Demon in a Dress?

An Exploration of How Television Programming Conceptualises Female Public Relations Practitioners as Monsters

Introduction

The term monster might have its roots in the Latin word *monere* (to warn) but has since evolved to have various symbolic meanings, from a terrifying mythical creature to a person of extreme cruelty. No matter the flexibility in use, the term is mostly meant to be derogatory (Asma). As Gilmore puts it, they "…embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination" (1).

However, it may be argued that monsters sometimes perform the much-needed work of defining and policing our norms (Mittman and Hensel). Since their archetype is predisposed to transgressing boundaries of human integrity (Gilmore), they help establish deviation between human and in-human. Their cognition and action are considered 'other' (Kearney) and a means with which people can understand what is right and wrong, and what is divergent from appropriate ways of being.

The term monster need not even refer to the werewolves, ogres, vampires, zombies and the like that strike fear in audiences through their "immoral, heinous or unjust" appearance or behaviours. Rather, the term monster can be, and has been, readily applied as a metaphor to describe the unthinkable, unethical, and brutal actions of human beings (Beville, 5). Inadvertently, "through their bodies, words, and deeds, monsters show us ourselves" (Mittman and Hensel, 2) or what we consider monstrous about ourselves. Therefore, humans acting in ways that deviate from societal norms and standards can be viewed as monstrous. Nowhere is this more evident than in the representations of public relations practitioners in media offerings.

In the practice of public relations, ethical standards are advocated as the norm and deviating from it considered unprofessional (Fawkes) and as we contend – monstrous. However, the practice has long suffered a negative stereotypical perception of being deceptive and with public relations roles receiving less screen time than shows and films about lawyers, accountants, teachers and the like, these few derogatory depictions can distort how audiences view the occupation (Johnston). Depictions of professions (lawyers, cops, journalists, etc) tend to be cliché but our contention is that fewer depictions of public relations practitioners on screen further limits the possibility for diverse depictions.

The media can have a socialising impact and can influence audiences to view the content they consume as a reflection of the real-world around them (Chandler). Television, in particular, with its capacity to prompt heuristic processing in audiences (Shurm) has messages that can be easily decoded by people of various literacies as they become immersed in the viewing experiences

(Gerbner and Gross). These messages gain potency because despite being set in fictional worlds, they can be understood as reflective of the world and audiences' experiences of it (Gerbner and Gross). Tsetsura, Bentley and Newcomb add that popular stories recounted in the media have authoritative power and can offer patterns of meaning that shape individual perceptions. Admittedly, as Hall (1980) suggests, media offerings can be encoded with ideologies and representations that are considered appropriate according to the dominant elite, but these may not necessarily be decoded as preferred meanings. In other words, those exposed to stories of monstrous public relations practitioners can agree with such a position, oppose this viewpoint or remain neutral, but this is dependent on individual experiences. Without other frames of reference, it could be that viewers of negative portrayals of public relations accept the encoded representation which inevitable does a disservice to the profession.

When the representations of the field of public relations suggest, inaccurately, that the industry is dominated by men (Johnston) and that women practitioners are shown as slick dressers, who control, and care little about ethics (Dennison), the distortions can adversely impact on the identities of public relations practitioners and how they are collectively viewed (Tsetsura, et al.). Public relations practitioners view this portrayal as the 'other' and tend to distance the ideal self from it, continuing to be stuck in the dichotomy of saints and sinners (Fawkes).

Our observation of television offerings such as *Scandal*, *Flack, Call My Agent!, Absolutely Fabulous, Sex and the City, You're the worst*, and *Emily in Paris* reveal how television programmes continue to perpetuate the negative stereotypes about public relations practice, where practitioners are anything but ethical – therefore *monstrous.* The characters, mostly well-groomed females, are shown as debased, liars and cheaters who will subvert ethical standards for personal and professional gain.

Portrayals of public relations practitioners in television and media

According to Miller the eight archetypical traits identified in media representations of public relations practitioners are: ditzy, obsequious, cynical, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished, or unfulfilled. In later research, Yoon and Black found that television representations of public relations tended to suggest that people in these roles were heartless, manipulative bullies, while Lambert and White contend that the depiction of the profession has improved to be more positive but nonetheless, continues to do a disservice to the practice by presenting female workers, especially, as "shallow but loveable" (18).

We too find that public relations practitioners continue to be portrayed as morally ambiguous characters who are willing to break ethical codes of conduct to suit the needs of their clients. We discuss three themes prevalent as popular tropes in television programmes, that characterise public relations practitioners as monstrous.

To be or not to be a slick and skillful liar?

Most television programmes present public relations practitioners as slick and skillful liars, who are shown as well-groomed and authoritative, convinced that they are lying only to protect their

clients. In fact, in most cases the characters are shown to not only believe but also advocate to their juniors that 'a little bit of lying' is almost necessary to maintain client relationships and ensure campaign success. For example, in the British drama *Flack*, the main character of Robyn (played by Anna Paquin), is heard advising her prodigy, "just assume we are lying to everyone".

The programmes also feature characters who are in dilemma about the monstrous expectations from their roles, struggling to accept that that they engage in deception as part of their jobs. However, most of them are presented as somewhat of an ugly duckling or the modest character in the programme, who is not always rational or in an explicit position of power. For example, Emily from *Emily in Paris* (played by Lily Collins), while working as a social media manager, regularly questions the approaches taken by the firm she works for. Her boss Sylvie Grateux (played by Philippine Leroy-Beaulieu), who embodies the status-quo, is constantly disapproving of Emily's lack of sophisticated self-presentation, among other aspects. In the episode Faux Amis, Sylvie quips, "It's not you personally. It's everything you stand for. You're the enemy of luxury because luxury is defined by sophistication and taste, not emilyinparis".

Similarly, in the first episode of *Call My Agent!,* Samuel Kerr (played by Alain Rimoux) the head of a film publicity firm relieves the conundrum faced by his anxious junior Gabriel (played by Grégory Montel) by suggesting that he lie to his client about the real reason why she lost the film. When a modestly dressed Gabriel questions how he can lie to someone he cares for, Samuel, towering over him in an impeccable suit and a confident demeanor, advises, "…who said anything about lying? Don't lie. Simply don't tell her the truth". However, the subtext here is that the lie is to protect the client from unnecessary hurt and in doing so nurtures the client-relationship. So, letting the audience decide the morality of lying here.

It may be argued that moral ambiguity may not necessarily be monstrous. Such grey characters are often crafted because they allow audiences to relate more readily to themselves by encouraging what Hawkins refers to as mental play. Audiences are less interested in the black and white of morality and veer towards shows such as *Call My Agent!* where storylines hone-in on the need to do bad for the greater good. In these ways, public relations practitioners still transgress moral standards but are less likely to be considered monstrous because the impact and effect on others is utilitarian in nature.

It is also interesting to note that in these programmes physical appearance is made to play a crucial role in showcasing power and prestige of the senior public relations practitioner. This focus on attire can tend to further perpetuate unfavorable stereotypes about public relations practitioners being high-income earners (Grandien) who are styled with branded apparel but lacking in substance and morals (Fröhlich and Peters).

Promiscuous women

The urge to attract audiences to a female character can also lead to developing and cementing unfavorable stereotypes of public relations practitioners as uninhibited women who live on blurred

lines between personal and professional. These characters are not portrayed as inherently bad, but instead are found to indulge in lives of excess. In her definition of the monstrous, Arumugam suggests that excess and insatiable appetites direct the monster's behaviour, and Kearney outlines that this uncontainable excess is what signals the difference between humans and others. Such excess is readily identifiable in the character of Patsy Stone (played by Joanna Lumley) in *Absolutely Fabulous.* She is an alcoholic, regularly uses recreational drugs, is highly promiscuous and chain-smokes throughout the series. She is depicted as prone to acting deceptively to maintain her vices.

In *Flack*, Robyn is shown as regularly snorting cocaine and having sex with her clients. Those reviewing the show highlight how it will attract those interested in "its dark, acidic sense of humour" (Greene) while others condemn it because it emphasises the "depraved publicist" trope (Knibbs) and call it "one of the worst TV shows ever made" even though it is trying to highlight concerns raised in the MeToo movement about how men need to respect women (McGurk). Female characters such as Robyn with her willingness to question why a client has not tried to sleep with her, appear to undermine the empowerment of the movement rather than support it and continue to maintain the archetypes that those working in the field of public relations abhor.

Similarly, Samantha Jones (played by Kim Cattrell) of *Sex and the City*, is portrayed as sexually liberated and in one episode another character describes Samantha's vagina as "the hottest spot in town: it's always open". In many ways Samantha's sexual behaviour reflects a post-feminist narrative of empowerment, agency, and choice, but it could also be read as a product of being a public relations practitioner frequenting parties and bars as she rubs shoulders with clients, celebrities, and high-profile businesspeople.

To this end, Patsy, Samantha, and Robyn glamourise public relations and paint it as simply an extension of their liberated and promiscuous selves, with little care for any expectation of professionalism or work ethic. This is also in stark contrast to the reality, where women often tend to occupy technical roles that see much of their time spent in doing the hard yards of publicity and promotion (Krugler).

Making others err

Public relations practitioners are not just shown being morally ambiguous themselves but often quite adept at making others do deceitful acts on their behalf, thus nonchalantly oppressing others to get their way. For example, although lauded for elevating an African American woman to the lead role despite the show maintaining misrepresentations of race (Lambert), the main character of Olivia Pope (played by Kerry Washington) in the television programme *Scandal*, regularly subverts the law for her clients despite considering herself one of the "good guys" and wearing a "white hat." Over the course of seven seasons, Olivia Pope is found to rig elections, plant listening devices in political figures' offices, bribe, threaten, and conduct an affair with the President.

In some cases, she calls on the services of her colleague Huck to literally, and figuratively, get rid of the barriers in the way of protecting her clients. For example, in season one's episode *Crash and Burn* she asks Huck to torture a suspect for information about a dead client. Her willingness to

request such actions of her friend and colleague, regardless of perceived good motivations, reinforces Mittman's categorisation that monsters are identified by their effect and impact on others. Here, the impact includes the torturing of a suspect and the revisiting of psychological trauma by Huck's character. Huck struggles to overcome his past as a killer and spends much of the show trying to curb his monstrous tendencies which are often brought on by PR woman Olivia's requests.

Although she is sometimes striving for justice, Olivia's desire for results can lead her to act monstrously which inadvertently contributes to the racist and sexist ideologies that have long been associated with monsters and perceptions of the Other. Across time and space, certain ethnic groups, such as those of African descent, have been associated with the demonic (Cohen). Similarly, all that's feminine often needs to be discarded as the monster to conform to the patriarchal order of society (Creed). Therefore, Olivia Pope's monstrous behaviour not only does a disservice to representations of public relations practitioners, but also inadvertently perpetuates stereotypes about women of African American descent.

What are public relations practitioners really like?

Striving to be ethical

Majority of the public relations practitioners are encouraged, and in some cases, expected to conform to ethical guidelines to practice and gain respect, admiration, and in-group status. In New Zealand, those who opt to become members of The Public Relations Institute of New Zealand (PRINZ) are required to abide by the association's code of ethics. The code stipulates that members are bound to act in ways that serve public interests by ensuring they are honest, disclose conflict of interests, follow the law, act with professionalism, ensure openness and privacy are maintained and uphold values of loyalty, fairness, and independence (PRINZ).

Similarly, the Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communication Management, that binds practitioners together, identifies nine guiding principles that are to be adhered to be recognised as acting ethically. These include obeying laws, working in the public's interest, ensuring freedom of speech and assembly, acting with integrity and upholding privacy in sensitive matters (to name a few). These governing principles are designed to maintain ethical practice in the field. Of course, the trouble is that not all who claim to practice public relations become members of the local or global governing bodies. This implies that professional associations like PRINZ are not able to enforce ethics across board.

In New Zealand alone public relations consultants have had to offer financial reparations for acting in defamatory ways online (Fisher) or they have been alleged to have bribed an assault victim to prevent the person giving evidence in a court case (Hurley). Some academics have accused the industry of being engaged in organised lying (Peacock), but these are not common, nor are these moral transgressors accepted into ethical bodies that afford practitioners authenticity and

legitimacy.

In most cases, public relations practitioners view their role as acting as the moral conscience of the organisations they support (Schauster, Neill, Ferrucci and Tandoc). Furthermore, they rated better than the average adult when it came to solving ethical dilemmas through moral reasoning (Schuaster et al.). Additionally, training of practitioners through guidance of mentors has continued to contribute to the improved ethical ratings of public relations. What these findings suggest is that the monsters of public relations portrayed on our television screens are exaggerations that are not reflective of most of the practice.

Women of substance, but not necessarily power

Exploring the role of women in public relations, Topic, Cunha, Reigstad, Jele-Sanchez and Moreno found that female practitioners were subordinated to their male-counterparts but were found to be more inclined to practice two-way communication, offer balanced perspectives, opt to negotiate, and build relationships through cooperation. The competitiveness, independence and status identified in popular media portrayals were found to be exhibited more by male practitioners, despite there being more women in public relations industry than men. As Fitch argues, popular culture continues to suggest that men dominate public relations and their preferred characteristics end up being those elements that permeate the media messages, regardless of instances where the lead character is a woman or the fact that feminist values of "loyalty, ethics, morality, [and] fairness" are advocated by female practitioners in real life (Vardeman-Winter and Place, 333).

Additionally, even though public relations is a feminised field, female practitioners struggle to break the glass ceiling, with male practitioners dominating executive positions and out-earning women (Pompper). Interestingly, in public relations power is not just limited due to gender but also area of practice. In her ethnographic study of the New Zealand practice, Sissons found that practitioners who worked in consultancies were relatively powerless vis-à-vis their clients and often this asymmetry negatively affected the practitioner's decision-making.

This implies that in stark contrast to the immoral, glamourous and authoritative depiction of public relations women in television programmes; in reality, they are mired by the struggles of a gendered occupation. Accordingly, they are not in fact in a position to have monstrous power and impact over others. Therefore, one of the only elements the shows seem to capture and emphasise is that public relations is an occupation that specialises in image management, but what these shows contribute to, is an ideology that women are expected to look and carry themselves in particular ways, ultimately constructing aesthetics standards that can diminish women's power and self-esteem

Conclusion

Miller's archetypes may be over twenty years old, but the trend towards obsequious, manipulative, and cynical television characters remains. Although there have been identifiable shifts to loveable, yet shallow, public relations practitioners such as Alexis Rose on *Schitt's Creek*, the appeal of

monstrous public relations practitioners remains. As Cohen puts it monsters reveal to audiences "what a member of that society can become when those same dictates are rejected, when the authority of leaders or customs disintegrates and the subordination of individual to hierarchy is lost" (68). In other words, audiences enjoy watching the stories of metaphorical monsters because they exhibit the behaviours that are expected to be repressed in human beings; they depict what happens when the social norms of society are disturbed (Levina and Diem-My).

At the very least, these media representations can act much as monster narratives do, as a cautionary tale on how not to think and act to remain accepted as part of the in-group rather than being perceived as the Other. As Mittman and Hensel argue, society can learn much from monsters because monsters exist within human beings. According to Cohen, they offer meaning about the world and can and teach audiences so they can learn, in this case, how to be better. Although the representations of public relations in television can offer insights into roles that are usually most effective when they are invisible (Chorazy and Harrington), the continued negative stereotypes of public relations practitioners can adversely impact on the industry if people are unaware of the practices of the occupation, because lacking a reference point limits audiences' opportunities to critically evaluate the media representations. This will certainly harm the occupation by perpetuating existing negative stereotypes of charming and immoral practitioners, and perhaps add to its struggles with gendered identity and professional legitimacy.

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