Mrs. Maxwell was on the right track, sort of

I finally watched Salmon Fishing in the Yemen last night (Netflix had me wait for this movie for about two months, but that is another story). If you haven't seen it yet, this is the basic plot: Yemeni sheik likes to fish salmon and wants to be able to do so in his country. He hires a British firm to find someone to bring his plans to fruition. British firm reaches out to Dr. Alfred Jones, of the UK Fishing and Hunting Department. Dr. Jones laughs at the idea, but Mrs. Patricia Maxwell, press secretary for the British Prime Minister insists that the project must go on, as a publicity ploy to counteract some bad news. And so Dr. Jones embarks on feasibility studies, etc.

To me, Salmon Fishing in the Yemen is a movie about the power of ~~faith~~ PR. Great public relations takes skill and passion. It is not for the faint of heart, especially when embodied by Mrs. Maxwell, who is played brilliantly, and with comic flair by Kristin Scott Thomas. She is a spot-on caricature of a PR person (always working, smartphone in hand 24-7, running from meeting to meeting). In my opinion, she alone makes the movie worth watching.

Mrs. Maxwell is very adept at PR. Here's what she does well:

- Understands the value of positive publicity ("we need a good news story from the Middle East")
- Is always thinking of what story to tell
- Recognizes opportunities (when she hears there are 2 million fishermen in the UK, she sees voters)
- Knows that every audience has its news source
- Thinks visually (does the Prime Minister fish? No, well send the Foreign Minister instead)

But Mrs. Maxwell is not perfect. Here's where she may have

gone a bit wrong:

- Fails to have a plan B (expects plan she has to work regardless)
- Doesn’t understand the constituency (salmon fishermen are pretty passionate about their fish and will not go down easily)
- Is too focused on the end result (goes too far in general)
- Treats people like pawns

What do you think? Do PR people go to far in real life? Do you know a Mrs. Maxwell? Do we need more PR people like her or fewer? And if you haven’t seen this movie, try to get it on your Netflix queue now. It may be a while.