

NEW MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR TEACHING HOSPITAL: ISSUES, PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

John GODSWILL¹, Victor NDIFON¹

¹Lecturer, Cross River University of Technology, Calabar, Nigeria
Corresponding author: John Godswill; email: godswilljohn@crutech.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper examined the challenges of new media technologies use in public relations practice in Nigeria. The paper specifically examined the practice in the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital (UCTH). The study utilized the survey methodology. The study also relied mostly on library materials and related literature as the source of data. Focus interviews were also held with public relations practitioners within the UCTH. The study was guided by the theory of technological determinism which is the belief that technologies have an overwhelming power to drive human actions which leads to social change. Findings arising from the study suggest that there is a considerable application of new media technologies in UCTH and that blogs, social and other emerging media are enhancing public relations practice in the hospital. Findings show that practitioners continue to strongly agree that social media are changing the way public relations is practiced. Although the relevance of new media technologies to PR practice are well documented, several challenges like cyber crisis, corruption, and the lack of expertise continue to plague the profession. Based on this, the researcher made some recommendations including the need for UCTH to frequently train their staff so as to keep them abreast with the changing trends in communication due to the transformation brought about by the new media technologies.

Keywords: *New media, Internet, public relations, cyber crisis, blogs.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In a society where there is a depressing economic climate and increased competition, resulting to increased cost and dwindling profits, it has become imperative for many organizations that are into business to not only make profit, but to also ensure that their public profile and perception is positive. To achieve this, some organizations have adopted measures to ensure that the reputation of their organizations' products and services is enhanced and, at the

same time, to establish and sustain a mutual relationship with their public.

Globally, good Public Relations (PR) is a time-tested measure to earn public acceptance and good will. This view of PR is re-echoed in the definition offered by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations who positioned the discipline as "the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics".

It is true that the advancement in modern technology, which resulted in building computer/Internet in the late 20th century and with more powerful and sophisticated ones in this 21st century, has transformed the world into a global village as postulated by a Canadian English professor, Marshal McLuhan. This new technology has further compressed the whole world into a single electronic to where information about far and near can be exchanged and shared with just one mouse click. Internet, being the host of many other social media such as: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, eBay, eBuddy, Eskimi, 2go, Yahoo, Google etc., made information distribution faster, cheaper and easier. The arrival of this information and communication technology affected every sphere of human activity, ranging from education to agriculture, business, mass communication, politics, and health.

Van der Merwe et al. have rightly pointed out that the field of public relations practice is also shifting with new media bringing about substantial increase in stakeholder strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups (VAN DER MERWE et al.,

2005). To Stephens information 'pours out of digital spigots and news now arrives "astoundingly fast from an astounding number of directions" and it is often free (STEPHENS, 2007). The implication of this is that anyone with a computer connected to the Internet has the ability to publish information for potential global consumption and it is clear that the Internet "is revolutionizing many aspects of public relations research and practice" (TAYLOR & KENT, 2006). It was McAllister and Taylor who opined that the Internet gives public relations practitioners a unique opportunity to collect information, monitor public opinion on issues, and engage in direct dialogue with their publics about a variety of issues (MCALLISTER & TAYLOR, 2007).

2. FOCUS OF INQUIRY

Gonzalez-Herrero & Ruiz De Valbuena argued that PR practitioners are not fully embracing new media, they are ill-equipped to do so and have a fear of technology although corporate websites, chat-rooms, email customer response facilities and electronic news release distribution are now viewed as standard aspects of public relations practice. It is sometimes worrisome to observe that many public relations practitioners are struggling with the impact of new media, and especially the Internet (GONZALEZ-HERRERO & RUIZ DE VALBUENA, 2006).

While it is safe to admit that the field of public relations practice is also shifting with new media bringing about substantial increase in stakeholder strength through facilitating communication within stakeholder groups and between different stakeholder groups, the Nigerian climate appears to be fraught with perennial challenges, the most difficult one being the absence of basic infrastructures to support the new media technology. It is against this backdrop that a study of this nature becomes imperative in order to assess the challenges mitigating the PR practice in Nigeria.

This work is however focused on The University of Calabar Teaching Hospital. Findings arising from this study are expected to provide ample evidence on the issue under discussion. It is also useful at this point to observe

that this study basically seeks to explore the challenges in PR practice occasioned by new media technology. The researcher is of the opinion that a study of this nature is relevant, especially against the backdrop of the present-day realities and he also expresses the belief that the findings will be useful for a more elaborate study, while also providing practitioners with the opportunity of benchmarking the current practice in relation to the contemporary challenges.

3. NEW MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Abdulrashid (2014) states that the Internet has clearly revolutionised the industry in a short period of time. He went further to explain that new communications media have developed into a number of different forms, including text, images, audio and video, through the development of forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, social networks, professional networks and micro-blogging sites.

There are instances where industry practitioners have misused and miscalculated the impact of new media. A perfect example by Broderick (2013) cited in Abdulrashid (2014) was in late 2013 when Justine Sacco, a Public Relations Director for InterActive Corp (IAC), published this tweet before boarding a flight to Cape Town, South Africa: "Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding! I'm white!".

In merely an hour, the tweet went viral worldwide without her realising and it almost plunged the organization into an international crisis situation. The company responded appropriately by condemning the offensive comment and stating that the comment does not in any way reflect the views and values of IAC. This behaviour cost the employee her job as the management of IAC terminated her appointment with immediate effect.

Keep in mind that public relations represents the task of goodwill creation directed in building harmony between an organization and its environment through mutual understanding based

on truth and full information. In fact, The Chattered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defines it as “the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its public”.

The function of public relations is directed towards developing and encouraging attitudes and behaviour, which will nurture the seeds of mutual understanding and assist their strong and healthy growth. Haywood and Nwosu in Anyi, share the view that public relations encourages pursuance of positive steps to achieve good will, that is, the implementation of strategies that could ensure a cordial business and social rapport with the various publics (ANYI, 2007). In other words, public relations encourages the building of corporate reputation. PR advocates elimination of practice which though legitimate, may offend public opinion or jeopardize mutual understanding.

Elsewhere, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), defines Public relations as “a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics”. This definition is considered simple and straightforward because it attempts to expose the basic concept of the practice and how it represents a strategic communication process.

Wynne stated that a public relations practitioner promotes companies or individuals via editorial coverage, as opposed to “paid media”, such as advertisements or announcements. By and large, it could be agreed that the industry promotes clients basically and make them seem as successful, honest, important, exciting or relevant as possible. In the words of Wynne, “they’re hired to protect, enhance or build their reputations through media” (WYNNE, 2013). This is more so in the sense that if there’s a positive message, they will translate it into a positive media story or when the news is bad, they will formulate the best response and mitigate the damage.

The power of new technology cannot be underestimated anymore. Current society thrives upon technology, where each and every one of the world’s citizen are somehow linked via a massive network known as the Internet. There is no doubt that the Internet has transformed the

way people communicated. This transformation carries with it several challenges which may significantly affect the fidelity of the communication process. It is therefore necessary to investigate the channels of communication within the digital spectrum.

Dewdney and Ride (2006) in Abdurashid (2014) sees new media as the preferred term for a range of media practices that employ digital technologies and the computer in some way or another. In its simplest form, new media could also mean the use of computers to send and receive information.

Galloway observes that the conventional public relations techniques are undermined by the mobile nature of new media and this requires public relations practitioners to rethink the way in which they relate to the public (GALLOWAY, 2005). Internet news services are not just relying on the news wire services, but turning increasingly to other places for raw materials. Public relations practitioners should be aware that “transcripts, reports and budgets are regularly being placed on the Web, either by the organizations themselves or by citizens trying to hold those organizations to account” (STEPHENS, 2007). Consumers expect instant updates in their inboxes when something happens. Public relations practitioners may be under more pressure to produce this instant content. The implications for public relations practitioners of needing to prepare materials faster than ever before include being able to produce what is required almost instantaneously and with the required level of accuracy; having processes in place that can get required priority clearances for materials to be released; and, having the technology at hand to directly distribute or upload what is being disseminated. These factors may put pressure on the public relations practitioners and on their team, but they may also pressure the relationships they have with colleagues or the senior staff, in particular the CEO, and his or her minders. It can also add pressure to the relationship with the Information Technology (IT) team if direct upload to the corporate website is not available to the public relations practitioners. In-house public relations practitioners may need to form stronger alliances with IT departments and may have to engage

with the organisation's legal advisers in order to refine content clearance procedures when content is instantaneously demanded.

Another practice area that new media changed in the past decade is that of events. People attending events are being exposed to more and more "bells and whistles", as new media technology gives the wherewithal to create spectacle to an ever-increasing number of people. The ubiquitous digital projector and PowerPoint presentations became baseline requirements for the most basic events, and access to the Internet to enable presenters to integrate online elements is now almost essential. Practitioners working on events may need to manage the expectations of their employing organisations, their consumers and stakeholders, including sponsors, that the level of spectacle and gadgetry provided at one event will be replicated or augmented.

There is also the need to consider whether target publics have access to new media technologies such as the Internet. This becomes an issue when the communication strategies target publics without such access due to geographic or socio-economic factors (BADARACCO, 2007).

4. OVERVIEW OF NEW MEDIA TOOLS USED IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

New media is the dominant force in professional communications today, impacting strategies in everything from marketing to publishing and to public relations. For PR professionals and communicators in particular, a strong and carefully planned new media strategy is vital in order to ensure maximum reach for a client or campaign. New media tools are a key resource for professionals looking to effectively implement a campaign across different platforms. Most also provide analytics on performance and engagement, allowing users to tailor future campaigns in order to increase efficiency. The new media tools used in PR are those that meet the changing trends associated with the 21st century, thereby enhancing the practice of public relations. They include the Internet, webcasting, e-mail, videoconferencing, video news release, among others.

Of a concern in this 21st century is the fact that the influx of the variety of contemporary public relations tools leaves the public relations department with the problem of choice. In this regard, Ajala provides some factors which should be considered in making the right choice (AJALA, 2005). Some of these factors include "the media profile, the target public profile, time factor, competition and cost of the tool". All these factors, if properly harnessed, are very capable of guiding the public relations department of any organization in choosing any of these contemporary tools.

5. THEORETICAL CONSIDERATION

This work rests on the technological determinism theory because according to Lievrouw & Livingstone, technological determinism is "the belief that technologies have an overwhelming power to drive human actions" and this leads to social change (LIEVROUW & LIVINGSTONE, 2006).

Technological determinism, simply put, is the idea that technology has important effects on our lives. This idea figures prominently in the popular imagination and political rhetoric, for example in the idea that the Internet is revolutionizing economy and society. The term "technological determinism" was coined by Thorstein Veblen and this theory revolves around the proposition that technology, in any given society, defines its nature. Technology is viewed as the driving force of culture in a society and it determines its course of history.

Technological determinism seeks to show technical developments, media, or technology as a whole, as the key mover in history and social change. Most interpretations of technological determinism share two general ideas: that the development of technology itself follows a predictable, traceable path largely beyond cultural or political influence, and that technology in turn has "effects" on societies that are inherent, rather than socially conditioned or produced because that society organizes itself to support and further develop a technology once it was introduced. Strict adherents to technological determinism do not believe that the influence of

technology differs based on how much a technology is or can be used. Instead of considering technology as part of a larger spectrum of human activity, technological determinism sees technology as the basis for all human activity.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that public relations practitioners in Nigeria must understand that new media technologies, when properly harnessed, are capable of transforming public relations practice. In fact, new media technologies, by their very nature, are drivers of social change, national development and organizational development. It is in the light of these elements, that this theory is considered apt for this work.

6. METHODOLOGY

This research relied almost entirely on secondary sources of relevant data for the work. In this regard, the researcher consulted the library for literature on the research area. Internet journals were also useful in providing quality data for this paper. Beyond this, the researcher personally had interviews with selected staff of the PR Unit of the hospital. The focus of the interview explored the level of compliance with new media technologies in PR practice in UCTH, as well as the factors mitigating the application of new media technologies in PR practice in UCTH.

Accordingly, findings suggest that there is a considerable application of new media technologies in UCTH and that blogs, social and other emerging media are enhancing public relations practice in the hospital. These social and other emerging media continue to influence the traditional mainstream media. Findings show that practitioners continue to strongly agree that social and other emerging media are changing the way public relations is practiced. This impact continues to be much more pronounced for external than internal audiences.

Regardless of the glowing tributes, several factors continue to mitigate the effective application of new media technologies in the practice of public relations in UCTH. These factors identified as the challenges of new media

technologies in the practice of public relations form the crux of this work. Here are some of the identified challenges, as following:

Cyber Crisis - This is one of the major factors affecting public relations practitioners in their use of new media. The Internet revolution came with its problem. It has the problem of human system failure, network problem, virus issues and many others. Campbell et al. note that "spam and spurious news" are some of the problems associated with the Internet (CAMPBELL et al., 2009). This among other related issues constitute cyber crisis for effective public relations practice. In this new media age, it is highly possible for anyone to wreak havoc, create a controversy or mar the image of a company or an individual in any small organization. Even a disgruntled employer or small/large group of people can mar the image of an organization by pasting controversial information on the net. This would undoubtedly negatively affect the effective public relations practice. However, prompt response to any such information online is one of the fastest means of combating cyber crisis.

Corruption - Corruption is another factor militating against the effective practice of public relations in the era of new media technologies. In this regard, Okafor states that many forms of bribery were erroneously described as media / public relations practice "adversely affected the integrity of the profession" (OKAFOR, 2002). In Nigeria for instance, it is commonly believed that some media gatekeepers ask for "white envelopes", in one way or the other, before accepting stories and news releases from organizations. Sometimes, some journalists without recourse to professional ethics rejects stories that are newsworthy and attractive from organizations public relations department because of lack of incentives. Therefore, it is not surprising that, occasionally, there have been issues of distrust or mistrust in public relations practice globally as manipulations of information have become the order of the day, because of corruption. To tackle this issue, media gatekeepers must ensure that they operate within the confines of the ethics of their profession.

Lack of Expertise - Public relations practice in this era of new media technologies requires

expertise for both the practice and the use of new media technologies. This required expertise is lacking in most developing countries. Okafor attributes this situation to the fact that early practitioners included people who “rose through the rank and graduates from other fields of study, such as Marketing, Psychology, Journalism, Linguistics etc., who did not receive any formal training in either public relations or media relations”, in order to enable them to effectively function in government or business organizations (OKAFOR, 2002). Even those who read Public Relations are not knowledgeable in all the new media usage and are not constantly trained in this regard. Regular training is the key to unlock this factor. Even the few who may claim to have fair or good knowledge of new media usage for the practice of public relations are seriously hampered by the unsteady power supply problem in Nigeria. Most new media require constant and stable power supply. This, unfortunately, has been a mirage in Nigeria for a long time. All these factors, if not properly handled, can put the practice of public relations in this era of new media technologies in jeopardy.

7. CONCLUSION

Apparently, the challenges confronting the practice of public relations in Nigeria in the era of new media technologies are alarming and should not be ignored. The efforts to reduce these factors lie in the hands of all stakeholders involved directly and indirectly in the practice. These include the Nigerian government, media organizations, corporate organizations, government and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), individuals, as well as public and public relations practitioners. The situation requires advocacy for a deliberate and conscious government policies in order to tackle the various challenges and a clarion call to all the stakeholders for a way forward.

Recommendations

In view of this, the following are recommended as part of a way to reduce and, if possible, eradicate some or all of the factors militating

against an effective public relations practice in Nigeria

1. Organizations in Nigeria lagging behind in frequent training of staff must ensure that their staff are sent for regular training sessions all over the world, so as to keep them abreast with the changing trends in communication due to the transformation brought about by the new media technologies.
2. Organizations operating in Nigeria in the 21st century should have an active website. Apart from this, the site should be updated regularly with events happening in the organization, especially with those that pertain to the plan of action the organisation intends to execute over a period of time in favour of the publics. In addition, there is a need for quarterly or, as the case may be, online survey through the organization’s website, in order to determine people and the media perception about them. Above all, public relations practitioners must be ready to use the benefits of Internet to their organization’s advantage and they must also position themselves in order to help the organizations deal with the crisis of the Internet.
3. Especially in Nigeria where there is still no visible improvement in power supply despite the government’s continuous claims and promises of providing regular power supply over the years, organisations should endeavour to generate their own source of power supply while hoping the government promises in that regard would eventually be accomplished.
4. The government of Nigeria must endeavour to provide a conducive atmosphere for the organizations operating in the country, through steady and regular power supply and moderate taxation for the smooth operations of activities.

Unarguably, if seventy-five percent of the above-mentioned workable recommendations are put into action, the public relations practice in Nigeria would reach unimaginable heights. It would also ensure that the importance of new media in public relations is felt especially when the right contemporary tools are employed and the appropriate strategies adopted.

References

- AJALA, V.O. (2005) *Public Relations: in Search of Professional Excellence*. Revised 2nd Edition. Ibadan: MayBest Publication.
- ALFONSO, G.-H., & DE VALBUENA, M.R. (2006) Trends in online media relations: Web-based corporate press rooms in leading international companies. *Public Relations Review*. 32:267–75.
- ANYI, J.O. (2007) Public Relations and the Banking Sector in Nigeria: An Evaluative Study of some Selected Banks in Enugu [PhD thesis]. Department of Marketing, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus.
- BADARACCO, C.H. (2007) *T. Kelleher, Public Relations Online: Lasting Concepts for Changing Media*, California: Sage.
- CAMPBELL R, MARTINS, C.R. & FABOS, B. (2009) *Media and Culture: An Introduction to Mass Communication*. 6th Edition. Boston: Bedford / St Martins.
- GALLOWAY, C. (2005) Cyber-PR and 'dynamic touch', *Public Relations Review*. 31:572–77.
- LIEVROUW LA, LIVINGSTONE S (2006) *Introduction to the First edition (2002): The Social Shaping and consequences of ICTs*. In: LA Lievrouw, S Livingstone, Eds.: *The Handbook of New Media*. Updated Student Edition. London: Sage.
- MCALLISTER, S. & TAYLOR, M. (2007) Community college web sites as tools for fostering dialogue. *Public Relations Review*. 33:230–32.
- OKAFOR, G.O. (2002) Principles of Public Relations. In: CS Okunna, Ed. *Teaching Mass Communication: A Multi-dimensional Approach*. Enugu: New Generation Books.
- STEPHENS, M. (2007) Beyond News. *Columbia Journalism Review*. 45:34–9.
- TAYLOR, M. & KENT, M. (2007) Taxonomy of mediated crisis responses. *Public Relations Review*. 33:140–6.
- VAN DER MERWE, R., PITT, L. & ABRATT, R. (2005) Stakeholder Strength: PR Survival Strategies in the Internet age. *Public Relations Quarterly*. 50:29–39.
- WYNNE, R. (2013) What does a public relations agency do? *Forbes*. Available from: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertwynne/2013/04/10/what-does-a-public-relations-agency-do/> [25 February 2020].