This 1997 movie, “Wag the Dog” directed by Barry Levinson, is based on Larry Beinhart’s book, “American Hero”. Robert De Niro plays the role of Conrad Brean, a political spin doctor specializing in managing crisis situations. Another key character, Stanley Motss, is played by Dustin Hoffman. He is the Hollywood movie producer brought in by Conrad to put
together an elaborate and comprehensive “production” to divert media (public) attention away from the story of possible sexual misconduct by the president, who is up for reelection in eleven days. A day before the story is to be published in the major news media the White House brings in Conrad Brean to try fix what this story could do to the presidency. Anne Heche plays the role of a white house staff (Winifred Ames), who even though she is part of this whole scheme, is at times baffled by the audacity of Conrad’s “production”.

Deception and diversion

The story in the movie revolves around the various deception schemes aimed at diverting attention away from the president’s sex scandal. Spurious news stories concocted by Conrad, Motss and Motss’s team are fed to the unsuspecting mainstream media in ingenious ways. The elaborate misinformation and false news items that are devised to divert media attention are: (1) The White house press office to denying the stories of the B-3 bomber (2) A war with Albania (3) Albanian terrorists placing a nuclear device (suitcase bomb) near the US border in Canada. Therefore, there is an imminent threat of the device being smuggled into the US (4) An American soldier, Sgt. William Schumann (played by Woody Harrelson) stuck behind enemy lines in Albania, and his homecoming as a hero after being rescued (5) A hero’s welcome to a fallen soldier.

The Public Relations Industry

This movie depicts the inner workings of the world of political spin, which is a major part of the public relations industry. The public relations industry is portrayed in a negative light. While exposing some of the unscrupulous methods employed by public relations professionals,
the movie shows how vulnerable to manipulation the media and the public are. Wag the Dog depicts how public relations firms concoct various distractions to divert attention. In the movie, Conrad Brean is referred to as Mr. Fix-it. This speaks to his expertise in handling (fixing) crisis situations. This movie also showcases how powerful entities (government, big business) use their resources to achieve their almost sinister objectives. The movie also brings to light the general attitude of disdain the industry has towards the public. It is clear in the movie that, while the industry is concerned about public opinion, it knows well that the public is gullible and can easily be manipulated through the media. This movie also showcases how human emotions and patriotism are used by the public relations industry in deceptive ways to manipulate the public. The movie demonstrates how the public relations industry creates and carries out comprehensive PR campaigns. It also depicts how Hollywood and the entertainment industry works and how an elaborate show production is formulated complete with: patriotic songs ("The old shoe"), emotional appeal ("Courage Mom"), An American soldier stuck behind enemy lines, A hero’s welcome for a serviceman, and bringing home the body of a heroic soldier.

**Ethical Issue 1: “I made that lame turkey fly” - Giving credit where credit is due**

Stanley Motss, who puts together this elaborate production of the fake war and other deceptions, starts to view this as his best work. He is proud of the fact that he was able to literally get the president reelected. In Stanley’s own words “I made that lame turkey fly”. However, when the news media credits the presidents’ win on a pathetic (in Stanley’s view) campaign with the slogan “Don’t change horses in midstream”, Stanley feels cheated out of the credit due to him. This is not uncommon in the business world. We often hear of someone taking credit for somebody else’s hard work. Academia is no exception. I am reminded of the story about a faculty member of the Carlson School of Business who was fired for claiming a student’s works
as his own. In business, when everyone is trying to impress their bosses and outshine their colleagues it would be tempting to claim credit for other people’s ideas or work.

The issue was not resolved. Due to the secret nature of the project and if the details of which were to leaked to the public could potentially bring down the presidency. Fearing that a disgruntled Stanley will alert the media on details of his involvement, Stanley is killed and his death is made to look like he suffered a heart attack at the poolside. The issue of taking credit is in essence is stealing someone else’s labor (a persons’ property according to the constitution). More ethical individual behavior could be cultivated by making people aware of the gravity of the offense. Further, if organizations do not curtail this, the organization may end up promoting and keeping non-qualified and corrupt individuals and driving away the real talent. Therefore, companies need to think through and have strict policy regarding this unethical practice.

Ethical Issue 2:

“Courage Mom” - Abusing visual imagery and other stimuli to deceive the general public

The movie depicts how various stimuli are used to mislead the public and convey subtle messages to the unsuspecting public. Among the stimuli used are: An Albanian teenager running with a white cat, patriotic theme song, little Albanian girl on the airport tarmac handing the president the first sheaf of the harvest, the president giving his jacket to the girl’s grandmother, “courage mom” written in Morse code on the serviceman’s jersey, rubbing meat on the serviceman’s shoe so that a dog would run up to the and lick his feet, hanging old shoes on trees to symbolize Sgt. William “old shoe” Schumann who is stuck behind enemy lines, and creating the song “The old shoe”. All this stimuli are used in order to get the media and public emotionally involved in the story being spun.
Many businesses use such stimuli in their advertising and merchandising to appealing to basic human emotions and fears in order sell their products and services. The advertising industry is often accused of engaging in deceptive practices. Wal-Mart regularly uses patriotic themes and portrays itself as an All American Company, even though the majority of the products they sell are from china.

This issue is not resolved in the movie. I believe that organizations would be more forthcoming in their advertising and try to truly live up to the image they portray to the public. The public being more aware of these schemes would also help to curtail this behavior. Also certain watch groups that would bring to light these deceptive practices will help to minimize these transgressions.

**Ethical Issue 3:**

“*The Old Shoe*” - Taking advantage of someone who is not of sound mental faculties

Sgt. William Schumann is a psychiatric patient, and is in military prison for raping a nun. However he is depicted in the production as the brave soldier stuck behind enemy lines. While doctored pictures of him are all over the media, Sgt. Schumann himself has no idea. When he sees his picture on the on the TV news at a grocery store, he utters “that looks like me”. Clearly this unsuspecting individual is being exploited. Ms. Ames has serious misgivings about using this mentally ill person, and does protest against it. However, after listening to arguments by Conrad and Stanley, and considering the scandal at hand is forced to reluctantly comply with using him. Even though Sgt. Schumann will be ok as long as he gets his medication, it seems that he is much sicker than they initially thought. They concoct various excuses to explain
Schumann’s bizarre behavior, such as blaming the behavior on the terrible things he suffered at the hands of the enemy.

In the business world it is not uncommon to see individuals being taken advantage of this way; whether buying product they have no use for or signing up for services they do not need, let alone understand. We often hear stories of unscrupulous telemarketers and salespeople taking advantage of the elderly or mentally feeble. In our prison visit, we even had the opportunity to meet a banker who had taken advantage of an elderly lady.

This is not resolved, but comes to an end when Sgt. William Schumann is shot dead by a grocery store owner when Schumann attempts to rape the store owner’s daughter. However they still use his body to have a hero’s welcome. There needs to be a better way of protecting the more vulnerable persons in society. Those who are not mentally sound need better protections against unscrupulous business practices. Provisions can be made in the law to have competent guardian signature when such persons enter into contracts, since such persons could easily end up in hurting their credit or end up in precarious situations.

Other Ethics Issues

Within the last month itself two major sexual scandals were in the news: David Letter of CBS and Steve Philips (baseball analyst) who was fired from ESPN. This movie is based on trying to divert attention away from a sex scandal, which often occurs in the business world. In Leaking selected information and misinformation to the media by public relations firms is also depicted in this movie. In the midst of all this deceptive schemes Ms. Ames is quite anxious about not employing the services of illegal immigrants, which could be a problem to the president. After a plane crash the group along with Sgt. Schumann is rescued by an illegal alien,
she works quickly to get him citizenship so that everything is clean and an illegal alien is not employed by the president.

**Lessons learned**

Kohlberg would categorize all the main characters involved in this plot as stage threes, since their primary group they identify with and have loyalty to is presidents inner circle (White House group concerned with keeping the president in office), and the next group is “the party”. At one time in the movie when Staley talks about getting credit/payback for his production, Ms. Ames mentions that he has done this for the party and “your party thanks you” is clear indication of this.

This movie was a fitting complement to the book “Trust Us, We're Experts”. Having read the book, I was more attuned to the events of the movie see the public relations campaign in action. And how boldly and easily they are able to manipulate the unsuspecting general public. This was a great opportunity to see the world of public relations and political spin doctors in action. This also made me aware that each news item may have deeper roots. Further, even the so called reputed media is flawed at times and needs to do a better job of verifying the news stories before they air it to an unsuspecting public.

**Reference**