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# SHOOT THE MESSENGER

In film and on television, PR people, or “flacks,” are usually morally vacuous – or stupid. At least some of them are funny, says New York talent booker **Celia Converse**

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**It is rare to find a sympathetic portrayal of a “flack” (or communications professional, if you prefer) in film or on TV – they don’t get the noble whistleblower treatment that journalists, lawyers, cops and doctors often receive. A movie that paints the “hacks” versus flacks relationship probably at its most cynical – both symbiotic and mutually repellent – is the classic *Sweet Smell of Success*.**

Set in New York City in the late 1950s and written by the brilliant playwright Clifford Odets, the film depicts J.J. Hunsecker (played by Burt Lancaster) as a ruthless, powerful, and acerbic syndicated columnist – modeled on real-life figures like Walter Winchell – and Sidney Falco (Tony Curtis) as a craven press agent who will suspend all principles to get publicity for his clients.

Falco is climbing “the golden ladder to where I want to get” and Hunsecker has nothing but contempt. But he is happy enough having Falco run around – “match me, Sidney” he says throughout, cigarette at the ready – digging up juicy gossip in exchange for running publicity for his clients. Falco is bothered by a flicker of conscience but he only looks good compared with the complete moral void that is the Hunsecker character.

At least many flacks are amusing, especially if they work in the world of showbiz. Several memorable creations have sprung from the mind of Christopher Guest, from whom we have the foulmouthed New Yorker Bobbi Flekman, played by Fran Drescher, in *This Is Spinal Tap*. She is the chain-smoking artist relations woman for Polymer Records whose bottom line is “money talks and bullshit walks.” In Guest’s Oscar campaign parody, *For Your Consideration*, John Michael Higgins plays the very odd Corey Taft of Corey Taft and Associates (there have never been associates, nor are there ever likely to be). He is a bouffant-haired idiot with an oversized ego and a touch of madness. After a prolonged absence from PR, Taft is handling press for an earnest and awful “indie” film, *Home for Purim*, and is hopelessly out of touch (“The

internet ... is that the one with e-mail?”). In Guest’s satire about folk music, *A Mighty Wind*, the publicists handling a reunion concert – Wally Fenton (Larry Miller) and Amber Cole (Jennifer Coolidge) of the Zizken Group – are cheerfully up-front about their ignorance of folk music or anyone involved in the event. Amber describes what drives the PR duo: “You know, we work together very well. It’s almost like we have one brain that we share between us ... like I’ll have an idea, it will just be a teeny, tiny little spark and then it will get to Wally and he’ll make it a fire.”

The queens of lifestyle publicists are undoubtedly television’s Edina “Eddie” Monsoon (Jennifer Saunders) from *Absolutely Fabulous* and Kim Cattrall as the hyper-expensed Samantha Jones in ***Sex and the City***. Jones is from a less absurd planet than Edina and the world she inhabits bears some resemblance to reality, although her PR work – which seems to consist of launch parties for fashion lines and work for various wealthy entrepreneurs – appears to provide her with an unbelievably large salary along with an insanely varied and pricey wardrobe. But we rarely see her actually work. She is drawn as smart and tough, and as unapologetically aggressive in her career as she is in her sex life.

Where Jones is a woman of absolute cool self-confidence, Edina is more a woman of boundless hysterical self-doubt. As a “PR guru,” Edina’s mania does seem to propel her to pull things off – be they fashion shows or questionable charity events. Even if Edina can’t get a Royal to show up, she can usually pull Lulu (“my best client”) out of her hat to promote her clients. And while Edina seems to spend the same or more on her wardrobe as Samantha, one of the best gags in the show each episode is Edina squeezed into the latest fashion of the moment – usually looking like a psychedelic potato even if it is “Lacroix, darling.”

In the cinematic and small screen worlds of politics, there are occasional noble examples such as the White House communications crew of television’s *The*

*West Wing* (Alison Janney as C.J. Cregg, Rob Lowe as Sam Seaborn, Richard Schiff as Toby Ziegler – Clintonia as Camelot). But there are more like the gloriously amoral Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro) in the film *Wag the Dog*. He's the spin doctor in charge of fabricating a war to distract the American public from a presidential sex scandal a few weeks before the election. Also, Peter Capaldi as the hilariously profane Malcolm Tucker, director of communications for the UK government in the TV series ***The Thick of It*** (and the film spin off, *In The Loop*). Tucker is said to be loved by real politicians and government PRs, perhaps some of whom worked with Alastair Campbell, former Prime Minister Tony Blair's ornery communications chief. Here Tucker derides someone's appearance in a television interview: "All these hands all over the place! You were like a sweaty octopus trying to unhook a bra."

One of the most compelling, if cynical, fictional PR characters is Nick Naylor (Aaron Eckhart) the smooth talking lobbyist for the tobacco industry in *Thank You for Smoking*. ("Michael Jordan plays ball. Charles Manson kills people. I talk. Everybody has a talent.") And a do-gooder corporate public relations consultant, Ray Embry (Jason Bateman), in ***Hancock*** has faith in his PR talent despite all evidence to the contrary. Describing himself as "the Bono of PR," Embry tries to do an image makeover of an alcoholic superhero (Will Smith) who causes mayhem every time he uses his powers. This flack's sincerity is genuine, but so unusual we could be forgiven for mistaking it for parody. ☹

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 With more than 20 years' experience as a talent booker, **Celia Converse** has handled famous movie stars to presidents (Sophia Loren making tiramisu, Barack Obama talking basketball), animals (the prize-winning boar from the Iowa State Fair), and the occasional vegetable (The World's Largest Rutabaga – although it got bumped). Currently she is a Talent Executive at Central Talent Booking in New York.