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Not just chick lit: How contemporary fiction conveys crisis communications

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ABSTRACT

A review and critique of Denise Hamilton's work of fiction: *Damage Control* (Scribner, 2011, 384 pages). This analysis shares insight on some of the novel's overriding themes of journalism, gender and ethics and their relationship with crisis communications. Through an examination of the main character, it reveals the differences and similarities between Hamilton's version of celebrity crisis management and representations of the field in popular culture. The novel portrays a version of perception management that is difficult, dirty and dangerous, but deeply satisfying – a concept that differs from what film and television depictions prove. Hamilton's riveting and page-turning work piques readers' curiosity into an engrossing murder mystery.

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A politician, an affair, murder and a long-lost best friend. What do you do when worlds collide, truths divide and your job is to reduce the damage?

Denise Hamilton attempts to explore the answer in her thrilling work of fiction, *Damage Control*. With a riveting plot that sheds light into the life of a Hollywood public relations practitioner, *Damage Control* reveals insight into the cornerstones and controversies of the profession: journalism, ethics and gender. Through the main character, Hamilton reveals a life of public relations that is difficult, dirty and dangerous, but deeply satisfying – a different notion than what popular culture would have us believe. Characters with depth and strong personalities make the reader want to continue turning each juicy, compelling page.

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While the novel offers a portrayal of the life of a crisis consultant, *Damage Control* is a story about burying and uncovering secrets, about how far you will go to find or create the truth and at what cost.

Hamilton writes with conviction as she depicts a middle-aged, middle-income divorcée, Maggie Silver, working at one of Hollywood's most prestigious perception management firms trying to solve the murder of a senator's aide and manage the media backlash. The believable dialogue helps propel the book's enticing narrative forward and although it is often challenging to keep track of the infinite characters continually introduced throughout, the plot twists make it a page-turner. The flashbacks between Maggie's troubled teenage years and the seamless connection with the present portray how the past exposes itself in the most unexpected times, turning her world around. Amid lies and secrets and forced to face her fears and demons of the past because of her work, Maggie finds out that true friendships are made – and kept – for a reason.

Ms. Maggie Silver is the novel's protagonist – an ambitious businesswoman saddled with a troubled past – whose insecurity emerges as the story progresses, suggesting that true character is revealed in the most trying times. Her insecurity shows through in her allegiance to her job over her safety and through the regrets she bears from her teenage years with which she never seems able to cope. In the end, she proves her loyalty lies not with her job or love interests, but with her mother and a childhood friend. "I'd take her secret – all their secrets – to my grave" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 371). At the root of Maggie's character as a "PR star" lies a blatant irony: a crisis consultant who struggles to manage the damage in her own life. Maggie, like Bridget Jones in the popular film, is a "free agent but uncertain of her future" (Johnson, 2010). Always vowing to change when the case is over, Maggie acknowledges that her profession is controlling her life, yet craves answers to the extent that she continuously postpones altering her ways. Maggie's profound, yet conflicted, character challenges readers to ask themselves why she is so determined to solve the case: is she doing it for her job or for herself?

Damage Control paints a picture of public relations as a thrill-seeking, desensitizing field in which danger is imminent and deception is expected. Cast against typical pop culture representations of public relations practice in which charm and glamour seem to be the norm, what Maggie faces is a tougher, more difficult and perilous job, yet similarities still remain. *Damage Control* fuels the perspective that female PR professionals in film and fiction are often obsequious, manipulative, money-minded, isolated, accomplished and unfulfilled (Miller, 1999, pp 3-38). Maggie has difficulty seeing the good

in people as a result of her job, as suggested by her blindness to her colleague Tyler's love for her because her natural human impulses are erased. Characters in the novel, much like in popular media, think in terms of revenue, not human decency.

The tough nature of the field is depicted in the novel through its treatment of the public relations file that Maggie is working on as a "case," rather than as a "campaign." As she and her colleagues are tasked to decipher the truth out of stories involving drugs, guns, murder, lies, violence, rape and adultery, their positions blur the line between detectives and professional communicators. Descriptions of Maggie's work in public relations are laced with jargon like "billable hours" and "positioning" and imply that the work of the professional communicator is essentially to "...make sure the client's version [of the story] gets told" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 12) and to "clean up messes" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 13). *Damage Control* promotes the stereotypical perception of a "sleazy and despicable" job in a "soul-sucking business" often reflected in negative media portrayals of the profession, but also adds the dimension of a dangerous, life-or-death industry.

Damage Control brings to light the uneasy relationship between journalism and public relations that is built upon mutual dependence and mutual distrust (White, 2007, p. 283). Narrated through the lens of a public relations practitioner, the novel portrays reporters as the bad guys - always popping up or calling when disaster strikes. Maggie repeatedly extends the deadline request for comment to a journalist, providing Maggie time to draft a statement first. When she finally does provide the reporter time, she simply repeats, "the family is in shock and has just heard the news" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 213). In the film *Roger and Me*, Mrs. McGee feeds Michael Moore the same line when she says, "it's a very private, personal time" (Miller, 1999, p. 21). The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "Century of Spin" echoes the notion of perception mattering more than reality when journalist Ira Basen (2007) says, "don't say what we think, say what we think will make us look good." Maggie's complex role is inconsistent with popular depictions of public relations characters, whose primary activity is media relations. "Media relations is almost exclusively the only specific public relations activity that these screen characters engage in..." (Lee, 2001). Maggie, however, also does other things, such as media coaching, research and drafting speeches.

Written by a female author who has been published in *Cosmopolitan* magazine, penned the *Los Angeles Times*' perfume column and counts an array of crime novels among the publications in her extensive portfolio, *Damage Control* creates a character that works tirelessly to get ahead, yet remains below

the ranks of her more negligent male bosses. Maggie engages in her many activities under the watchful eye of her male superiors, displaying a highly gendered perspective of the field. Often reduced to “damage girl,” Maggie works under a glass ceiling in the Blair Company, reminiscent of the majority of representations and reality of the field. More than seventy percent of membership at the Public Relations Society of America in 2007 was female, however eighty percent of upper management in PR is male (Sebastien, 2007). Like Bridget in *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, Maggie’s role lies predominantly within the technical ranks instead of management. Women have lower wages and status in the field and while Maggie doesn’t struggle to make ends meet, she shops at thrift stores and keeps working on the case under difficult pressure so she can get a promotion and earn a higher wage. The notion that “the face of public relations is female” (Johnson, 2010) is reinforced through Maggie’s bosses always making her do the on-camera work and face the Paxton family, often to act as a minder.

Sex appeal remains a crucial element of the gendered nature of the profession and Maggie’s character as an attractive, single woman works to reinforce this idea. Faraday’s comment to her saying, “you don’t have to actually *do* anything, Silver, just stand around and look pretty” (Hamilton, 2011, p. 349) is evidence of this fact. Other descriptions like “torpedo breasts, hornet-stung lips” (Hamilton, 2011, p. 270) portray the connection between public relations and appearance. The extensive allusions to perfume throughout also provide Maggie’s character with an increased sense of femininity and it just so happens to end up being this perfume that provides a clue into the resolution of the murder.

In film, females are often included either as a love interest, attractive or unmarried or any combination thereof. While Maggie never sleeps with her boss, she does with Tyler. Her character embodies post-feminism through the concepts of fashion, pleasure and independence, but not to the extent of characters like Samantha in *Sex and the City* who exhibit more autonomy and self-fulfillment.

While Maggie’s character works under a male hierarchy, this doesn’t keep her from holding her own. Maggie is the target of gendered statements like, “they sent a girl to do a man’s job,” (Hamilton, 2011, p. 156) and completes dangerous tasks in the name of her role, like meeting men in the dark alone at night, dodging bullets and running from gunshots – all-the-while wearing heels and perfume. Much like popular depictions of public relations in film, such as the BBC series *Absolute Power*, Maggie’s role is not synonymous with glamour, event planning, party-going or cocktail drinking.

Ethics come into question throughout the novel, specifically when Maggie accepts a project that is a conflict of interest, and in the development of the ensuing strategy. Maggie entered into the project in full acknowledgement of her close past relationship with the client's family and finds it difficult to make objective decisions. She says, "I worry that my emotions are clouding my judgment" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 101) in the "murky new terrain between crisis consultant and family friend" (Hamilton, 2011, p. 42). When she is asked to be taken off the Paxton case, Maggie is persuaded to continue with only a little coaxing, suggesting she has the capacity to engage in sophisticated moral reasoning, but doesn't always follow it.

She also struggles with the ethics surrounding the perception management firm she works for, wondering whether the Blair Company abides by any ethical standards. L'Etang (2004) maintains the most important task of PR is to ensure the company is perceived as a socially responsible agent, yet the novel makes no reference to any codes of ethics. It reads, "we don't need your business if it means torpedoing our credibility," (Hamilton, 2011, p. 91) but there is no proof Blair wouldn't accept other high-profile, high-paying clients with less-than-moral prospects. Practitioners pay people off to acquire information and engage in other questionable scheme, yet face few repercussions. The consequences in film and fiction for dealing with ethical choices are clearer and involve either repudiation or redemption. Some practitioners lose their jobs, are physically attacked, jailed, or receive the ultimate repudiation, death.

Public relations characters in film are often presented in popular culture as veering off the path of acceptable behaviour by lying. In the *Sweet Smell of Success*, Sidney Falco's employer tells him, "it's a publicity man's nature to be a liar. I wouldn't hire you if you wasn't a liar" (Miller, 1999, p. 14). Lying by omission is certainly prevalent in *Damage Control*, stressing the disregard for any mutually beneficial two-way relationship between client and stakeholders.

Overall, Denise Hamilton's *Damage Control* relies on some of the most fundamental concepts in the realm of crisis communications to fashion a must-read story that is entertaining, thought-provoking and captivating. The narrative flows at a fast pace, revealing complex characters that work their way through pressure and peril to solve both a high-profile murder and their own internal struggles.

Damage Control fulfills its mission as both a psychological thriller and compelling work of "chic lit" by unraveling complexities involved in an increasingly popular modern career choice and its intersection with journalism,

ethics and gender. While prompting readers to uncover a mystery, Hamilton engages one to think beyond the scope of the often seemingly superficial profession and to one that is challenging, disturbing, and yet highly gratifying. Whether for analysis in a public relations or journalism course or for a leisure read, the fast-paced plot and plausible characters propel the reader forward to realize the aforementioned themes transcend simply public relations and actually reflect human nature.

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