THE CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS OF NEW MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIAN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

The need for relationships management and consent engineering has necessitated the growth of Public Relations in organisations, the Ivory Towers inclusive. The arrival of the New Media technology driven by the Internet has introduced a paradigm shift in Public Relations Management from the use of the old media like newspapers, magazines, radio and television etc to the gradual adoption of the platforms of the social media like blogs, face book, Twitter and LinkedIn etc. Apart from the advantages of the use of new media technology in PR in the areas of higher speed of dissemination of communication, interactive qualities etc, there are obvious challenges. These range from lack of gate keeping and liberalization to anonymity of the audience among others. It amounts to the dialogue of the deaf where everyone is talking and nobody is hearing. Literature reviewed however revealed that the PR capabilities of the new media have not been fully explored by Higher Institutions in Nigeria especially in the area of blog. It is therefore recommended that they live up to that expectation by expanding the horizon and switching to the new media platform with its dialogic and interactive potentials.

Key words: new media, Public Relations, Interactivity, challenges, Relationships Management.

INTRODUCTION

Public relations has become an essential aspect of modern management such that any organisation that worth its salt has got to make it a priority (Gross, 2012). The reason for this trend is straightforward: public image of any organisation is most essential for its success and indeed survival especially our Ivory towers with much public expectations.

Public relations has been defined as “a management function, which evaluates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures, and interests of an organization... followed by executing a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance” (Lee and Bernays, 1992). The key objective of public relations is to achieve and sustain mutual understanding, mutual goodwill and mutual faith between an organisation and its publics.

However, being a communication endeavour, public relations cannot be executed without recourse to a communication medium. In other words, every PR endeavour involves one form of communication or the other and in consequence must be carried out via one form of communication medium or the other (Bargeron, 2006).

Traditionally, public relations employ communication media such as newspaper, magazine, radio, television, billboard, bulletins, etc. This class of media is referred to as the traditional or old media. The term “old media” is aimed at underlining the difference between a particular genre of media now known as the “new media.” Scholars have found it a bit problematic defining new media being that the term is admittedly a loose one; “it refers strictly to no particular class of communication hardware but only to some form of
functionality, i.e. some particular results associated with applying some form of technology in communication” (Nelson, 2011). In this vein, Okoye (2011) sees the new media as “that class of communication platforms that integrate the ‘mass’ strength of the traditional media and the interactivity cum participatory advantages of the interpersonal media to give the audience greater control over the communication process.” The new media are basically founded in the computer and Internet technologies and thus have equally been seen as synonymous with the Internet and its multifaceted communication platforms. Thus, Nelson (2011) explains new media to include the following:

- Internet publishing (books, newspapers and magazine)
- Social media (blogs, face book, Twitter, YouTube etc)
- Internet broadcasting (online radio and television)
- Internet Audio and Video Streaming

The new media essentially differ from the old media due to their interactive nature. The new media afford users the rare opportunity of becoming both content creators and content consumers or what is now popularly referred to as “Prosumers”. At the same time, feedback, unlike in the old media, is immediate in the new media (Okoye, 2011). These special features of the new media become reflected in public relations as noted by Phillips and Brabham (2012):

New media technologies challenge much of what we know about public relations theory and practice, since these technologies fundamentally change the ways publics interact with organisations, particularly the speed with which that interaction happens. New media technologies, such as the Internet, enable a great deal of temporal flexibility and can facilitate real-time communication (e.g., chat, instant messaging, tweets), rapid message exchange (e.g., email), or indefinite asynchronous communication (e.g., bulletin board systems and blogs, where users can read and leave messages for one another across long stretches of time). New media technologies also have an enormous reach, as messages on the Internet are globally accessible to those with connectivity.

In essence, with the new media, public relations become more interactive. There comes a shift from the top-down approach to real time interactivity in PR communication. The PR publics now have the opportunity to ask questions and receive immediate feedback as never available with the old media while doing public relations.

In employing the new media for PR purposes in tertiary institutions, Practitioners have a wide range of platforms at their disposal. These include electronic mail, website, blogs, face book, USENET, online news platforms (such newspaper, radio, TV), among others. All these media have the potential to bring the organisation and its publics to one “roundtable” forum where they can efficiently interact without some of the hurdles characteristic of the old media.

According to Onyeso (2006), tertiary institutions are invariably big organisations comprising a large body of actors including management, staff, students, industrial unions and of course the host communities who though are external to the running of the school but are nevertheless very influential. This feature “makes an institution of higher learning an organisation with a large and complex scope of management activities.” Onyeso, therefore, notes that for this reason, every tertiary institution has a whole lot of public relations task to do.

Arguably, tertiary institutions ought to be keen on acquiring and deploying the best of the media, the best of the technologies in its PR activities for maximum impact. This is where the new media could come in. Similarly, considering that a key segment of the publics of any tertiary institutions is the student population comprising mostly young people who research has shown embrace the new media culture more than the older segment of the society. In fact, young people “are the more prominent users of the Internet in terms of number and enthusiasm” (Salako and Tiamiyu, 2007). Because it is “a relatively young invention, naturally the young who are usually adventurous and enthusiastic are jumping into it” (Okoye, 2011).
Against this backdrop, this paper discursively looks at the place of the new media in public relations with particular reference to blog and website as employed in the PR endeavours of the tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

Public relations, like all other communication endeavours, faces the same challenge of achieving efficiency in passing its message from the source to the destination and ensuring prompt feedback delivery (Phillips and Brabham, 2012). While the application of the new media to public relations represents an attempt towards achieving communication efficiency, there remains to be seen the extent the new media would be able to advance this cause.

First, though the Internet has become a key communication platform in the contemporary world, access to it is still below average among developing nations including Nigeria (Internet World Statistics, 2011). With basic communication infrastructure problems, economic and awareness challenges bedevilling these nations, to what extent could organisations in Nigeria circumvent these obstacles to become reasonably integrated in the global trend of new media-driven PR practice?

Similarly, successful communication is not all about technologies but requires that the appropriate communication culture becomes present as well. By communication culture here is meant the use habit or use disposition of the target audience (Daramola, 2003, p.57). For instance, merely introducing the new media in PR communication may not be fully effective when there is no complementary use habit on the part of the target publics. How much are the publics of the tertiary institutions in Awka metropolis aware that they could speak and be spoken to by the management through website and blog? If they are so aware, how disposed are they to take this advantage?

2.1. Public Relations: An Overview

The history of what is today known and referred to as public relations is as old as the human society itself. This is because right from time, individuals, groups and institutions have always been desirous of a harmonious relationship to exist between themselves and the people they come in contact and relate with. This was important as the human society has always proved to be complex, pluralistic and dynamic. Thus, whether it is individuals, groups, or instituted authority, they all are particular about the way others in the society perceive and respond to them. However, there seem to be controversies over the actual origin of public relations. But literature has it that Public Relations as a profession began in 1900, when the first Public Relations Agency, The Publicity Bureau, was founded by Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, who helped establish the field as a professional practice in the United States of America. Both men are therefore referred to as the fathers of public relations. Yet, much of what is regarded as modern public relations practice blossomed after the Second World War. In Nigeria, it was the colonial administration that gave us a glimpse, albeit negatively, of what public relations is. They established a Public Relations Department in Lagos with units in the Northern, Eastern and Western provinces with the aim of telling the people what government is doing and what the public are supposed to be doing, plus to publicise Nigeria to Nigerians and to the world (Adamolekun and Ekundayo, 2002, p.5).

Looking at the some definitions of Public Relations, the supposed fathers of modern public relations, Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays are reputed to have provided the first definition of public relations. To them, in the early 1900s, public relations is “a management function, which evaluates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures, and interests of an organization... followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance.”

For the Institute of Public Relations, formed in the United Kingdom in 1948, public relations is not a haphazard business. The institute incorporated into the definition what the fathers of public relations could not in their own time, by suggesting that PR is a planned and sustained effort: “Public relations practice is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics”.

In 1960, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), agreeing with the foremost definitions of public relations by Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays and Institute of Public Relations, United Kingdom, defined it even more elaborately as:
[A] management function, of a continuing and planned character, through which public and private organizations and institutions seek to win and retain the understanding, sympathy and support of those with whom they are or may be concerned by evaluating public opinion about themselves, in order to correlate, as far as possible their own policies and procedures, to achieve by planned and widespread information more productive cooperation and more efficient fulfilment of their common interests.

At the first World Forum in Public Relations in Mexico, held in August 1978, representatives of more than 30 national public relations associations, in what was termed the “Mexican Statement” defined public relations as “the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action, which will serve both the organization and the public interest.” This Mexican Statement has been adjudged one of the best definitions of public relations and thus one of the most widely consulted. The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) in 1982 gave a long, winding definition of what Public Relations is and should be all about. They posit that public relations is what helps businesses, trade unions, government agencies, voluntary associations, foundations, hospitals and educational and religious institutions to bring harmony between them and their many different audiences or publics: employees, customers, local communities, shareholders and others in our complex and pluralistic society. Moreover, in 1984, Grunig and Hunt (1984, p. 94) gave a brief and yet succinct definition of public relations as meaning “management of communication between an organization and its publics”. As restricted to just communication as the last definition might seem, the definition definitely positions public relations not just as a mere management-controlled function, but as a concept encrusted in communication itself. Little wonder Sam Black (1989) defined it as “the art and practice of achieving harmony with the environment through mutual understanding based on truth and full information”. Doing public relations ought to be all about communicating truth and full information emanating from the organizations and other institutions who desire to relate with their publics in a way that will bring harmonious, cordial relationships characterized by respect, between them and those publics. Public relations, according to Grunig and his colleague, is what you do with what you know and what others think about what you say. Jo (2003, p.400, quoted in Church and Nnaane, 2007) says that PR is concerned mainly with persuasive communication, advocacy, public image and reputation management and relationship management.

Interestingly, between 2011 and 2012, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) developed, since after 1982, after an ‘energetic’ public discussion on the public relations discourse, a recent definition to simply read: “Public Relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics.”

Essentially, going by the foregoing, it is safe to argue that Public Relations is all about communication; of course that is why it forms part of the broad categories of mass communication dealing with consent engineering or building a rapport between an organization and its publics. This begins with identification of organizational goals and challenges, relating same with the publics of the organization, management of the issues and crises, building lasting relationships with key publics, laundering of image and reputation of an organization, analysing trends, events and public opinions to counseling management on strategic decisions regarding the organization.

**New Media and Public Relations: Pros and Cons**

Being essentially a communication endeavour, public relations must operate via a communication medium through which the message of a public relations programme is carried to the target publics and vice versa. For this reason, the nature, strengths and weaknesses of any medium employed for public relations would very likely affect the efficiency of the said PR effort.

Public Relations employ both interpersonal media and mass media. Traditionally, when the mass media are employed in public relations, one naturally expects the PR message to be relayed via channels like radio, television, newspaper and magazine, etc, referred to as the traditional media. However, with the arrival of the Internet and the attendant convergences and liberalisation, these traditional media now became categorised as the “old media” or the “traditional media” to differentiate them from the “new media” which the Internet and its numerous platforms have come to represent. Given the inseparable link between public
relations and the media, this shift in media paradigm was bound to trigger corresponding shift in PR paradigm.

But before looking at this shift in some depth, it will be pertinent to briefly explore the meaning and implications of the new media. Admittedly, defining new media has generally been a little bit difficult because of the loose nature of the term. The term refers strictly to no particular class of communication hardware but only to some form of functionality, i.e. some particular results associated with applying some form of technology in communication (Nelson, 2011). Therefore, loosely, the new media have been seen as that class of communication platform that integrate the ‘mass’ strength of the traditional media and the interactivity cum participatory advantages of the interpersonal media to give the audience greater control over the communication process (Okoye, 2011).

The distinguishing qualities of the new media vis-a-vis the traditional media include its horizontal orientation as against the top-down approach associated with the old media channels such as radio, television and print media. In other words, the audience has some greater autonomy and control in deciding what to consume and when to consume them, and are also in the position to generate and pass on their own message and feedback. This way, gatekeeping becomes liberalized, freed from centralization and bureaucratization; offering greater immediacy in feedback as well as a great deal of interactivity in the communication process. Stated differently, it makes communication more “sharing” in orientation and has reduced even mass communication to “conversation”.

Naturally, these qualities found in the new media would in one way or the other reflect in the theory and practice of public relations in the light of the new media technologies. Scholarly discussions have tended to view this effect of the new media on PR from perspectives of the advantages and the challenges the technologies pose to the practice. In fact, Quinn-Allan (2011) uses the word “disruptive” to describe this effect of the new media on PR; in other words, the new media have brought about some turbulence (both positive and negative) in the waters of public relations practice. The impact has been indeed radical. While warning that the approaches to the teaching of public relations ought to adjust to this reality, Quinn-Allan (2011) argues:

So from a Public Relations perspective social media, as a disruptive innovation, should be regarded as a way to establish new forms of relationships with newly conceived stakeholders. Certainly the increasing use of the Internet and social media by users to facilitate discussion around products, brands and organisations indicates that disruption has already taken place and the nature of the organisation-public relationship is substantively altered. Persisting with traditional approaches to the teaching of Public Relations relationship building within social media environments seems ill founded.

These two perspectives (positive and negative effects of the new media on public relations practice) are highlighted in the sub-sections below.

The New Media As An Advantage to PR
The positive implication of the shift from the old to the new media for public relations has been decidedly profound. Gross (2012) reflects on this effect, thus:

Throughout the years there have been many changes in the media that have affected the practice of public relations. The appearance and popularity of such tools as offset printing, radio, television and magazines have each dramatically changed the way public relations professionals do business. But no change has appeared as fast and as strong as the Internet. The Internet offers public relations professionals millions of opportunities to perform research and spread their message. This new medium has expanded both internal public relations and external public relations. From electronic mail to newsgroups to World Wide Web sites, professionals now have the chance to communicate with the person in the office next door, their consumers and the world. The possibilities are endless. The pros and cons of this new media are still being debated by many professionals, but it is impossible to deny that the Internet has become a powerful
force in the world of public relations, and it is hard not to recognize its potential for the future.

Similarly, Phillips and Brabham (2012) write:

New media technologies challenge much of what we know about public relations theory and practice, since these technologies fundamentally change the ways publics interact with organisations, particularly the speed with which that interaction happens. New media technologies, such as the Internet, enable a great deal of temporal flexibility and can facilitate real-time communication (e.g., chat, instant messaging, tweets), rapid message exchange (e.g., email), or indefinite asynchronous communication (e.g., bulletin board systems and blogs, where users can read and leave messages for one another across long stretches of time). New media technologies also have an enormous reach, as messages on the Internet are globally accessible to those with connectivity.

Having brought about a fundamental change in the orientation of communication such that communication has become decidedly interactive giving the audience much more power of control than was ever available to them, the PR publics of today, unlike in the era of the old media, are in a better position to really engage the organisation in a completely interactive setting; asking questions and demanding immediate answers. Phillips and Brabham (2012) discuss this fact:

This new kind of public relations work locates power very much in the hands of participants in online communities rather than in the organizational hierarchy or the public relations practitioner, and it calls for public relations practitioners to act as online community managers who monitor the ebb and flow of community needs and dynamics.

Very importantly, the modern day PR practitioners ought to be thankful to the new media for having made it so easy and convenient for them to measure public opinion. The new media sphere is one where people freely give out their views without fear or pretences – an advantage which the traditional methods of PR research may not always guarantee. Secondly, such Internet-aided research could cover a much wider geographical area and populations in a very cost-effective way, as data gathering is electronic rather than physical.

In the same vein, the new media have brought to the PR practitioner a new leverage, a new flexibility in terms of gatekeeping. Such practitioner is no longer encumbered by the old media imperative of subjecting his/her PR message to the scrutiny and selection of the journalist. Meiners (2010) comments on this as follows:

The Internet has made it easier to find media contacts and form relationships with journalists, but more importantly the rise of social media and online PR has meant bypassing the media and going directly to your audience. Online PR has changed the PR industry and it’s not going back.

Similarly, the new media have added vibrancy to public relations; increasing the amount of messages generated and enlarging the scope of participation both in terms of audience size and geographic spread, thus generally increasing the pace of public relations engagement in a relatively cost effective manner.

**New media As A New Challenge to PR**

Despite its boost to public relations, New Media has at the same time posed certain challenges to it. First, the fact that the new media have immensely increased the message-generating power of the audience may place the PR practitioner in a difficult situation as he/she becomes confronted by the delicate task of maintaining control in the face of endless barrage of these audience-generated messages disseminated even beyond the geographical scope of a given public relations programme. As reflected upon by Quinn-Allan (2011), “the most significant change in terms of control and public relations in the new media era concerns the ability for users to quickly and easily produce and distribute content to a global audience. In today’s … era of the Internet, we have seen an upsurge in user-generated content.”
For this same reason, the public relations practitioner in the new media era is left with little time for planning and systematisation amidst the astounding speed of information generation and distribution which the internet entails. “Modern public relations practitioners are facing more difficulties and challenges as information speed … alter the pace … of the profession” (Quinn-Allan, 2011). Hence, González-Herrero and Smith (2008) cited in Phillips and Brabham (2012) encourage PR practitioners “to be vocal online quickly in order to maintain control of a crisis.”

Another challenge which the new media era has brought to the practice of public relations is the tendency of the Internet to conceal the identity of users. In other words, the audience of the new media could be veiled, faceless, giving rise to a new kind of challenge to the PR practitioner. Phillips and Brabham (2012) expresses this sentiment when they note that the new media “technologies allow users to remain anonymous as they participate in information exchange online, throwing accountability and authenticity into question.” This user anonymity is otherwise referred to as “disembeddedness” with reference to which Bucher (2002) cited by Phillips and Brabham (2012) summarises:

[… the high degree of disembeddedness makes Internet communication highly risky, because disembedding always means loss of control: control over sources and their reliability, control over selection, control over verification.

Thus, the new media are in a sense resistance to social control and institutionalisation. Garba (2012) argues that the non-institutionalized nature of the new media; their weak linkages with other social institutions, makes them poor builder of institutions. According to him, while the media can easily unsettle and turn the social order on its head as witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia, it can hardly rebuild the institutions. With particular reference to social media (an aspect of the new media), he opines:

As it is today, the new media which has catalysed the uprisings in the North Africa is yet to efficiently mobilise the people for social order and stability. The new media is hardly able to rally the society around a particular personality as done by the traditional media in relation to persons like Gandhi and Luther. The discussions going on in the social media are akin to the dialogue of the deaf where everyone is talking and nobody is listening. There are hardly opinion leaders to who the crowd look up to (Garba, 2012).

It is against this background that the new media could be seen as a constant threat to the PR practitioner who is ever in the struggle to retain control and initiative in the face of constant threat of anonymity of users whose good intentions may not be always guaranteed.

Empirical Reviews on new media use in PR

A study by Wright and Hinson (2009) sampled 547 PR practitioners with the objective being to discover patterns of social media use in PR programmes among them. Findings showed that there is strong interest in social media by PR practitioners. However, “meaningful gaps exist when measuring differences between what is happening and what should be happening in terms of all of the social media”, particularly in relation to what are considered the most important social media. The study identified the social media and social networks mostly used by practitioners as Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. It found that public relations practitioners continue to rely predominantly on traditional media for accessing news, with 85 per cent using newspapers ‘very frequently’ or ‘somewhat frequently’ on a five-point Likert scale, 79 per cent relying predominantly on television news, and 71 per cent relying mostly on radio news, compared with 58 per cent who say they frequently get news from blogs.

These quantitative findings indicate an under-utilisation of social media in public relations compared with perceptions of the potential uses and benefits afforded by these new forms of interaction and communication. Only four per cent of PR practitioners report spending more than half of their time working with social media. However, only 11 per cent say they spend 26-50 per cent of their working time engaging with social media and 30 per cent spend 11-25 per cent. Almost half (48 per cent) of PR practitioners spend less than 10 per cent of their working time engaging with social media, and seven per cent spend no time at all with social media (Wright & Hinson, 2009, p.23-24). Notwithstanding, the researchers discovered that 73 per cent of respondents reported that social media have changed the way they communicate and 72 per cent believe social media have enhanced public relations.
Another 2009 study by Porter, Sweetser & Chung reported that PR practitioners mostly maintain personal blogs, and use blogs as a professional communication medium at low levels. Significantly, Xifras and Huertas (2008) reported that organisations filter comments heavily in customer blogs, as they do not want to give customers freedom of expression.

Alison Theaker (2008) found a lack of confidence and lack of training in relation to social media among PR practitioners. This was also found in a study of European practitioners by the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA, 2007), which cited a lack of “employees with the necessary skills to handle new communication challenges posed by social software” as the major barrier constraining public relations. An outcome of this lack of skills and training is “ambivalence” and “anxiety”, according to Fitch (2009).

James (2013) carried out a Nigerian study on the use of website and blog in public relations among tertiary institutions in Awka metropolis. It combined both a quantitative (survey) and qualitative (in-depth interview) approaches. A sample of 400 respondents was selected from the student populations of the two tertiary institutions in Awka metropolis – Nnamdi Azikiwe University and Paul University while questionnaire was used in collecting data from them. Similarly, an in-depth interview guide was employed in gathering data from the public relations officers of the two institutions under study. After the qualitative and quantitative analyses, the study found that the managements of tertiary institutions in Awka metropolis attach importance to website as a tool for public relations but, however, do not do the same in relation to blog; that the managements of these higher institutions are continuous in their deployment of website as a tool for public relations; and that the institutions primarily target their student population in their use of website for public relations.

From the above empirical reviews, it would be observed that foreign studies appear to have dominated literature on the use of new media in public relations practice. Wolf & Archer (2012) affirm this observation by noting that “Scholarly publications on new media have traditionally been US-centric.” They suggest that this situation may stem from the fact that the United States has led the way in this new technology. Similarly, there is also a gap in social media penetration between the West in general and developing countries including Nigeria (Cook & Hopkins, 2008) — a fact which may also account for the seeming dearth of local literature in this field.

**Conclusion**

Based on the findings of the study by James (2013), it is concluded that the PR capabilities of the new media have not been fully explored by the higher institutions in Nigeria especially in the area of blog. The same applies to other organisation based on challenges of skills and other factors among practitioners as x-rayed in this paper. The new media has been acknowledged here as needful in doing public relation based on the merits of its interactivity, flexibility and speed of message dissemination among others but is still underutilized.

**Recommendations**

Based on the fore-going issues, the following recommendations are therefore made:

1. Higher institutions in Nigeria should evolve and implement a definite and exhaustive new media based Public Relations policy. Such an elaborate measure will go a long to ensure that these institutions explore fully the new media based PR capabilities in the areas of website, blog, SMS, etc use.

2. Public Relations training in the Nigerian schools should integrate as a matter of priority the knowledge and skills in the use of computers required for efficient use of the new media in Public Relations. This will help practitioners to be effective in their attempts to integrate new media platforms in their PR efforts.
3. Efforts at improving the Internet infrastructure in Nigeria should be sustained and if necessary improved upon. This is to ensure speedy progress in the quality of Internet services currently obtained in the country, and which if done, will benefit PR sector by opening up more possibilities in the area of new media-aided public relations. The state of Internet use in Nigerian Universities and other tertiary Institutions in Nigeria is still very poor (Ukwueze, 2014, p .239)

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