, books, word of mouth, magazines and such). The average pre-viewing rating for Group 1 was 3.25, and for Group 2 the average rating was 3.2. With no significant difference in pre-viewing ratings between the two groups, one might consider that meeting someone in the profession doesn't necessarily translate into a more positive or negative view. After viewing the clips, the average rating of Group 1 was 2.75, which was slightly less than the pre-viewing average (change of 0.5 on the Likert scale).

For Group 2, the post-viewing average rating was 2.8, also slightly less than the pre-viewing average for the same group (change of 0.4 on the Likert scale). While these differences in rating are not statistically significant, it is still noteworthy that the people who have met someone in public relations rated the profession more negatively after watching the clips than the group who had never met someone in the field. This indicates that real life practitioners are viewed *more positively* by Group 1 than the entertainment media portrayals of public relations characters are viewed. By extension, this finding could suggest that the entertainment media representation of public relations is out of step with the real life practice and profession. It should also be kept in mind however, that this research is based in New Zealand, and as such it is likely that the practitioners met by Group 1 were also based in this country. As the text clips shown to the focus groups were from the UK and the USA, it is possible that the entertainment media representation of public relations is more in line with the practice of the profession in that country than it is with the practice of public relations in New Zealand.

Furthermore, it is significant that the group of people who had never met someone in public relations (Group 2) gave a similar pre-viewing average rating to the group who had met someone in the profession (Group 1). This suggests that an individual does not have to have personal contact with a person from a certain profession in order to rate how they feel about the profession as a whole.

In addition to being asked if they have ever met anyone who works in public relations, focus group participants were also asked if they recall seeing any mention of public relations or public relations people in films or television programs. The majority (8/13) of participants had seen public relations or practitioners mentioned in films or television programs that they have watched. Only one participant expressed that they had never seen public relations or practitioners mentioned in film or television programs, and the remaining four participants responded that they either don't recall, or have never noticed or paid attention to this. This is a significant finding because it shows that more participants than not have been exposed to portrayals of public relations and the people who practice in the profession.

Table 8: Participants expectations of public relations practitioners, before and after viewing

Participant	Expectations of PR people (pre viewing)	Expectations of PR people (after viewing)
1	Very talkative outgoing person, nice clothes and car. Very well spoken, variety of vocabulary. Confident.	Smart, risky, well-spoken, confident, arrogant, well dressed
2	Neatly dressed, presentable. Polite, courteous, but firm. Knowledgeable.	Same as before
3	Professional, educated, good language, good public speaker. Friendly.	Same as before
4	Professional/corporate persona. Bubbly, persuasive, busy, approachable, not too much money.	Same as before
5	Smart, good level of sociability, Type A personality, likes mixing, sense of importance, socialise with the 'in' crowd.	Flashy, well presented, night owl, mixing with the power brokers or perceived people of influence
6	On a local level, from PR individuals I know on a personal level; they seem to be well spoken, well presented, occasionally – pretentious, shallow and materialistic	Same as before
7	Speaks well, tidy dress, well-groomed, messy office, relates well to others, courteous. Trendy.	Tidily dressed, very talkative, a bit demanding, good people management, time conscious, representatives of the company
8	Very well dressed, unethical or conniving, cold hearted, mean, corporate.	Very well dressed, unethical or conniving, cold hearted, mean, corporate PLUS Confident speaker, in control
9	Very well dressed & well spoken. I think they would put a lot of effort into how they appear to the public and the people they work with.	Same as before
10	Smartly dressed. They would need to appear well-off so that you'd trust them (So that it appears they've made money doing what they're doing because they're good at it)	Well dressed. Clean cut.

11	Professional. Stylish/well groomed. Friendly.	Professional. Confident.
12	At work: Highly professional, dressing neatly. At home: Same as everyone else.	Confident, can control the crowd through communication.
13	Presentable and likable. Conversant, not too flashy, reasonably presentable premises, warm and cordial relationship with others, ethically professional, need not be filthy rich, in command of finances as everyone should be	Cool, well prepared with facts and figures, humourous, persuasive and likeable.

The post-viewing expectation was compared to the response given to the same question prior to watching the four clips, so any changes in expectation could be tracked for analysis. Interestingly, the majority of participants (7 out of 13) stated different expectations of public relations people after viewing the clips that featured public relations characters in them. 5 out of the 13 participants stated that they're expectations were the same as before watching the clips, and 1 out of the 13 gave the same answer as prior to viewing the clips, but also offered two other words to describe her expectations of a public relations person.

4.9 Media consumption of focus groups

As this thesis is heavily focused on how entertainment media representations intersect with the audiences' knowledge and interpretation of the public relations profession, it is pertinent and useful to examine the amount and types of media the focus group participants consume. Finding this information was done in several ways, and relied on both anecdotal discussions during the focus group (which was audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis), and self-reports on a scale of 1-5 gauging how much media the participants consume in their private lives. The self-reporting revealed that all the participants either consume average or above average amounts of film and television, with the typical participant reporting a 3.7 out of 5.

A key question that was posed to all focus group participants at the end of each session, was how much media the individuals consume (ranging from only a few hours a week, to more intensive media-consumers who engage in several hours of media consumption a day).

Secondly, participants were also asked to recall what type of media they most commonly watch and enjoy, and again the responses were varied. Grossberg, Wartella and Whitney (1998) place understanding the everyday role of audiences' media use and consumption as a critical element when trying to interpret the power of the media or specific media products.

Any attempt to understanding the power of the media or specific media products requires us first to understand how these products are located within and operate within people's everyday lives: That is, the effects of the media depend on or are *mediated* by where, why, and how people use or consume them (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998, p. 237).

A common thread among the younger participants was that very few actually watch media in traditional forms (i.e. on television or at the cinemas), instead opting for downloaded or streamed content on the Internet. There is also a clear divide between the participants consumption of news media, with some embracing the informational purposes of news, while others wholeheartedly rejected the current news media, citing bias and sensationalism as reasons for that rejection. Several participants mentioned that watching non-fiction documentaries from websites like *Top Documentary Films* was a favourite pastime, and similarly younger participants reported enjoying series which they watched online.

The amount of media that participants consume seemed to have a noticeable influence on their understanding of the clips they were shown, almost as if by watching a large amount of film and television made them more perceptive about the way public relations characters were portrayed in the texts. For example, one of the older participants in the focus group (who indicated that she watches above average amounts of film and television) gave a highly thought-provoking response during the concluding minutes of the focus group, in which she not only identified some of the clips as spoofs (or satire/parody), but also related the scenarios in the clips to 'real-life'.

Well I mean, the Stephen Fry one, and the last one, *In the Loop*, you know those are spoofs. So you know, you know that they're just in there to show how awful PR actually is and how the spin works. The second one which is talking about the lobbyist position in America I think is actually far more worrying, because in fact those are really big meaty issues um that impact on peoples life and death. And you know, we all know that the American government is run by lobbyists and big business. And in fact so is the New Zealand government, but people don't kind of see that because it's all hidden, and I think in America it's more out there and open.

This participant was a middle aged Pakeha woman who self-reported that she watches lots of documentaries, political media, and keeps an eye on current affairs and political matters. Working in government seemed to give this particular participant a high level of insight into political spin and how information can be manipulated behind the scenes before ever reaching the public domain. In other statements, this participant mentioned that image is often the deciding factor in who will win a political election, and she even went as far as suggesting that the current political election in New Zealand will be decided not on the policies of the various parties, but instead, the person whose image (or what she referred to as the "common touch") resonates best with the public will be the one who takes the role of Prime Minister.

Investigating the media choices that audiences make is an interesting and informative mechanism for locating the participants' perceptions of and response to, the public relations characters in the entertainment media clips they were shown during the focus group. Indeed, Bryant & Zillman (1994) advise that when making entertainment choices, people can, at times, be very calculated and deliberate when selecting how their leisure time will be used. This was certainly true of the participants in the three focus groups employed for this research, with the majority of participants citing strong patterns in the media they like to consume. Of course, there are times when people will watch whatever program is on television just to be occupied, but for the most part, the focus group data revealed that the media choices people take are deliberate and generally consistent (for example those that don't like watching the news will generally avoid it).

However, contrary to what the focus group data revealed, Bryant and Zillman (1994) dispute that all media choices are deliberate. Instead, they argue that more often than not, media choices are made “on impulse”, and that rather than having a pre-determined list of favourite media types or products to consume, choices are made depending on whatever holds the most appeal at any given time.

Moreover, these authors contend that media choices are, therefore, variable depending on the situation, and function to serve needs that the viewer may or may not be aware of.

While some participants noted that at times they would watch whatever was on television in a bid to ‘zone out’ or ‘escape’, more often than not the participants reported that they had quite clear requirements for their viewing choices. These seemingly contradictory trends are worthy of more attention. One might consider that Bryant and Zillman’s (1994) work is from almost 20 years ago, and therefore it is reasonable to suggest that with a greater number of media products available, and more ways in which to access these products (most significantly the internet and the ability for viewers to seek out and watch their selected films or programs in their own time), people’s media viewing choices have changed as the technology develops and gives more freedom to an increasingly demanding and fragmented audience.

It is interesting to note that although not all of the focus group participants had ever come into personal contact with a public relations practitioner, all of them could nevertheless identify certain traits or expectations of the profession and those that practice it. Therefore, the question becomes pertinent, if people are forging their expectations of public relations people not from personal contact, then where are they getting their information (and subsequent judgements) from? That concern is at the heart of this thesis inquiry, and it is relevant not only with regards to the entertainment media portrayal of the public relations profession, but also for any other social, professional, or ethnic group that exists within the entertainment realm.

4.10 Summary

This chapter has examined and detailed the qualitative findings that emerged from the film analysis and the focus groups. Key findings are that there are consistent themes which emerge from the representation of public relations characters in entertainment media, notably the role of ethics, differences between men and women, young and old, and texts from the UK and the US. The role of control and power was also a consistent theme, and this is strongly related to the perception (and reality of the profession). The next chapter (Chapter 5: Discussion) will integrate the findings and discuss their significance to the study. Information gained from the popular culture observation diary and from personal communication with a top 'spin doctor' will also be integrated into the discussion, in a bid to add extra meaning and perspective to the formally acquired data.

Chapter 5: Discussion - What does it all mean?

5.1: Introduction

As more than one research method has been employed in this thesis, it is logical, useful and holistic to bring together the data sets that each of those methods created. Drawing together these findings and trying to make lucid comparisons, links, differences and extrapolate any common themes or trends, is both a subjective and personal process, but one that is nevertheless a necessary step to take in research. By taking the rich qualitative data that the film analysis provides, and pairing that with the insightful and meaningful verbal and written data that the focus groups provided, and then adding a further layer of detail and data from the extensive popular culture diary that the researcher has compiled over several months, a more holistic, informative and therefore valuable contribution might be made to the academic body of knowledge about professional stereotypes, media effects and contemporary audiences who are operating within an info-tainment and popular culture dominated societal realm.

5.2 Integrating the film analysis, focus group data, personal communication and diary findings

By taking the film analysis themes, and discussing them in relation to the themes and ideas that emerged from the three focus groups, the researcher is better equipped to investigate any similarities, differences, trends, points of interest, or internal problems between the data sets. Rather than being able to comment solely on the way public relations characters are represented in contemporary film and television texts, or giving opinions on the discussion that occurred in the focus group setting, by combining the data, the researcher can make observations based on multiple areas of interpretative activity, rather than a one dimensional assessment of the image and reputation of public relations.

Below is a list of the key themes that emerged from the film analysis and focus groups:

- Context
- Control
- Demeanour
- Lobbying, politics
- Morals, values, ethics
- Motivation
- Old vs. New Generation PR
- Male vs. Female divisions
- Public Relations Activities
- Presentation & Appearance
- Prior Expectations
- Inter-textuality
- Differences in UK and US representations

Some of these central themes will be discussed in this chapter, and in the following chapter (Chapter 6 Conclusions and Recommendations), the significance of these ideas and trends will be given more attention, and related to the wider context of this research. There were some interesting key themes that emerged across both the text analysis and in the focus groups around *Absolute Power*. Firstly, the physical appearance of Charles was a defining characteristic and both the text analysis and the focus groups touched on that point. The well-tailored suits, loudly coloured shirts and patterned ties, give the overall impression of a highly professional and successful practitioner, who understands the importance of personal image and presentation. The majority of focus group participants alluded to the presentation of the character, and out of the four texts analysed, Charles was seen as having the best-presentation. As an extension of that appearance, both participants and the text analysis revealed that Charles seems like a pompous, old-fashioned, English gentleman. Interestingly, a point of discussion the focus group that correlates with an analysis finding, is the contrast between Charles and the younger practitioners that are featured in the program. One female participant mentioned being surprised at the brash nature of Charles, and compared that to her expectation that the practice of public relations today is more subtle and not so visible.

Um, love the actor. He's amazing. I actually thought it was, the way he was dressed and everything, he was much more of a kind of English gentleman. As opposed to, when they were all sitting around in the room, and the much more young, kind of relaxed thing. So, in terms of PR, you'd think he was almost part of the previous generation almost, like because he didn't fit with what I would have expected of a top ranking PR man. How he was dressed, and how he was very brash about it. I guess I wouldn't see PR as being quite so brash and like ha-ha. It's more of an undertone of it I think. With how it would be today. Sort of in terms of if they are successful in something I wouldn't expect it to be so much like "I'm going to go out to lunch and gloat", not quite as direct (female participant in her early 20s, university postgraduate student).

This observation is very interesting, for two key reasons. Firstly, in the analysis, it was noted that there seems to be a division or tension between the older and younger practitioners in the Prentiss-McCabe PR agency. This tension materialises through actions or symbols such as dialogue between key characters, giving each other grief for either having too little experience in the profession (usually from Charles to the younger female character Alison, or the male Jamie), or the younger ones accusing the older practitioners of being out of date and out of touch with contemporary society and communication tools. For example the younger practitioners use of the internet for getting information from gossip sites or planting information onto them, referred to as 'feeding the rumour mill', or creating false websites to benefit a client's cause. The older practitioners (Charles and Martin) don't seem to grasp these tools so readily, and this creates a noticeable difference in the public relations activities the practitioners carry out. In the participants above comment, she mentions that she expects public relations practitioner today to be more subtle and behind the scenes in their work, whereas Charles is very loud, brash and arrogant. In another comparison, the focus group participants commented that the character Nick Naylor in *Thank You for Smoking* is essentially the face of Big Tobacco, whereas the character Malcolm Tucker in the film *In the Loop* is very much more behind the scenes, and tells the people in the spotlight how to act and what to say. The following extract from the focus group transcripts shows two participants talking about this idea;

1st speaker: It kind of seems like he's behind the scenes, like he's not doing that direct, so it doesn't seem like he'd be the one to go on the talk show, its more he's trying to control or manage the people who do.

2nd speaker: It's quite a different form of control, while Aaron Eckhart's characters is like here's all the wonderful things we are doing, and I'm taking the lead of the conversation, I find that yeah, this guy is just really abrupt, and just "I'm forcing the control, this is the law, you are not going to do this", he's not being nice or anything.

It is noteworthy that these two younger female participants both refer to public relations being practiced behind the scenes, rather than in the full glare of the public eye. The two participants also relate this idea to control, and control over other people and over information. The idea of control is a major finding in this research. Many of the focus group participants referred to the characters having control or trying to gain control of situations, and this theme is a significant finding with regards to the audience perception of public relations and the way it is represented in entertainment media. Even when participants weren't directly or explicitly referring to the use of control in the texts, if one reads further into the comments they made, it quickly becomes evident that control, power, manipulation are recurring themes that emerged from the data around the different texts that were selected. The data from the transcripts strongly indicate that many of the participants associate public relations with damage control and protecting images. One participant, a lady in her 30s, commented about the character Malcolm *from In the Loop*;

Um, damage control, yeah that's what I really thought public relations was all about, which is why they're so persuasive, and with this character he seemed a little bit older, and he seemed like he already knew what he needs to listen out for. And chaotic is probably the best word, I put in the pre-interview as those in PR are always busy, but chaotic would be a more suitable word, but that's because they are always controlling the damage, for the most part (female participant in her 30s, works in education).

While some of the participants were neutral in their comments about the use of control in public relations, as if it is almost a necessary evil in the profession, one participant thought the use of spin and manipulation is the pinnacle of everything that is wrong with the public relations industry. This relates back to Weimann's (2000) argument that audience understanding and meaning making is context dependent, as for this participant, prior knowledge and disposition towards public relations has impacted upon her view of the characters in the media clips.

She was also referring to the character Nick Naylor in the film *Thank You for Smoking*;

Uh pretty much epitomises everything I hate about the PR industry. The fact that when he was speaking on stage, what he was saying, that twisted logic which actually convinces people, yeah and then combining that strange form of logic, with the confidence and the presence and the fact that he took control straight away so he was never on the defensive. Um, it's up to him doing his job really really well (as Nicole said), but that's really really not a good thing (female participant in her early 20s).

As one might notice from the number of comments about the use of control by the public relations characters in the texts, this is a central theme that emerged not only from the focus group discussion, but also the text analysis. In public relations, the flow of information and communication is one of central importance to a practitioner, and it is not surprising that damage control is strongly associated with the profession. Public relations people are often called on to comment on so-called "PR disasters", and it is far less often that a public relations person will make a statement that is not reacting to a situation or event. The idea that public relations is related to and concerned with controlling situations and people is also linked to the use of spin and spin doctoring. These terms are often used in a negative context, and interestingly, three of the four characters that were examined for the text analysis made some reference to their own use of spin. This self-aware and almost tongue in cheek reference to the very term that seems to plague the contemporary image of public relations is a noteworthy theme, as it indicates that the idea of spin has permeated into entertainment media representations of public relations characters, to the extent that the characters explicitly allude to the concept themselves (as opposed, for example, to someone else calling them a spin doctor as an insult).

5.3 Demeanour and Disposition of the characters

The demeanour or disposition of the characters was a significant theme that both emerged in the text analysis and the comments made by focus group participants. The most often used terms with regards to the demeanour of the characters were confident/confidence, arrogant, genuine, professional, and several allusions to an X Factor or killer instinct that seemed to separate the average public relations practitioner from the great practitioner.

Confidence and arrogance seem to sum up what the majority of characters had, and one might reason that a high degree of personal and professional confidence is a pre-requisite for surviving in public relations. All four characters had varying degrees of confidence, from the overly confident and somewhat pompous Charles Prentiss (*Absolute Power*), to the quietly confident and somewhat naive Ray Embrey (*Hancock*). Interestingly, the participants expressed that Ray had less confidence than the other characters, and by extension, was less assertive, less effective, and less successful in his attempt to pitch his business idea to the pharmaceutical executives.

The data from both the focus group transcripts and the text analysis strongly suggest that there are some bench-line attributes for public relations practitioners. These prerequisites include good presentation, confidence, professionalism, and to a certain degree, likeability. These personality traits were mentioned countless times during the focus group discussions, and form the general perception of public relations practitioners. Other adjectives used to describe the characters such as arrogant, pompous and manipulative were more negative terms, but still encapsulate the fundamental nature of how audiences understand the profession through entertainment media. Alistair Campbell argues that far from having an X-Factor, the most important quality for a successful public relations practitioner to possess is to actually know what they are talking about (see Appendix E). This is a logical argument, as surely an informed and up-to-speed practitioner is going to function at a higher and more successful level than someone who has little knowledge about the subject or point of view they are trying to convince people to accept.

The idea of successful public relations practitioners having a killer instinct, the X factor, a commanding presence or even just being described as slick, was a strongly recurring theme in the focus groups, and this is worth further discussion. Three of the four characters were said to possess this special quality that set them apart from other people, and that made them highly successful in their work in public relations. Apart from Ray (the well-meaning but naive publicist from Hancock), each of the characters was said to have a unique characteristic that made people listen and believe what they heard.

This meant that even characters like Malcolm (*In the Loop*) who were not likeable, if they had that X factor, that presence, then they could persuade audiences, colleagues, the media, of just about anything. Below are several of the quotes from the focus groups, which illustrates the importance placed on the charismatic nature of the characters;

And um he also seems very tough, like to manage the image of a prime minister, you obviously have to be sort of quite strong in your presence and the way that you present yourself. Like he may not wear the nicer clothes or anything, but I think he sort of got more presence than the other three guys that we've seen.

Um he was still confident but I think the difference between him and the other two characters is that he doesn't have that ridiculous confidence that comes from that immortality kind of thing, like I'm invincible and I'm amazing, he doesn't have that vibe coming from him, and definitely when he's encountered by that train, there's that real mortal, not as confident, still confident, because he can command a presence in the way that he did with that crowd but he still doesn't have that whole snap your fingers, everyone's eyes on me, now you're listening and I've got your attention.

Yeah he can't seal the deal, he can get their attention but it's not as much control.

Yeah he can get their attention but can't actually convince them to the point that he needs to.

Like he was still dressed in the suit and everything, which was very corporate, but he didn't have that slickness that the other two had, like that suave, that charm.

It's like a killer instinct almost.

Yeah it really is like a killer instinct, and there's a kind of charm about it as well, and he didn't have that. Like he still looked professional and clean cut, but he just didn't have that killer instinct.

I think he's a good, he's a savvy PR man. And he's just like Marc Anthony, praising Julius Caesar, you know.

He seems up with the play.

Oh absolutely. Because the tobacco guy, who was very attractive and very outgoing and very smiley could actually hook that whole crowd in. You could see the way he was just manipulating it all, and everybody changed from like, as you said, being the most unpopular person there, to like having everybody saying "well yes isn't he great, he's saying the right things".

And so, and I wrote in my feedback about New Zealand politics, and the difference between John Key and Phil Goff, is a really good example of that. Because people like John Key, what does he stand for? Nobody really knows. But he's a nice smiley character, who kind of reassures people. Phil Goff, who's really driven by policy and that sort of belief in the Labour overarching philosophy, nobody really gives a shit about. You know? And I think that although he's quite good-looking, he doesn't have that common touch that people talk about, being able to sell policies. And he's never to become the Prime Minister here for that very reason.

Yes! Absolutely, unbelievably terrible. But, people like him because he's kind of like salt of the earth, farmer, you know. And it's like what...(laughs). So it depends whose giving that message, it really is, and if you believe that person, you'll believe anything. You know, people are very gullible.

These comments came from across all three focus groups, and therefore this data represents a valuable cross section of the views expressed. When combined with the other demeanour /personality traits the participants and the text analysis identified, it becomes possible to conceptualise the common representation of public relations characters in the entertainment media texts.

5.4 Morals and ethics: Do public relations people in the movies have any?

With regards to the morals, values and ethics theme, this is a highly revealing and significant subject. As a profession, public relations is largely able to function when the organisations, causes, and sources of information are seen to be credible and trustworthy in the eyes of the public. When that credibility and trust is lost, it can be very difficult for an organisation to win back the goodwill of its customers and target publics. Findings that emerged from both the focus group transcripts and the text analysis reveal that the role of morals and ethics are still visible in representations and perceptions of public relations. What is evident is for the most part, public relations characters on screen are depicted as lying, unethical and cheating people, who will do whatever it takes to achieve their goals. For example, in the text analysis of the television series *Absolute Power*, it was noted that there is very loose morals in the offices of Prentiss-McCabe Public Relations. This lack of ethics materialises in multiple instances, for example when Charles Prentiss takes on a client who is going for the same religious position as an existing client, who his colleagues represent.

In another example, Charles is trying to convince Martin to take on a wealthy Neo-Nazi as a client, arguing that it will be a great challenge and to think of the money they would earn by representing the man. In what could be described as the lowest moment in the series, the agency decides to create a fake website about a disease they made up, in a bid to get their client out of trouble for beating up his heavily pregnant partner. The scheme goes awry when members of the public start saying they have the disease too, with one man committing suicide when he thinks he has the illness. Similarly, one might look to *Thank You for Smoking*, in which Nick Naylor represents Big Tobacco. This fact led one of the focus group participants to comment that Nick must have misguided morals in order to be the face of a product that ultimately kills all of its customers.

Um it seemed to me like he has a problem with ethics, like if you are going to be the face of a smoking company obviously you don't really care if you are killing massive amounts of people, I mean, he mentioned a number there (female participant in her early to mid 20s, psychology student)

Another participant alluded to the fact that smoking and tobacco is something which cannot be defended, and yet Nick Naylor still fronts to the media and the public, and staunchly defends peoples' right to smoke cigarettes. Naylor wins the argument on the argument, of course, and comes out of the situation looking better than he did before it.

And defending something which is you know, almost impossible with all the research that's out there, even if they haven't found any of it, but it's almost impossible to defend it, and yet he's there defending it, just because he's paid to do that (young female participant, early 20s).

The idea of loose ethics and morals can be linked to the motivation of each of the characters. In the above comment, the participant noted that Nick Naylor defends the tobacco industry, which should be impossible to do with all the damning research about the harmful effects of smoking, and yet he does this because that's his job and is what he is paid to do. Moreover, people believe the messages that Naylor puts forward, which comes down to a mixture of both persuasion and credibility. Borrowing from theory on the role of ethics in public relations, Parsons (2008) recounts that when she first meets her new students, there are many preconceived notions about the job.

In some insightful first hand research, Parsons says that each year she gets students to rate a series of characteristics or qualities, according to how important they think each one is to be successful in public relations. Characteristics such as flexibility, maturity, intelligence, creativity and integrity are included in the list. Interestingly, Parsons notes that after tabulating the students' responses, the order that the characteristics are ranked in remains consistent each year, with integrity often coming dead last. The author suggests that this trend is worrying for the future of the profession, so it is noteworthy that the role of ethics is a recurring theme in academia, entertainment media, and audience responses about public relations.

5.5 Motivation: What makes the characters tick?

This concept leads well into the theme of motivation, and this was a concept that recurred throughout the focus group discussions and the text analysis. Themes such as this beg the question, do public relations people essentially sell their personal ethics and morals in exchange for a big pay check, or is this simply a perception that the public holds (and that entertainment media perpetuates)? Indeed, even in the film itself, Nick Naylor defends his work for the tobacco industry by trying to say that he has to work to pay his mortgage. He even refers to his as the yuppie Nuremberg defence, meaning he will say he has to pay the bills, and in doing so, gets out of any responsibility for his moral and ethical void.

In a quote from the movie *Thank You for Smoking*, Nick has an inner dialogue which is highly revealing about his motivation to work, and the second meaning that the term Yuppie Nuremberg defence has.

Nick Naylor: [out loud] "I just need to pay the mortgage."

Nick Naylor: [to self] The Yuppie Nuremberg defence

The term suggests that someone people will do whatever it takes to live a good life, and relates back to the Nuremberg Trials of the Nazi war criminals of World War II. Interestingly, one of the Nazi leaders who died before he could go before the Nuremberg trial was Adolf Hitler's Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels, who was essentially the chief Nazi spin doctor.

The fact that Nick Naylor invokes the Yuppie Nuremberg defence suggests that deep down, he does have a conscience and perhaps even holds onto a degree of guilt for representing a product that kills thousands of people each day. Of course, the term 'yuppie' refers to "Young Urban Professional", and was popularised during the 1980s to describe people who were very materialistic and ambitious. At one point in the film, Nick's boss asks if he likes his work at Big Tobacco;

Boss: Tell me, do you enjoy your current work Nick?

Nick: Yes sir, its challenging, I mean, if you can do tobacco, you can do anything.

At first glance, Nick's answer seems like he is satisfied in his work, and has no major qualms about working for the tobacco industry. But if one reads deeper into the meaning of this message, it becomes evident that Nick is suggesting that there could be no harder, more morally dubious role than selling cigarettes, a product which ultimately ends up killing its customers. Ironically, after Nick leaves the Academy of Tobacco Studies (the lobby group for the tobacco industry), he starts up his own public relations firm and his first potential client is the cell phone industry, and Nick is shown telling the cell phone executives to start practicing saying there are no conclusive links between cell phone use and brain cancer. So in this way, Nick is merely trading one ethically void job for another, and the audience sees that he really does just like his job and is talented at talking and persuading people, a fact Nick acknowledges himself several times in the film;

Nick: Michael Jordan plays ball. Charles Manson kills people. I talk. Everyone has a talent.

Nick: I don't have an M.D. or Law degree. I have a bachelors in kicking ass and taking names

Nick: You know that guy that can get any girl? I'm him ... on crack.

Nick: I speak on behalf of cigarettes.

But is it satisfactory to assume that all public relations people only perform their jobs so they can pay the mortgage or because they are good at it?

One must question if there are other motivations that lead people into the profession, and the characters represented in the texts offer several statements and allusions as to why they are in the public relations industry. Quotes used in the earlier text analysis charts will be used to illustrate these points, and poignant statements that emerged in the focus groups will be integrated to highlight any links and trends.

The character Ray Embrey (*Hancock*) seems to operate with a significantly different motivation to the other three characters that were analysed. Specifically, Ray is motivated by making positive change in the world, and that is a motivation highly removed from monetary gain or self-interested power mongering. The idea represented by his All Heart business is that big businesses should do more good for the world, rather than just taking and making profit, and that doing good for the less fortunate will lead to a more positive reputation for the company and a larger market share (ultimately leading to increased profit). For example in the television series *Absolute Power*, the main public relations character Charles is meeting with the Government public relations chief, and the government man asks why he never delved into politics. Charles' answer is highly revealing;

Government PR guy to Charles: You're very good at this, you should have gone into politics

Charles to Govt PR guy: Well they did ask me, but I wanted to work where the real money and power lie

This statement is highly significant, as it reveals that Charles is motivated to work in public relations not only for the money he receives in salary, but also because of the power and influence that come with his role. As previously mentioned, there is a high level of media relations portrayed in *Absolute Power*, and Charles is often shown wining and dining editors, journalists and media personalities at fancy high profile restaurants. He will often suggest story angles to the media, and more often than not, the audience will see later in the episode that the suggested angle has been adopted for the news and tabloids. One might also consider the intersect between the public relations agency and politics, with the agency getting one of their clients, who is an aspiring politician, a prime position in Cabinet.

During another episode, the agency represents two religious men (as separate clients) who are both trying to get nominated to a high-profile Archbishop position. Charles rigs a televised debate so his client wins the position, while simultaneously getting a Welsh football player (another client) to be allowed to play for Britain in a big soccer competition. These examples illustrate particularly well the motivation of power and influence for public relations people.

With multiple references to the power and influence that come with public relations (some references more explicit than others), it is fitting to consider the similarities between power hungry public relations people, and the power-wielding politicians of the world. In the texts analysed for this study, and in the focus groups that were conducted, several references are made to the use and abuse of power at the hands of the public relations characters, which creates an image of the power-hungry, and morally flexible practitioner. If one extends that logic to the real world, it is interesting to consider that while politicians are voted into power by their constituents, public relations figures are accountable to no one, and furthermore, they can't be voted out through the democratic process (i.e. if people aren't satisfied with a politician, they will vote for someone else to replace the incumbent). This alludes to the behind the scenes nature of the profession, and is an idea that Alistair Campbell ²raised with this researcher (A. Campbell, personal communication, 14 December 2011). When asked if he felt there is a noticeable portrayal of public relations in the media (both news and entertainment), the infamous communications advisor to Tony Blair responded that while there *shouldn't* be a generic representation of the profession, there often is anyway;

I suppose the dominant theme is of a slightly shadowy force behind the public figure or public body (A. Campbell, personal communication, 14 December 2011).

² Alistair Campbell: Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair's communications advisor, press secretary, spokesman, and strategist from 1994-2003. Critics of public relations, and of political public relations, often point to Campbell as the poster-child for the term spin doctor, citing his work for New Labour, and in the controversial lead up to the US-UK led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Most recently, Campbell has been testifying at a Government inquiry into the News of the World phone hacking scandal.

Campbell went on to relate the idea of being behind the scenes to his time as former British Prime Minister Blair's communications chief, and that the perception of public relations as being an almost invisible profession (particularly in relation to political public relations) is often an accurate one;

When the BBC did a series on my first book, *The Blair Years*, they called it 'the other man in the room', and I thought that was actually not a bad description of the politician-PR relationship as it should be. Of course it is possible to do the job on the basis of being briefed at the end of meetings, or when decisions are made. But far better to be there alongside that process. Tony Blair was the decision maker. But I was in the room thinking through the communications and strategic issues as they arose (A. Campbell, personal communication, 14 December 2011).

This first-hand account of the relationship between the leader of a country (Tony Blair) and his top communications aide (Campbell) is very revealing about the nature of political public relations. It is similarly useful when considering the film *In the Loop* (which centres on the relationship between the UK and US governments), and the leader public relations character is, in fact, widely believed to be based on Campbell himself.

Malcolm Tucker (*In the Loop*) holds a significant degree of power in his job as a government director of communications. One focus group participant commented on how much power and control Malcolm has, even to the extent that he can change the facts when someone steps out of line;

I love when he said, No you don't think that! And then, "You may have thought that you heard him say it's unforeseeable, but he did not say that, and that's a fact". That he's trying to change the fact. It's quite interesting, and especially, "No, You don't think that", because he is clearly the one who's telling people what to think, or what their allowed to say at least. So yeah I found that quite funny, and then obviously you've got when he's talking to the journalist, and he's threatening to tell his wife about his affair if he prints the word unforeseeable, so again that confidence, and angry. Very angry man. And kind of sounds like he's trying to keep a lot of possibly incompetent people in check, um and control that communication, and control what is being said definitely (young female participant, early 20s).

As the above statement suggests, there are varying levels of control exerted from the characters analysed. However, some of the other focus group participants noted that the context in which each public relations character operates in can also have an impact on their effectiveness in their job.

For example, one participant noted that perhaps Ray (*Hancock*) was less effective and successful than the other characters because he was trying to pitch his All Heart idea to a large group of executives working for a pharmaceutical company, and therefore they were more clued up to how business and persuasion works. On the other hand, Nick Naylor (*Thank You for Smoking*) is shown talking to a chat show audience, who are presumably not as business savvy and tough as the group of corporate executives are;

I was just going to say from personal experience, like I kind of deal with executives of a big company, on a regular basis. And they come across really different, like they are all really confident, like to be in that level of a management position of a big company, you have to be really confident, and you have to be like a PR person, so in the other clip where he was talking to the audience (*Thank You for Smoking*) he was talking to everyday kind of people, it's a lot different when you talk to people that are kind of in the same, like more confident and able to stand their ground a lot more, able to stand by their decision. It's hard to convince an executive to change their way of thinking (young male participant, early to mid 20s).

This is a notable comment, as it suggests that the overall impression one gets from the entertainment media characterisations is influenced not only by the characters actions and demeanour, but also the context (both physical, social and psychological) can have an effect on how audiences perceive the public relations characters. Moreover, the political, cultural and historical context a text is produced in (and set in) can create strong undertones in the texts, and some audience members picked up on that, and would relate their understanding of the text to the wider context from which it emerges (for example participants mentioning the New Zealand general election, or the lobbying industry in the United States).

5.6 Participants' interpretation of meaning

People are constantly interpreting what they see and hear, to the point where those interpretations are often taken for granted (Grossberg, Wartella & Whitney, 1998). However, one needs to keep in mind that people have different ways of understanding and interpreting messages and making meaning out of them, and the focus groups illustrated that variation in understanding. For example, several of the female participants mentioned that they liked the actor Aaron Eckart (the central public relations character Nick Naylor in *Thank You for Smoking*), based on both his appearance and acting skills.

Grossberg et al (1998) advise that when it comes to interpreting meaning, people will often focus on their relationship with the performer and his or her image. This is particularly relevant in the present case, as the women in the focus groups specifically said that they would believe anything the character Nick Naylor said, based on their prior knowledge and exposure to the actor playing that role. Interestingly, this trend was not confined to the female participants in the focus groups, with one young male participant commenting on the *Thank You for Smoking* character;

When somebody is that confident, no matter what they are saying, you will listen to them. Just listening to somebody like him, you'd probably believe him more than the lady on stage, just because of the way he presents himself.

Similarly, it was interesting that when commenting on the public relations characters in the films and program excerpts, several of the participants related their understanding of the characters to the wider context. For example, several of the participants shared the sentiment that the fact that the character from *Hancock* (Ray Embrey) was trying to promote and get sponsorship for his All Heart business made him seem more likeable and genuine as a public relations person. They expressed that his cause (promoting corporate social responsibility) seemed like a good motivation and this seemed to change the way the participants perceived him and his work. Interestingly, they made comments like he didn't seem as good at his job, and that he was idealistic, naïve, and was generally ineffective to sell his pitch to the pharmaceutical executives at the start of the film.

Participants also used the focus group to raise some concerns and ideas they seemed to feel strongly about. For example, a middle-aged female participant expressed dissatisfaction with politics in New Zealand, and a disdain for the power and influence of the image that certain people portray. Another female participant, who was in her early 20s and has studied communications at university level, expressed a great dislike for the public relations profession, and this was illustrated not only through her verbal contribution to the focus group, but that sentiment was also echoed in the written answers she gave to the pre and post viewing questionnaire. This suggests that the dislike for public relations could be related to the level and bias of the knowledge a person knows about the profession.

For example, this participant could hold a strongly negative view about the public relations profession because she has learned to be critical of persuasive messages and campaigns through her education at university. Alternatively, a young male participant who is studying English at university, did not seem to be able to determine that Nick Naylor's actions in *Thank You for Smoking* were not genuine.

5.7 Public Relations Activities

The range of public relations activities that the four characters perform are in fact essential communications functions that happen in real life public relations, not just on-screen. In this vein, it is positive to see that while the demeanour and personal ethics of the characters in the texts may be construed negatively at times, at least there is an accurate portrayal of professional public relations work as well. While the focus group participants seemed to only comment on the use of damage control, image/brand management, and spin, the text analysis identified a wide range of public relations activities and techniques that are employed by the various characters. The reason for the low number of PR activities identified by the focus group participant is two-fold. Firstly, the researcher has worked, studied and volunteered in the public relations sector and in the media, and therefore it is likely the text analysis was performed with a more informed view of public relations activities than the participants, none of whom work in the public relations sector (this was a key point of exclusion criteria, in order to keep the focus group data relatively unbiased). Secondly, only short extracts from the films and television program were shown to the focus group participants, as showing three feature length films and a whole season of a program was not possible with time constraints and the size of this thesis. So therefore the text analysis examined the films and programs in their entirety, whereas the focus group participants were exposed to shorter clips from the same texts.

A comprehensive list of the public relations activities enacted in the texts and in the popular culture diary is as follows:

- Damage control
- Spokesperson
- Media interviews
- Media liaison roles

- Media relations and briefings
- Press releases
- Image, brand and reputation management
- Reactive vs. proactive
- Strategic planning
- Goal setting
- Stunts, hoaxes, disasters
- Target publics
- Statements to the press
- Providing transcripts and fresh angles to media
- Pitching for new business/clients
- Getting briefs by clients
- Conflict resolution
- Social media and Internet PR
- Information management
- Brainstorming sessions
- Charitable giving
- Corporate social responsibility initiatives
- Targeting channels of influence
- Suppressing, altering or filtering information

The range of public relations functions in this list is quite wide; however, there is no mention of more strategic and mundane tasks (which are still core public relations tasks). For example, there is lots of focus given to publicity, media relations, and stunts, but there are no significant references to other functions such as speechwriting, annual reports, manning exhibitions and expos.

5.8 Fragmented Audiences

Watson (2003) argues that this fragmented audience poses some serious challenges for media producers, who are forced to adapt in order to survive in an ever-changing media environment. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge Watson's argument that new technology is the element that makes the fragmentation possible.

Of course, as Watson goes on to reason; from the producer and program-makers perspective the fragmented audience makes measurement a complex and difficult process, one in which personal behaviour and viewing patterns of audiences come under increased scrutiny, with the personal information of audience members becomes a highly in-demand commodity. The increasingly fragmented audience is an idea worthy of more attention in the present discussion, as this could also point to more marked differences in how audiences interpret the characters portrayed in entertainment media. Whereas if one assumes that prior to being described as fragmented, the media audience could be described as one unit or with little difference in taste and consumption, then one might assert that by extension, the audience would perceive characters in the same way as the person sitting next to them. On the other hand, in the context of a fragmented audience, it is reasonable to suggest that there would be a wider and more diverse range of judgements of characters in film or television.

Furthermore, one might look to Bartsch and Viehoff (2010) who argue that the gratifications that audiences receive (and perhaps even seek out) when engaging with entertainment media can range from simple hedonistic gratifications to more complex and intricate gratifications such as fulfilling social and cognitive needs. These authors come from the viewpoint that the desire to experience emotions such as empathy, suspense, humour and interest, is widely considered to be the main motivation for using entertainment media (such as movies, novels, television programs, music videos and so on). However, the authors go on to question this widely held view, asking what exactly is it that people are looking for when they seek out emotional experiences through entertainment media formats?

Extending the idea of media consumption is the media effects theory of cultivation hypothesis. As the present study has only concentrated on the short term effect of entertainment media on participants views on public relations, it should also be noted that there can be significant long-term effects of the media as well. The cultivation hypothesis states that the overall impact of television stereotypes are increased when the audience member is a heavy viewer of television (Mastro & Robinson, 2000).

The authors go on to explain this concept in more depth;

This hypothesis is concerned with the overall impact of television over time, rather than the influence of a single exposure. Advocates of the cultivation model suggest that differences in perceptions about social reality emerge as a result of varying degrees of exposure to television, such that heavy viewers believe in a reality consistent with that found on television - regardless of the accuracy of these beliefs (Mastro & Robinson, 2000, p. 386).

While the cultivation hypothesis is usually referred to in the context of people seeing violent images on television and in the news, and therefore cultivate the view that there is increasing levels of violent crime in society, the hypothesis is also worth mentioning in the present research context. One might question, if there is a consistent manner in which public relations characters are represented in entertainment media such as film and television, and audiences are exposed to these consistent messages over a long period of time, does that increase the influence of the media stereotype on that audience?

5.9 Summary

This chapter has integrated and discussed the key themes and concepts that emerged from the various sources of research. An extensive list of those themes has been included, as well as a more in-depth discussion of some of the most noteworthy and relevant themes. Salient quotes from the focus group and from Alistair Campbell have been included, in order to add depth and clarity to the way in which these themes manifest in the discourse about public relations. The next chapter will conclude this thesis, by detailing areas for future research, and the contributions and limitations of the present study.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and recommendations

6.1: Introduction

This thesis has provided an extensive literature review, spanning areas as diverse as media effects, film theory, characterisation, the psychological processes behind stereotypes, the image of public relations and the increasing importance of popular culture in a rapidly changing and mediated world. The researcher has also applied several research techniques (film analysis, focus groups, personal communication with a well-known practitioner and a popular culture diary), in an attempt to explore and tentatively explain the relationship between the entertainment media representation of public relations characters, and the effect this has on audiences understanding and attitudes towards the public relations profession itself. This thesis is unique in that it attempts to draw together both media representation and media effects, in the context of the professional image of a communication-based industry, which is both growing in size and influence in the public domain and popular culture (public relations). While several studies have examined the portrayal of public relations characters in film, television, and news reports, there are far fewer studies that have attempted to bring together the public perception of public relations, and the way that entertainment media constructs its' public relations characters. This chapter then, will detail the conclusions that may be drawn from the present research, and will also offer several recommendations for both research and practice in public relations, with the hope that the findings of this study might provide some academic insight into why the public relations field is often presented and thought of in a negative light.

6.2 Overview of research findings

The key findings of this study are ones that would benefit from being built on with a more extensive and longitudinal research project. A central finding is that there is a set of characteristics that are commonly used to portray public relations characters in entertainment media, such as the use of control over information and over others, a slick way of speaking and being successful at persuading people, a degree of high personal grooming and dress, and a rather loose set of personal and professional morals and ethics.

From the focus groups, it was found that exposure to public relations characters in films can have a short term effect on the audiences views of public relations, and that this effect results in a more negative view of the profession overall, regardless of the participants prior contact with a public relations practitioner. The extensive popular culture diary provided a lens through which the everyday, unmediated experiences of the researcher could be documented. A key finding from the diary was that there is a strong correlation between the entertainment industry in the United States, and the role of publicity and publicity stunts. Particularly in the realm of the celebrity, the role of the publicist is highly visible, and this provides a limited account of the functions of public relations, in that practitioners are only seen to be responsible for releasing statements and doing damage control for clients. Across the board in this research, the range of functions performed by the public relations practitioners and characters is a limited one, with barely any reference to the strategic and long-term roles that practitioners are responsible for in real life.

6.3 Future research

Future research in both academics and in the field of practice would be well-placed to carry out more extensive and longitudinal studies into the portrayal in both entertainment media, news media, opinion pieces, and the realm of popular culture itself. Combining multiple research methods, similar to the present research project, would allow a more in-depth and meaningful explanation of why people still hold negative views of the public relations profession, and would make way for improvements in the professional image of public relations. While some professional organisations or unions may see extensive research into this subject as time and labour consuming, the results could create a data-based opportunity for public relations to not only improve its own image and communicate that to the public, but it could also provide the opportunity for public relations to take responsibility for the way the profession is represented in the public domain. This heightened awareness of its own reputation could create more business opportunities for public relations, and can contribute to elevating the credibility and professional status of the industry. As credibility is one of the cornerstones of any successful public relations campaign or activity, it is imperative that the public has an increased level of trust and respect for public relations in order for it to survive and function successfully in the future.

With specific regard to the way in which the public relations profession is represented and portrayed in entertainment media such as films and television programs, this study has shown that there is a potential opportunity for improvements in this area. While of course this statement does not suggest that the public relations profession should employ sinister tactics to improve the image of public relations in movies and TV (ala the placement of cigarettes in films as suggested in the film *Thank You for Smoking*), there are several avenues that could be pursued by the professional bodies that represent the public relations industry (such as PRINZ, PRIA etc). One of the most useful and appropriate avenues could be for increased consultation between public relations bodies and the film/television studios that bring the media to the screen. If these professional bodies could provide a more accurate and positive description of the practice of public relations, perhaps script writers, casting directors, film directors and editors would be better equipped to representation public relations characters as ethical and valuable members of society. Responsibility for enhancing and protecting the image of public relations lies primarily with the individual practitioners and consultancies themselves, and perhaps being accountable and transparent about the work they conduct should be made a priority.

When public relations characters are consistently and negatively represented in popular entertainment media texts as arrogant and unethical individuals who are only concerned with making headlines, this reduces the profession as a whole to one that is merely concerned with publicity and profit for clients. If an increased level of consultation was undertaken, perhaps film and television would become better informed and equipped to show the range of useful and valuable public relations practices (such as community engagement, sponsorship, corporate social responsibility programs, sustainability initiatives, which are all growing areas of contemporary practice). This is by no means a way of shifting responsibility from the profession to those that represent it, and if anything, public relations practitioners need to ensure that their own professional conduct is nothing less than exemplary. For practitioners who are also researchers (such as the researcher of this thesis), some can run the risk of being in a state of denial about why people often hold a negative view of public relations, and instead look for external sources of influence that might affect how the profession is viewed.

In the name of objective and credible research, one must be reflexive and honest about the state of contemporary public relations, and realise that sometimes there is an element of truth to the claims critics have about the profession (i.e. spinning the facts to make them favourable for the client, withholding information from media and stakeholders, bribing journalists, and using publicity stunts to attract attention).

An additional recommendation that is worth making in this section is more to do with the personal attitude and the way they represent their own profession. An interesting finding that emerged from the focus groups was that of those participants who reported that they had previously met someone who works in public relations, several commented that these practitioners often seem overly materialistic, somewhat arrogant, loud and are always well-presented. While that last comment (with regards to personal presentation) can be seen as positive, the majority of comments were less than flattering. In light of this finding, one might be well-placed to acknowledge that the manner in which public relations people present themselves can often impact on how people outside the profession view the industry as a whole. Therefore, it is recommended that individual practitioners could take care to present themselves as honest, highly ethical, and professional people, who are confident in their presentation and their communication with others, without coming across as arrogant and materialistic. Of course, one might reasonably assume that certain kinds of people are attracted to the professions and occupations that best fit their personality and intellect. For that reason, perhaps it is individuals who are already confident, well spoken and take pride in their personal appearance, who are best suited (and therefore are more likely to enter) into the public relations profession. However, discretion over the types of people who can enter the profession and how to ensure professional conduct could be made a priority. Methods like a selection process, an enforceable code of conduct and even compulsory registration for practitioners could all assist in raising the standard for the public relations profession and its resulting image in the public sphere.

This recommendation then, is more concerned with the micro-level issues that can contribute to the public's view of the public relations profession, rather than the macro-level issues like the media representation of the industry.

The subject of media literacy is one that certainly deserves more attention, from both academic quarters and everyday audiences (see Tisdell, 2008). Indeed, with the focus group participants for this research reporting varying degrees of media consumption, and differing tastes in the specific media products they chose to watch (such as news, documentary, films, weather, television series), it is not hard to assert that there is as much variety in media literacy as there is in choices and time spent with media. Some of the focus group participants did indeed demonstrate a more critical and in-depth view towards the media machine (and by extension, these individuals also had more critical views of public relations characters), arguing that much of what is portrayed as reality or news is in fact a constructed and biased account of the truth. This extends not only to the representation of public relations characters in entertainment media, but also acknowledges the increasing convergence of technologies, of consumption and leisure time, of the blurring lines between information and entertainment, of popular culture and the public consciousness, and how media and its messages are understood and adopted by the masses. Critical thinking skills and media analysis should be given increasing importance within educational systems, as the power of the media becomes both more influential and more pervasive, and therefore young people are going to need the skills to interpret the media messages they are constantly bombarded with, and not merely accept everything as the truth. Of course, one might consider who would be able to teach young people about media studies, as adults and teachers alike are also susceptible to persuasive and manipulative media messages.

It is also imperative to examine the possible motives that underline the trends in representation through entertainment media. This idea links back to a section in the literature review of this thesis, and it is this authors opinion that relating the systems of fictional representation in entertainment media to the larger production and economy of the media is a crucial step in understanding the significance of media effects and audience interpretation of the 'real world'.

If one understands the profit-driven motivations behind many (if not all) commercial media outputs, then Gerbner et al's., argument about the consistent messages conveyed through the media provides an insightful lens through which these systems occur;

Given the tight links among the various industries in the production and distribution of electronic media content, and the fact that most of them are trying to attract the largest and most heterogeneous audience, the most popular program materials present consistent and complementary messages, often reproducing what has already proven profitable... Most of the variety we observe comes from changes in the program structure and perspective. What is most popular naturally tends to reflect – and cultivate – dominant cultural ideologies (Gerbner et al., 1994, p. 19-20).

The role of entertainment media and the role of democracy and politics in society is one that underlines the importance of media studies. Curran (2011) argues that entertainment media supports the democratic process because it contributes to the formation, maintenance and sometimes even the reformation of social identity. Curran states that if social identity changes, this can have a profound impact on politics.

So, media consumption that influences people's understanding of who they are, where they fit in and who they are against is central to the dynamics of contemporary politics (Curran, 2011, p. 68).

Curran also implores that when entertainment is cited as a mere distraction for citizens, this fails to recognise the political meaning of entertainment. Stemming from the 19th century ideals of the media as the fourth estate, the notion that the media only role is to hold those in power to account is one that is somewhat outdated. The media performs multiple roles in the 21st century, and when scholars and critics claim that the fourth estate isn't being honoured, the crucial role the media plays in socialising and teaching the masses about society (and not just politics) is neglected.

6.4 Contribution to knowledge and limitations of the study

As a Master's level thesis, it is expected that this study has in some way contributed to the field of communication studies research, with specific reference to public relations, entertainment media effects and popular culture.

Without giving excessive attention or justification to the fact that a Master's thesis is meant to be written within a yearlong period, this must still be acknowledged as one of the central limitations to this study. Of course, with any research project, there are limitations and constraints that must be negotiated, and this thesis is no exception. Therefore, it is within the boundaries of a year-long study, and a maximum word count of 60,000 words, that this thesis is able to push the academic knowledge and understanding of the perception and representation of public relations, and the intersect that has with entertainment media and popular culture. This study has located some of the micro level issues surrounding this field, while also trying to locate those issues within the macro environment, and the wider context in which the issues occur (for example the information saturated, celebrity obsessed, postmodern society, where economic instability and political unrest is becoming a defining characteristic of the early 21st century).

The innovative and multi-method approach this thesis has taken to exploring the subject is one of its unique characteristics, and offers a new way of understanding media effects and professional representations. Using film analysis, focus groups, a popular culture diary, and personal communication with one of the world's most vocal and well-known public relations practitioners, this thesis has sought to provide a compelling and discourse-based account of the contemporary representation of a fast growing communications industry. It has focused on everyday experiences, filmic representations, first -hand accounts, and audience-centred research to offer a holistic and wide-ranging narrative about the image of public relations and how that is negotiated through more than one avenue, and through more than one source of information.

Similarly, one of the unique characteristics of this thesis is that it borrows from classical philosophical theory, (Plato's Allegory of the Cave) in a bid to locate the wider significance of representation in the media and the reality of the situation. As a relatively new field of study communication studies researchers often run the risk of neglecting the classical perspectives on the role and power of the media in shaping peoples' perception about the world they inhabit. Instead, researchers might choose to focus on the contemporary significance of media representation and audience perception, rather than locating these interacting elements in a wider frame of reference (like Plato's Allegory). Using this allegory, one might theorise that people are no longer forced to watch the shadows on the wall of the cave, but that audiences are chaining themselves to see only a shadow of reality, and all too often take what is seen in the media, to be what really occurs in the world. As seismic changes take place around the globe, it is hoped that entertainment media and artificial representations will not serve as a distraction from the political, economical, environmental and social realities that people are faced with daily. While the Roman Empire might have been successful in distracting the masses from the real power struggles and failings of government with gladiators and entertainment, one can only be optimistic about contemporary society's ability to question the messages, representations and information they are so regularly bombarded with.

6.5 Summary

This chapter has outlined the limitations, contributions, and further areas of research that this thesis has resulted in. It is hoped that by combining several different research methods and means of finding information about the social and mediated views on public relations, that a more cohesive and timely account of the profession's reputation can be used as a building block for future practice and research into this area. By integrating a discourse analysis approach, and borrowing theory from a diverse range of academic and socially based practices, a multi-layered view of the profession may begin to emerge. As long as practitioners and academics recognise that the profession has a less than stellar reputation, it is hoped that steps might be taken to remedy that perception, if only by challenging the current practices and norms of the profession itself.

While people are often quick to dismiss the entertainment media's representation of professions, saying that it is 'only in the movies', this thesis has shown that film, television, and popular culture all play a part in shaping peoples' understanding and attitude towards an increasingly important industry. If a comprehensive public relations campaign for the public relations profession could be launched and endorsed by industry and academia alike, the profession will be well placed to lead the way as an ethical, respected, and trusted source of information and opinion. Businesses will benefit from increased advocacy and share of voice, society benefits from having more trustworthy and open information, and the media benefits from having easy access to timely information and organisational representatives. If people can step outside Plato's Cave and the shadows on the wall to experience the real world for themselves, perhaps the damaged image of the public relations profession can be improved. Similarly, the 'bad eggs' in the profession need to be removed, and tighter regulations put in place to raise professional standards and service to clients and the public good. Only then will the entertainment media and popular culture representations and depictions of the practice be enhanced for the better.

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Appendix 1: Media and medium diary

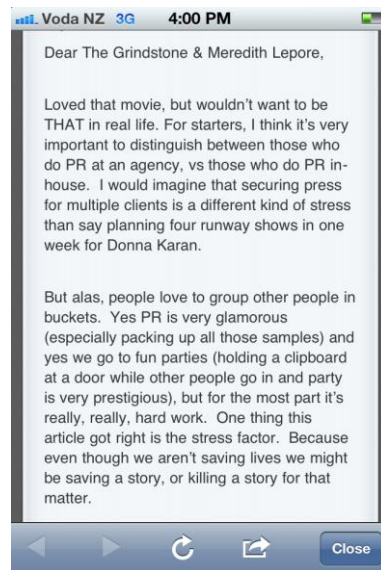
February 22 2012 – The Grindstone & @dknyprgirl: Article about PR sparks internet debate

A fascinating internet debate was sparked after an article appeared on the website The Grindstone, which questioned why cattiness was such a prevalent trait in public relations. The ensuing debate was really interesting to follow, specifically because it touches on the reputation of public relations, and where that representation comes from. Some of the key points, plus some screenshots from a response from a DKNY public relations officer, really gets to the heart of why PR has a bad reputation, and what should be done about it.

From the article: The media has portrayed women who work in PR as having possibly the coolest jobs ever. I mean if my only knowledge of the Public Relations industry was from watching shows like *Sex & the City*, *The Hills* and *The City* I would say all these women do is plan awesome parties, invite awesome people to them and then try to get cool magazines to cover these events. Plus, they get to wear awesome clothes while doing it. However, that is obviously not true.

“The respect level of the profession has diminished with the overly-romanticized depictions of publicists and PR practitioners in entertainment media, especially reality TV”

“Does the field of Public Relations have a reputation for being “catty?” No. That reputation is only founded on Hollywood movie sets. Sadly, characters like Samantha from *Sex and the City* have, perhaps, perpetuated a myth about what Public Relations actually is”



December 7 2011 – H&M Internet Models are Computer Generated (Perez Hilton)

A story on the gossip/entertainment website Perez Hilton recently featured a story about clothing giant H&M using computer generated models for their latest underwear promotion campaign. An H&M public relations representative was forced to comment after a Norwegian blog spotted the striking similarities between the bodies of all four models, and the Perez Hilton story said that the PR rep was doing 'damage control'. It is interesting that in times of crisis or public scrutiny on a company, it is almost always the PR person who will give a comment or statement to the media.

Furthermore, it is noteworthy that when I clicked through to the original statement that the H&M rep gave to the Swedish newspaper Aftonbladet (but covered by the Australian newspaper ABC), the author referred to the representative as the H&M Press Officer. The different ways in which public relations people are referred to is a fascinating practice, and one which deserves more scholarly attention.

November 22 2011- Qantas Twitter disaster

As seems to be common practice when something goes wrong within an organisation or a high-profile individuals life (for example the BP oil spill, the Toyota braking disaster, the Adidas All Blacks jersey debacle), a recent social media campaign by Australian airline Qantas got the company some bad publicity after it backfired.

The idea was to get a positive buzz going on the micro-blogging site Twitter, but after a series of industrial disputes and technical issues this year, people were quick to use the opportunity to show Qantas how disgruntled people are. The social media disasters was quickly labelled a PR disaster, and will no doubt be held up as an example of how PR shouldn't be done.



November 2011 – Cleo Magazine

In the November issue of the popular women's magazine Cleo, there is a feature on so-called public displays of affection (PDA's), and the title of the article is 'Public Relations'.

This is an interesting play on words, as the title would indicate the feature is about the public relations profession, however, on closer inspection it is about how couples act in public. It is interesting to note however, how prevalent the term public relations is becoming in the social lexicon.

November 10 2011 – Hillary Swank gets dropped by her PR firm

The two time Academy Award winning actress Hillary Swank was recently dropped by her public relations firm in New York, over an appearance she made at the President of Chechnya's birthday celebrations. Swank was paid for her appearance at the event, but later came under fire from a human rights group for associating with the President Ramzan Kadyrov, who has been accused of human rights violations and murdering his political rivals. She promptly fired her manager Jason Weinberg and two of his associates for booking her to attend the event.

Swank was then dropped by her PR team over disagreements about how to handle the bad press she was receiving over the appearance. The actress has publicly stated that she wasn't aware of Chechnya's seedy past, and that she would not have done the appearance had she been fully aware of the circumstances. Swank has also promised to donate the appearance fee she was paid to a charity. The appearance and subsequent media fallout has been described as a 'PR gaff'.

November 1 2011- Kim Kardashian and Kris Humphries Announce Divorce

In what can only be termed as a publicity scam, the two-month marriage of reality superstar Kim Kardashian and the locked out NBA player Kris Humphries came to an end today, with the star filing for divorce in Los Angeles. The pair wed after just six months of dating, and made an estimated US\$18 million from their lavish and over-the-top wedding just eleven weeks ago. Straight away, fans and critics alike have been blasting the wedding as a PR stunt, or publicity hoax, and public relations practitioners themselves are also weighing in with their opinions on how the quickie-divorce will impact on the Kardashian brand.

Fans seemed to be disappointed in Kardashian's announcement, and some even claimed they would no longer watch the television series that airs on E! (re-runs of the four hour wedding special are still being played on high repeat on E!, with a reported 900,000 people tuning in for each re-run and an estimated 4 million people tuned in for the premiere of the wedding special). Critics say that the divorce was inevitable, and that the wedding itself was a money and publicity hungry-scam, with some even going as far to accuse the Kardashian family, the E! network and the executive producer Ryan Seacrest (who is also the executive producer and host of the mega-popular American Idol franchise) of being guilty of fraud.

Lawyers and public relations gurus have weighed in with their opinions over the just-announced divorce, with popular opinion being that Kim's personal wealth will be untouched, and that on the whole the Kardashian brand will be untarnished, as a result of the woman's strong fan following and product portfolio (Kim has some 10 million followers on the micro-blogging site Twitter and reportedly gets paid up to 1 million dollars for endorsement tweets).

November 2011- Elizabeth Knox engages public relations firm (NZ Herald)

A story about the controversial American student Elizabeth Knox, who spent several years in an Italian prison after being accused of murdering another student was recently featured in the New Zealand Herald newspaper. The woman was freed from prison earlier this year, and has gone back to America to be with her family and friends. Being a young, pretty female has worked in Knox's favour, and multiple broadcasters are now trying to secure her first television interview. Interestingly, Knox's family have now hired a top PR firm to handle the bids for the interview rights, which seems almost ironic, seeing as she spent her last few years in a dingy jail, and now people are clamouring to pay big bucks to hear her version of events about the gruesome murder which was allegedly part of a sex game with two females and a male friend.

UNITED STATES: Homecoming for Knox, family hires PR firm

The Knox family have hired a leading Seattle PR firm, Gogerty Marriott, to handle bids expected to be as much as US\$10 million (\$13.1 million) for her first television interview.

The front-runners are thought to be the veteran ABC broadcasters Diane Sawyer and Elizabeth Vargas.

October 2011- Jennifer Aniston and Beyonce Knowles pregnancy rumours

As is becoming an increasingly common practice with celebrities, Jennifer Aniston is the latest famous face who is reportedly pregnant (with reports citing a rounder than usual stomach and a trip to her doctor recently). Media reports say that her publicist has said that if and when Aniston is pregnant, she will decide whether or not to make that information public. Again, it is interesting to note that in the United States, the media will usually refer to publicists rather than public relations spokesperson. This is possibly because in the entertainment industry, public relations is more centred on courting the media and creating photo opportunities than engaging with stakeholders, communities or having more long-term strategic communications plans, like more corporate/brand business does.

Earlier in October, mega-star Beyonce Knowles was also in the media over her pregnancy (which she and husband-rapper Jay Z have confirmed), with allegations that she is faking her baby bump. The rumours started when Beyonce gave an interview to an Australian television show, and as she sat down, her dress appears to deflate, causing some to speculate that she is wearing a prosthetic baby bump. As is common practice with celebrities, Beyonce's publicist made a statement about the claims, saying that the rumour is ridiculous and foolish.

September 2011- All Blacks jersey disaster

The picture below was the headline that followed a major retail faux pas on behalf of global sports brand Adidas. In the weeks leading up to the Rugby World Cup 2011, Adidas was revealed to be ripping New Zealand customers off, by charging them far more to buy the official All Blacks supporter jersey than people buying it overseas. When Adidas refused to lower its price for its New Zealand customers, a media storm erupted.



Late August 2011- Ray Anderson dies

Ray Anderson is widely acknowledged as making the first shift towards sustainability in big business. He passed away earlier this year, and the short obituary about his life in Time Magazine alludes to the fact that lots of CEOs and big business try to say they are green and environmentally friendly, but Ray Anderson was the real deal. Anderson was significant for proving that big business need to make changes about how they use natural resources, but also showed that caring for the environment is also good for business. Many contemporary PR people focus on CSR and making sure their clients protect their environment, and this will become an increasingly competitive practice as people realise that consumers are becoming more conscious about their purchases.

Late August 2011 – Small article in Time Magazine

There was a small article in Time Magazine about President Obama's use of fundraisers, who are in fact those people in charge of lobbying campaigns. This is noteworthy as it relates to one of the films under study for this thesis *Thank You for Smoking*.



18 August 2011 – Restaurant opening, Auckland City.

If one understands culture (and by extension popular culture) as a way of life, then this diary entry is perhaps one of the most revealing cultural scenario. While attending a restaurant launch in Auckland's CBD last week, this researcher was party to a conversation with the female restaurant co-owner and some other guests. On numerous occasions, the host (and guests at times), would refer to other women they knew as a 'PR bitch'. As in, 'Yeah, she's such a PR bitch'. The women then alluded to the PR person in question making a habit of always introducing other people and name-dropping, however it wasn't said in a negative manner, more just stating the facts. While this example may seem irrelevant in a thoroughly academic thesis, this researcher would argue that on the contrary, the very fact that a PR person would be referred to in such a way (and in such a public setting), is remarkably telling about peoples' views of the profession (and by extension the individuals who practice it).

Late July- August 2011- No Logo reading for work

The researcher of this thesis is also a Communications tutor at AUT, and while doing class preparation for the Globalisation and Popular Culture topic, an excerpt from the Naomi Klein book “No Logo” was read. No Logo is about the pervasive and dubious nature of advertising and branding in a globalised economy, and with the No Logo reading, multiple mentions were made about public relations. In particular, the author (Klein) refers to public relations people trying to cover up and ‘spin’ situations of corporate wrong-doing (such as Nike’s use of sweat shop labour, McDonalds attempts at suppressing criticism from activists etc). Public relations are not cast in a positive light at all, and moreover, the overall impression one gathers from the reading is that public relations is only ever about lying and manipulating the public in order to protect a companies’ reputation.

Mid July 2011 – News of the World Phone Hacking Scandal

The News of the World phone hacking scandal exploded onto the global media scene in mid July, and thrust Britain into a state of chaos. The revelations and subsequent police and parliamentary investigations into the allegations of phone hacking saw News Corp International’s Rupert Murdoch having to give evidence at a hearing, and also saw the arrest of Andy Coulson, the former Director of Communications for UK Prime Minister David Cameron for his role in the hacking while editor of the News of the World. Below is a quote from a BBC news story, where Labour leader Ed Milliband attacks the British Prime Minister David Cameron for his hiring of Coulson.

The Labour leader Ed Miliband has repeated his attack on Prime Minister David Cameron over the hiring of Andy Coulson as his director of communications.

If we examine the use of the title of Coulson’s position (Director of Communications), in the context of a growing number of other titles for what are essentially public relations roles, then one can grasp that Andy Coulson was the PM’s PR person. Furthermore, if one views the News of the World phone hacking scandal in the context of another nationwide scandal in Britain (the MP’s expenses scandal), then it is possible to locate the story within a wider scenario of corruption and a lack of ethical integrity in the UK parliament.

Interestingly, the man who is regarded as the modern spin doctor, Alastair Campbell (former UK Prime Minister Tony Blair's Communications adviser) also came under from the media and public about his actions while in a position of power. Campbell's communication with this researcher is included in this thesis (see Appendix E).

4 July 2011- TMZ website

The entertainment and paparazzi website TMZ (which stands for 'Thirty Mile Zone' as it covers the Hollywood area), featured a story on a Dancing with the Stars contestant Mark Ballas. Ballas had been taken to the small claims court after his former PR company alleged that he terminated their contract without paying the severance bill. The defendant Ballas claims that he shouldn't have to pay Ace PR because they did a poor job of working for him.

28 June 2011- Google News site

The popular news search engine Google featured links to a series of stories about two young men who are alleged to have beaten a seal to death. The news reports stated that the pair had engaged the services of an Auckland based PR firm, and had even released a statement to the media and the public to deny any wrongdoing in the case. The PR company was named in the articles.

The men have since paid a PR firm to voice their side of the story after defence lawyer Steve Bonnar said his clients were "concerned" about how the case had been reported. In a statement issued by The PR Department Auckland today, the men said they were simply trying to release the female seal pup from their net.

It is interesting to note that the journalist who wrote this story views the pair engaging PR services as an attempt to tell their own side of the story, and calls it as such in the article. The use of public relations services in times of personal crises like these two men are experiencing is somewhat common in popular culture. Top of mind cases would be the singer Chris Brown after he was charged with assaulting his then-girlfriend Rihanna, or the BP oil company when the Gulf of Mexico oil spill happened. Similarly, the heiress and socialite Paris Hilton's use of PR during her many run-ins with the law are well documented. It's possible that the repeated coverage of public figures and companies engaging PR help during crises has meant that more of the public audience is aware of public relations, although it remains to be seen the effect this has on audience perception of PR anyway.

24 June 2011- Perez Hilton website

The celebrity gossip site Perez Hilton is running a story about Los Angeles based publicist Bradley Frank who has been indicted for a raft of charges, including one count of grand theft, one count of receiving stolen property, and one count of computer access and fraud. The story features several mentions of PR, mainly about the different PR firms involved, but also in the context of the publicists' actions being negative PR for his own employers. It is alleged that Frank wiped all his client data from his work computer after being fired, as well as making copies of the firms' entire database. Could this be a case of bad PR for PR?

13 June 2011- Perez Hilton website

The comedian/actor from the hit NBC show '30 Rock' Tracy Morgan recently came under fire from the media and the gay community after making a series of violent and homophobic slurs in a stand-up comedy performance in Nashville, Tennessee. Actors and directors who have worked with Morgan were quick to denounce his actions, as were the various Gay and Lesbian advocacy groups in the USA. While Morgan did release an apology statement, the media has continued to criticise the actor for his violent and anti-gay comments, with the notoriously bitchy blogger Perez Hilton commenting;

"We definitely think this is a step in the right direction, but we aren't all the way convinced that he's a changed man or that he's even really that sorry beyond his career image taking a PR hit" (Perez Hilton website, 13 June 2011, underlining added).

10 June 2011- TMZ

In early June, a story broke online and in various tabloid magazines about an alleged affair between celebrity Kim Kardashian and NBR player Brett Lockart, during Kardashian's engagement to football player Kris Humphries. It was tit-for-tat through the media between Kardashian and Lockart, until the former sent a demand that Lockart retract his statements and apologise. The letter was published on gossip website TMZ, and was addressed to Lockart's publicist. It is interesting to note that often people's publicists are held to be somewhat responsible for their clients' actions, although it makes sense in a way as they are the professional hired to safeguard the reputation and if need be, take action when something arises to compromise that reputation.

3 June 2011- Discovery Channel

It is interesting to note how the intersect between public relations and industries such as sport and cars appears to be strengthening. On the Discovery Channel recently, a short program aired about the Dodge Viper car manufacturing process. The program featured the workers at the factory, who hand finish the elite muscle cars. Later in the program, the public relations manager of Chrysler took one of the finished Vipers for a spin around the testing lot, commenting on the cars performance and identity as he drove. It is noteworthy that the PR practitioner was actually titled as such, due to the fact that public relations workers are often referred to by other titles, such as communications/marketing/HR manager, information officer or the ever-useful term 'spokesperson'. Indeed, the practice of PR people distancing themselves from the actual term public relations is one that seems to be not too uncommon, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that PR people prefer to call themselves different titles because not everyone trusts or respects the PR profession. It's interesting to note though, that even though people might not refer to themselves as a public relations person, they essentially still perform the same tasks and have the same responsibilities.

1 June 2011- Twitter

In early June, a set of nude photographs hit the internet, with a female alleged to be the young American actress Blake Lively (star of the cult TV series *Gossip Girl*). The hashtag #BlakeLively instantly became a trending topic on the micro-blogging social networking site, and the girl's team were quick to respond. After the initial story broke, her publicist released a statement saying the photos were 100% fake. This element of the story then also began to gain traction on the micro-blogging site, with many tweeters referring to Lively's publicist issuing an official statement to denounce the photos as fake. It is interesting how in the entertainment industry, the term and job of public relations is often used synonymously with publicity and publicist.

29 May 2011- Comedy/Advertising show on TV

During the television show *The Gruen Transfer*, the panellists from the advertising industry were discussing a recent faux pas by an Australian clothing brand.

The company had created a fake YouTube video, without audiences realising, and then denied that it was a fake when asked by the media about it. One panellist argued that bad advertising can be extremely harmful to a companies reputation, just as bad public relations can damage reputations. The panellist noted that there can be both good and bad advertising, as well as good and bad public relations. This is an interesting subject for discussion, and in some ways touches on what this thesis is about, in that often people will see or hear about one public relations mis-step (for example the Wal-Mart fake blog), and will then apply that negative example across the whole profession. It is positive to see that media commentators can distinguish between the two though.

27 May 2011: Entertainment news story, on the New Zealand Herald website

Reading a story about the demands that pop star Katy Perry made while she was recently performing in New Zealand. The story mentioned Perry's publicist in New Zealand, who justified the singers demands by saying performers who have been on tour for a while often have 'fairly detailed riders' (a rider is the list of things the artist requests ahead of time). It seems to be common practice for publicists to be quoted or referred to in entertainment stories.

26 May 2011: FAMOUS, tabloid magazine.

Flicked through FAMOUS magazine while waiting for a train at Britomart. Read a story about the Kardashian sisters, and a recent holiday they took in Mexico with their respective boyfriends. The magazine called the holiday a PR/publicity stunt, purposefully orchestrated to allow the sisters to model their new beachwear line for the gathering paparazzi.

In another issue of Famous Magazine, a story about the actors Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt stated that at the recent Cannes Film Festival, the famous couple were booed by the French media, after tabloid reports that the power-couple had fired their French nanny while she was on sick leave. The magazine referred to the unfair dismissal of the employee as a public relations disaster for the couple. It is always interesting to see how the media use the term "PR Disaster", and this was a subject that was given extensive attention in this researchers dissertation (see Dennison, 2011). This term is often used when a person, brand or organisation does something that doesn't sit well with the public, although it often has nothing to do with the actual practice of PR.

For example, the BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico last year is a prime example, as many would consider the spill an environmental disaster (and also an economic disaster for those affected), and yet it was reported more as a public relations disaster because of the way BP handled the fallout from the initial spill.

April 2011: Chasing Harry Winston, fictional novel

This first diary entry is about a fictional novel by Lauren Weisberger (*Chasing Harry Winston*), recently read by the researcher. One of the central characters travels to Israel to review a restaurant there, and meets the public relations guy who works for the place. I have included a poignant quote from the book, in order to illustrate the explicit nature that the author uses to describe the type of people who are associated with the public relations profession;

“Emmy has walked into the restaurant, expecting to endure a late lunch with the Israeli version of a typical American PR girl: well-dressed, fast-talking, irritatingly upbeat” (p. 218).

And then the subject is revisited a few pages later;

“Very interesting,” Emmy murmured. “It all makes perfect sense, but how did you become the resident PR person? Because I have to say, you don’t exactly fit the mold”. (p. 221).

What is so interesting about these excerpts is the explicit way in which the public relations type is referred to, and furthermore, that the character identifies that the man doesn’t fit the mould. The book was written by the same author as *The Devil Wears Prada*, which of course was made into a hit-film starring Glen Close and Anne Hathaway. With the latter becoming ingrained in popular culture in recent years, it is interesting that the author seems well-tuned in how the public relations profession is constructed and perceived by those outside the industry. It leads one to wonder if the author herself has come across public relations people who fit that mould (well-dressed, fast-talking, irritatingly unbeat), or if she herself has relied on popular culture representations of the profession (ie news reports, films, television, other books).

Appendix 2: Miller's (1980) Characterisation list

Physical/Biological Characteristics

Age

Sex

Height and weight

Colour of hair, eyes, skin

Physical defects

Physical body and posture

Movement and facial expressions

Mannerisms

Voice/Speech/Verbal expressions

Hereditary

Clothing/Dress

Appearance

Sexuality and tension

Psychological characteristics

IQ/Intelligence/Abilities

Disposition and other qualities

Complexes/Maladjustments

Frustrations and major disappointments

Any nicknames?

Feelings (most common and what makes them uncomfortable)

Attitude towards life

Most like about themselves

Aspects of own character they deny or not accept

Hidden aspects of the character

Interpersonal characteristics

Family and family background

Friends and lovers

Co-workers, employers, employees

Other people the character interacts with

Cultural characteristics

Birthplace

National, ethnic, racial background

Education

Occupation (and how do they feel about their job? What are his/her satisfactions and dissatisfactions)

Socio-economic status

Environment

Historical period of story (and its ethos)

Interests/pastimes/hobbies

Special abilities and skills

Religious beliefs

Political attitudes

Values (morals, ethics, habitual mode of response to life)

Lifestyle

Dominant traits

Major events in the characters life

Goals/ambitions

Dominant expression and impact of the character

Appendix C: Indicative Questions for Focus Group interview

Researcher: Mikela Dennison (BCS) (Hons)

Date of interview: August 2011

Location: AUT Tower Building, 2-14 Wakefield St, Auckland City.

- What do you know about the public relations profession?
- Can you recall where you know that information from? (I.e. school, work, television, news etc).
- Have you ever met anyone who works in public relations? If yes, please explain how you felt about them
- If you had to sum up public relations people in five words, what would they be?
- On a scale of 1-5, would you say you are more positive, negative, or neutral towards the public relations profession? (1=very negative, 3= neutral, 5= very positive) Please explain.
- Have you ever noticed mentions of public relations, or public relations people in any films or television programs you've watched?
- What do you expect a public relations person would be like? (With regards to their clothes, language, car, office, relationships with others, professional ethics, money etc).
- Have you ever seen any or all of the following films or television programs? (Media texts will be listed here)
- On a scale of 1-5, would you say you watch a lot or very little film and television? (1= very little, 3= average amount, 5= a lot)

Appendix D: Break down of pre and post viewing ratings of the profession

Participant	Pre viewing rating	Post viewing rating
1 Up	3	4
2 Down	4	3
3 Down	3	2
4 Same	5	5
5 Down	3	2
6 Same	3	3
7 Down	4	3
8 Down	1	-50 (this rating becomes 0 for analysis and chart)
9 Down	4	3
10 Down	3	2
11 Same	3	3
12 Down	4	3
13 Same	3	3

More positive about PR after viewing clips = 1/13

More negative about PR after viewing clips = 7/13

View of PR unchanged after watching clips: 5/13

Appendix E: Personal Communication with Alistair Campbell

- *People often refer to your legacy in both modern PR and the political landscape. How does that make you feel, to have shaped the worldview of two integral elements of democratic society?*

I am certainly conscious of being seen as an agent of change, sometimes from a supportive perspective, but often not. To my mind, we made changes that were needed both to adapt to the changing media landscape in a way that benefited us rather than the media, and also to change the Labour Party to make us electable after a series of defeats. In opposition, communications is more important than it is in government, where you can influence opinion by what you do as well as what you say. When people talk of legacy, those coming at things from a negative perspective mean ‘spin’, which they see negatively. I always thought that debate was overblown. But there are very few organisations today – if they are successful – who do not at least understand the basics of strategic communications.

- *What effect, if any, do you think film, television and news portrayals have on audiences’ view of PR as a profession? How accurate do you think those portrayals are? How do you think PR should be portrayed?*

I don’t think there is any one way that it is portrayed, or should be. I suppose the dominant theme is of a slightly shadowy force behind the public figure or public body. There has also been a tendency in media reporting to focus on the PR contextualization and processology as a way of suggesting the public figure is not sincere. I always felt that our opponents built me up as a way of trying to undermine Tony Blair’s abilities and sincerity. It was a mistake. They got some limited political mileage out of making spin an issue, but not as much as they imagined, and in doing so they also undermined politics as a whole, which didn’t help them either.

- *Newspaper reports have referred to you as Tony Blair's former "spin-doctor". How do you feel about that label, and do you think the public views it as a negative or positive term?*

It is meant negatively, and probably taken negatively, because at its heart is the implication that you are distorting or misleading ... spinning essentially means not being straight. As a label it is irritating but nothing more than that. I saw myself as a communicator, trying to get messages through to the public over time that chimed with the reality of their lives and the reality of the political project we were embarked upon. We had ups and downs, good phases and bad phases, but by and large we did that, and that is more important than what I got called along the way.

- *The focus groups I carried out for this research suggested that confidence, good presentation, being likeable, intelligent and having the 'X Factor' are all pre-requisites for having a successful career in PR. Do you agree with those traits, or would you revise that list?*

I'd say that it misses the most important quality, which is that you really have to know what you're on about. When the BBC did a series on my first book, *The Blair Years*, they called it 'the other man in the room', and I thought that was actually not a bad description of the politician-PR relationship as it should be. Of course it is possible to do the job on the basis of being briefed at the end of meetings, or when decisions are made. But far better to be there alongside that process. Tony Blair was the decision maker. But I was in the room thinking through the communications and strategic issues as they arose. I trained myself to think like him I suppose. Now if you have that sense of confidence in the arguments you are putting, and the relationship with your boss in the right place, you are more likely to have the other factors you talk about. I also think it is better to be respected than to be liked, though if you can have both, even better.

- *If you would like to add any other comments or thoughts about the modern view of PR, or the media portrayal of the profession, please feel free to include them here.*

I would make this point – the media world has changed out of all recognition in recent years and within that there has been something of a struggle for the agenda. When we first came along, the media were quite excited by the idea that this new bunch of people were determined to set the agenda. It was part of the New Labour success. But once we got into power, they felt that it was going too far, that THEY ought to be the ones setting the agenda again. So we became, in their eyes, all about ‘spin.’ They were the communicators. They were trying to create a sense that only they could be trusted to tell the truth. We challenged that assumption but as a result the politics-media debate became sterile and hostile and generally unhealthy. The truth is in the modern age it is a nonsense to think top flight politicians, surrounded as they are 24/7 by media interest and speculation, do not have a comms team looking after strategic and tactical communications. I just wish we could all be a bit more grown up in our acceptance of that. It is not an unhealthy add-on, but a basic necessity. In democracies, politicians have a duty to communicate, not just an interest.