

EMBRACING THE INFORMATION SUPERHIGHWAY: A LOOK AT THE USE OF INTERNET IN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

OBYAI Paul Martin¹ Ph.D
ONWUDE Fiona²

¹⁻²Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, Enugu State
Correspondence Email: nennyfifi@gmail.com, frobayi@gmail.com.

Abstract

Public relations is a deliberate act of creating and sustaining goodwill, two-way communication and mutual understanding between an organization and various publics. The technology determinism theory and agenda setting theory served as the theoretical foundation of the study. Using library research, the study revealed that the use of the Internet in public relations practices has numerous challenges militating against its effectiveness. The study concluded that the tremendous speed at which information is transmitted and assimilated in the Internet possess a challenge that demands absolute commitment from the PR man to be on top of the situation at all times. It was recommended that public relations practitioners should embrace, adapt and train themselves in the use of the Internet in public relations practices in order to be one step ahead in the field of image making and public relations.

Keywords: Public relations, Internet and Communication.

Introduction

Public relations simplified is a deliberate attempt by an organisation to create a conducive social environment within the work place, between the organisation and its clients/customers and the host community. The idea being that such a situation where achieved enhances productivity, discourages conflicts and other altercations that usually emanates at such work place. It is also expected to make the host community appreciate the organisation as part owners and the clients/customers feelings of partners in progress can only lead to positive ends.



Generally, Public Relation deals with creating a favorable mutual understanding between an organization and its publics; it's the exercise of managing the flow of [information](#) between an [organization](#) and its [publics](#). It provides an organization with information concerning the individuals, their needs, thoughts and reasons for their attitude or expose individuals on the company's goals and objectives by using topics of public interest and news items that do not require direct payment. The company's major aim is often to persuade the public, investors, partners, employees and other stakeholders to maintain a certain point of view about the company, its leadership, and products or of political decisions (Tunde, 2012). The public here being the employees, host community, clients/customers and any other person, group of persons or body that have dealing with the organisation. Example of such groups of persons or body is the press, charity organisations, non-profit organizations e.t.c.

We live in a dynamic and unpredictable world, a world that witnesses changes of all kinds by the minutes. Some of these changes are positive while others are negative. However, in whatever pattern the changes come, there is usually bound to be some tension. When these frictions occur, the need for mutual understanding increases, hence a deliberate public relations effort becomes necessary; therefore, it is the duty of public relations to lubricate the societal engine, if not to eradicate but at least to reduce the friction resulting from the changes (Tunde, 2012). These changes might be societal, economic, geographical or communication changes. One of these changes is the introduction of internet as a veritable instrument of communication, a system so fast that it permeates all and sundry within shortest possible time. That is the challenge of the Public Relation Personnel in the internet era.

Communication is an essential part of Public Relation. Human relation is essentially a function of verbal or behavioral interaction between persons or group of persons. Considering that public relation as distinct from human relation can be traced only to the fact that while in case of human relation, it is an interaction between a person and other person/persons, public relation is an interaction between an organisation and other organisations, persons, and groups. Much semblance can easily be identified between the difference between human relations and public relations with that of inter personal communication and mass communication. Therefore, mass communication becomes an indispensable instrument for promotion of public relations. This is made evident when the history of public relation in Nigeria is traced back to the establishment of the newspaper *Iwelhrohin* by Rev. Henry Townsend. Of a Christian missionary service in 1989. This newspaper performed the first public relations function by providing up to date information concerning missionary activities as well as socio-economic and political activities affecting Anglican parishioners, Abeokuta indigenes, the settlers and Europeans at large (Oyodokun, 2012).

Embracing the Information Superhighway: A Look at the use of Internet in Public Relations Practice

Communication is really important in Public Relation. According to William and Vincent (2005) the classicists rarely mentioned communication, and then only as a downward mechanism designed to control the unpredictable nature of employees. With the absence of communication employees will not be understood and with the unpredictable nature of human beings the organization might not be able to predict certain circumstances and correct them before it goes out of hands. The emphasis on efficiency and structure, emphasized control, authority, and downward information flow and placed importance on task-related concerns. In more contemporary formulations, the role of communication is expanded to include person-oriented issues, conflict, and diversity, especially where employees are seen as organizational assets.

Public Relations Defined

Public relations is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends (Broom, 2009). Public Relations is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organization and its publics (Institute of Public Relations, USA).

Jefkins (1985) explained that public relations consist of all forms of communication outward and inward, between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding.

Public relation is a management function which attempts to create goodwill for an organization and its product, services or ideas with groups of people which can affect its present or future welfare (Offonry, 1985). Generally, Public relation is a deliberate, well planned, systematic process used to create a mutual understanding between the organization and its internal and external publics.

In any organization there are many activities that can only be put together through Public Relation objectives which range from fostering the good will of host communication, positive image and its benefits, goodwill of the employees, customers and solution of labour problems, maintaining good will of government and suppliers, Ability to attract the best personnel, Creation of awareness of the organization's product, attitude of the public toward the company and formulation of policies. In a training handbook prepared by Shri P and Shri A (2017) stated that one or more of these elements must be contained in a definition or explanation of public relations. These elements include:

- A planned effort or management function.
- The relationship between an organisation and its publics
- Evaluation of public attitudes and opinions.
- An organisation's policies, procedures and actions as they relate to said

- organisation's publics.
- Steps taken to ensure that said policies, procedures and actions are in the public interest and socially responsible.
 - Execution of an action and or communication programme.
 - Development of rapport, goodwill, understanding and acceptance as the chief end result sought by public relations activities.

Public relation is very important as it plays vital roles in an organisation. Winston (2017) stated various roles of public relation in an organisation and they include:

Public Image Strategy

Public relations strategists will work with top executives in the organization to craft an overview of how the company wants to be perceived, and how it is going to project a positive image. This can involve focusing in on exactly the right message, and then deciding on the broad outlines of a campaign to disseminate that message.

Outreach Events

Public relations professionals often arrange events to raise the profile of the organization or lend its brand and name to a charitable event that represents the philosophy of the company. Think of a corporation sponsoring a Special Olympics event, or a hospital organizing a health outreach day in its town

Media Relations

Talking with the media is a core function of public relations departments. Public relations professionals field questions from reporters, arrange for interviews with key individuals in the organization and write press releases to make the media aware of company events or achievements.

Social Media

One emerging function of public relations is to maximize an organization's positive use of social media to build its image. Managing a Twitter feed, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel are all vital ways to connect with possible new customers or stakeholders. Monitoring public comment about the organization on the Internet can also give PR professionals' early warning of any emerging trends or problems.

Handling Emergencies

Sometimes a company or organization is struck by a disastrous event that ruins its public image. This might be an oil company that has to deal with a high profile spill, or a food company that has a contamination event. Public relations professionals decide how the organization will repair the damage to its image, communicate how it is dealing with the problem and regain control of its message.



Internet Defined

The internet is the largest computer network in the world, connecting millions of computers. A network is a group of two or more computer systems linked together and it is made up of two types of computer networks; Local Area Network (LAN): A LAN is two or more connected computers sharing certain resources in a relatively small geographic location, often in the same building. Examples include home networks and office networks (Goodwill Community Foundation, 2003).

Federal Networking council explains that the internet refers to the global information system that

- is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons
- is able to support communications using the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons and/or other IPcompatible protocols; and
- provides, uses or makes accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein.

The networking council went further to state the applications of the internet and they include

Traditional core application

- Email
- News
- Remote Login
- File Transfer
- **The killer application:**
- WorldWide Web (WWW)
- **New applications:**
- Videoconferencing
- Telephony
- P2P applications
- Internet Broadcast

History of public relations

The Roman University of Communication Institute (2000) gave a detailed history of Public Relation. According to the institute, Public relations has been in existence for thousands of years. The Greeks called it: sematikos: to signify, to mean. Semantikos means semantics, which can be defined as how to get people to believe things and do things which could be a simple definition of Public Relations. In 50 B.C. Julius Caesar wrote the first campaign biography, Caesar's Gallic Wars. He publicized his



military exploits to convince the Roman people that he would make the best head of state. Candidates for political office continue to publicize themselves with campaign biographies and accounts of military exploits to this day. In 394 A.D., St. Augustine was a professor of rhetoric in Milan, the capitol of the Western Roman Empire. He delivered the regular eulogies to the emperor and was the closest thing to a minister of propaganda for the imperial court. Thus, St. Augustine was one of the first people in charge of public relations. The modern equivalent would be the President's press secretary or communication director. In 1776, Thomas Paine wrote "The Crisis," a pamphlet which convinced the soldiers of Washington's army to stay and fight at a time when so many were prepared to desert so they could escape the cold and the hardships of a winter campaign. Paine was a master of political propaganda whose writing could get people to do things and believe things. Benjamin Franklin made it a rule to forbear all contradiction to others, and all positive assertions of his own. He would say, "I conceive" or "I apprehend" or "I imagine" a thing to be so, or it appears to be so. Franklin pioneered the rules for "personal relations" in an era before mass media had made possible a profession called "public relations." In the middle of the 19th century appeared a man who was to become one of the leading publicists of all time, P. T. Barnum. His accomplishments include the founding of the American Museum and the establishment of the Barnum and Bailey Circus. Barnum was a master of promotion who could fill his enterprises with customers by using what we today would call sleazy methods of publicity. For example, he announced that his museum would exhibit a 161-year-old woman who had been Washington's nurse. He produced an elderly woman and a forged birth certificate to make his case. William Seward, Lincoln's secretary of state in 1861, gained a large American audience through his understanding of how to use the press. He told his friend Jefferson Davis (they were friends before the war): "I speak to the newspapers – they have a large audience and can repeat a thousand times what I want to impress on the public." Public relations became a profession in 1903 as Ivy Lee undertook to advise John D. Rockefeller on how to conduct his public relations. Rockefeller owned coal mines and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Miners were on strike and the railroad hushed up the facts when its trains were involved with accidents. Lee advised Rockefeller to visit the coal mines and talk to the miners. Rockefeller spent time listening to the complaints of the miners, improved their conditions, danced with their wives, and became a hero to the miners. After a railroad accident, Lee invited reporters to inspect the wreck and get the facts. The Pennsylvania Railroad then obtained its first favorable press coverage.

Lee professionalized public relations by following these principles:

1. Tell the truth
2. Provide accurate facts
3. The public relations director must have access to top management and must be able to influence decisions

Lee defined public relations, saying: Public relations means the actual relationship of the company to the people and that relationship involves more than talk. The company must act by performing good deeds.

In Nigeria, Public relations started during the colonial era. Through the establishment of the first newspaper in Nigeria which was 'Iwe Irohin' by the late Reverend Henry Townsend in the year 1859. The 'Iwe Irohin' was initially used to announce deaths, births, and marriages. It only had few or no advert in it. The British seized the opportunity to use the newspaper as a propaganda instrument. The use of newspaper was used to inform about the evil deeds of the British and enlighten them on what is wrong and right. PR was being used as an instrument to gain the trust of the people. The British colonial administrators in 1944 established the first Public Relations Department. The department was headed by Mr. D.C. Fletcher, as the leader of a group of staff, which included a public relations officer, an assistant public relations officer, a process engraver, a press officer, a publicity artist, an antiquities officer, a photographer, a films officer, a radio officer and a confidential secretary. The function of the department was mainly to carry out public enlightenment programs relating to government activities. The colonial administrators targeted selected publics, such as Nigerian soldiers who participated in World War II as part of the British Army. After Nigeria gained its independence in 1960, the public relations department was transferred to the newly created Federal Ministry of Information (FMI) where it continued with information activities for its various publics. The next significant changes in the development of PR in Nigeria occurred between the years 1950 and 1960. This period witnessed political, social and economic changes in the country including the attainment of independence with all its implications, the discovery of oil and the shift of emphasis from general trading to industrialization. Led by Shell and U.A.C, the companies were compelled to launch planned programmes covering government press and community relations. They also helped to popularize the creation of PR departments in their various companies, and the development of Nigerians to man such positions. Other contributors to the progress of PR in Nigeria include such as Dennis Buckle, formerly of UAC, and John Stocker, one time regional director of information based in Enugu, Eastern Nigeria. Mass Communication which provides the back-bone for effective practice of the profession was introduced as a course in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, the University of Lagos and the Institute of Management Technology, Enugu (Offonry, 1985 as quoted by Badaru, 2017).

Internet and Public Relations

Internet as a medium of communication started in the United States in the early 1960s. This was the Cold War period, when the world was bi-polar: The United States and the Soviet Union were competing in expanding their influence in the world, viewing each other with great caution and suspicion. On October 4, 1957, the



Soviet Union launched the first space satellite, Sputnik. The Sputnik success necessitated American reaction. It was a question of pride and leadership. The US Department of Defense responded by establishing the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA), designed to promote research that would ensure that the USA compete with and excel over the USSR in any technological race. ARPA's mission was to produce innovative research ideas, to provide meaningful technological impact that went far beyond the conventional evolutionary developmental approaches, and to act on these ideas by developing prototype systems (Raphael, 2011). During the 1990s we witnessed a massive expansion of the Net. The Internet's accessibility, its multi-application and its decentralized nature were instrumental in this rapid growth. Business as well as personal computers with different operating systems could join the universal network. The Internet became a global phenomenon, more countries and people joined and ground-breaking minds expanded the horizons of the platform with new, imaginative innovations.

Rex Harlow gave a contemporary definition of Public relations in (1976) after reviewing over 500 definitions and stated that

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organization and its public; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on, and responsive to, public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of, and effectively utilize, change; serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tool (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000, p.4).

One of the salient points in this explanation is that public relations is certainly not a unit of almost expendable inconsequential use that can be manned by an unprofessional but instead public relations is a very important integral part of management. It has always been like that and organisations had neglected this did that to their peril. In the internet era it becomes even more compelling for organisations to engage a well-qualified public relations expert in order to achieve maximum results. This definition by Cutlip et al. also highlighted the fact that public relations is a two-way traffic and should be used in policy formulations of organisations.

The application of the Internet by public relations practitioners who tend to apply the online tools in a fashion similar to traditional media tools such as print and broadcast

and fail to include the Internet in their strategic planning process. The advantages of the Internet in Public Relations Practices includes include reduced costs, enhanced speed, customization and direct contact with the internal publics. However it has some challenges such as the accentuation of crisis due to the globalised networking on the Internet and the difficulty in keeping up to date with the constantly evolving Internet world. Today's public relations practitioners are confronted by a changing media environment that is significantly more complex, diverse and dynamic than the traditional media sphere and requires them to share information in a far more transparent and interactive manner than ever before. The implication for the practitioners is to acknowledge and understand the changing demands and perspectives of their publics and fully utilize the opportunities offered by the new media channels.

Review of related studies

In a study carried out by Deepti (2010), titled *The use of Internet in public relations and its impact on the practice: A New Zealand perspective* explored the trends in the application of various Internet tools in the public relations practice of New Zealand and the impact these have on certain key aspects of the practice such as skills, encroachment, gender balance and ethics. The study revealed that there are considerable variations in the use and application of the different online tools in the New Zealand public relations practice. This discrepancy was found to have been influenced by the area of work and experience of the practitioners along with their knowledge of the Internet and the organizational environment they operated in. Further, it appears that practitioners do not have a full grasp of the nature of online tools and their scope of utilization in the practice.

In another study carried out by Jacobs (2013) titled *examining the internet as a strategized cooperate communication tool in Public Relations* examined the attention of public relations (PR) practitioners who are positioned in the corporate affairs department to manage the image of the financial institutions they represent. The objective of the study, therefore, was to gain an understanding of the contributions in the literature with respect to the Internet as a communicative tool for businesses. Although the literature has little or no evidence from Nigerian markets, theoretical arguments indicate many uses of the Internet for business communication by PR practitioners resulting in a new communication model proposed by Hoffman & Novak (1996). An attempt to situate these theoretical positions within a local context led the researchers to carry out a pilot study which revealed that there is a gap between internet channels initiated by business and the business objective of opening up such channels. As a result, there is a tendency of such channels to target the wrong audience – calling for the need for further research with empirical evidence.



In another related study titled *Public Relations: The empirical research on practitioner ethics* (1991) discussed public relations practitioners' suggestions on how ethics in public relations can be improved. Sample members of the Public Relations Society of America most frequently suggest having ethics education, taking disciplinary action against violators of codes of ethics, and emphasizing professionalism of practitioners as strategies for improving practitioner ethics. This article also concludes that, because ethics education leads the list of suggestions, professional-development seminars and college-level courses might explore in further detail those ethics issues most common in the practice and might examine in group settings how the ethics of such issues are perceived by practitioners.

Theoretical Framework

The agenda setting theory is a theory that discusses on how the mass media influences in making a certain issue as a public agenda. The public agenda is the main focus or prime issue which the members of the society or public concern about. The term agenda setting theory is first used by McCombs and Shaw (1972). This theory elaborates the connection in term of relationships between the emphasis that the mass media put as an issue and the media audiences or the public's reaction or attributes to such issue (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

The agenda setting theory begins as an explanation on how the mass media affects to change the pattern in political behavior during elections (Cohen, 1963). Subsequently, the theory has inspired and developed hundreds of latter explorations on how the mass media primes and frames issues for their audiences. Not only limited to such, the discussion also covers on how the mass media colours a particular event for their media audiences (Matsaganis & Payne, 2005). Therefore, the mass media can be considered as responsible in influencing and shaping the public opinion and agenda. Such influence of mass media on the public agenda or opinion can happen intentionally or unintentionally (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

The agenda setting theory stands as important theory not only on mass communication, but extends to other related social science studies such as political communication (Reese, 1991). Under the agenda setting theory, the mass media is believed not to possess the ability to set the public agenda especially in matters of opinions or attitudes (Cohen, 1963). However, the mass media has a particular access in contributing to or influencing the audience's perceptions, values, focus and priorities. With such influence from the mass media, the media audiences tend to form their own opinion or focus on those issues that are considered as worthy of inclusion on their mental agendas (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009).

Limitations to the Mass Media's Agenda Setting

There is a continuing debate between scholars who are proponents to Cohen's

opinion (1988) with the opponents of such view. The debate circles around the core questions of media influence, namely, how directly and to what degree the media set the public agenda. Some of the recent studies propose that personal variables can mitigate the effects of media agenda setting on individual or audience (Matsaganis & Payne: 2005; Gross & Aday: 2003; McCombs & Shaw: 1997). These majorly contributed from the background education and understanding of the media audiences on the issue or agenda which is presented by the mass media (Carter: 1996). Their opinions are more difficult to be influenced by the information that they received from the mass media (Matsaganis & Payne: 2005; Littlejohn and Foss: 2009; Coleman: 1993). Moreover, such influence from the mass media in forming opinion is impossible to those people who lived far away from the information provided or to those who are difficult to get the accessibility of the information from the mass media (Lippmann: 1922).

This theory is relevant to this paper because public opinion tries of change of people's opinion and sets agenda for them. Public relation deals with a consensus opinion of a group of people of a particular product, client or particular issue that is of public importance. If the public opinion is negative then the PR man can make efforts to spread a particular doctrine to change peoples opinion, so that it will become favorable to the organisation in question (propaganda) (Okafor 2006). Institute of Public Relation (2012) also agreed that Public relation makes effort to influence the thought of the audience and the internet (media) has a major influence in the decision people make. This makes it easier for the PR man to set agenda for the people.

Another theory relevant to this study is the technology determinism theory. According to Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006), technological determinism is “the belief that technologies have an overwhelming power to drive human actions” which leads to social change.

The technological determinism theory is a member of the family of theories known as medium theories. These theories, according to Potts (2010) propose that the most significant cultural and social effects of media derive from the intrinsic properties of the media themselves. He, however, explains that the impact of digital information and networking should provoke a reconsideration of medium theory, the oldest of which is technological determinism theory proposed by Marshal McLuhan in the 1960s. Its antecedents in western thought have been identified either in support or in criticism of its controversial claims.

The Basic Assumptions of the Theory are: (Lievrouw and Livingstone, 2006)

- The message of any medium is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.
- That each new medium of communication alters the patterns of perception

steadily and without any resistance.

- That this affects the individual engagement with the medium.
- That the technology of any medium will affect the cognitive functions of those who use it, thereby causing inevitable change in culture.
- That some media have hot properties while others have cool properties which help to affect the cognitive functions of the users.

The birth of the internet and its globalizing influence gave impetus to arguments in favor of technological determinism. The assumption that each new medium of communication alters the patterns of perception and that this affects individuals engagement with the medium holds true for the internet whether accessed through a desk-top computer, laptop or a telephone handset. Individuals are now emphasizing mobility and portability as a new pattern of engagement due to the properties of new media. It is now possible to read one's book through a handheld computer, listen to the reading of the same book while taking a walk, or view and listen at the same time. These changes have also led to inevitable change in the way people consume media services. We now have cyber cafes, online forums, online learning communities and online book clubs made possible by new media. It is now possible to hold video conferences with people in 150 countries at the same time.

The relevance of this theory to this paper is that the theory emphasized on how technology determines a whole of things like people's perception, attitude and also how information is disseminated and received. The internet (which is advanced technology) has affected the duties of a Public Relation man in diverse ways. One of the assumptions of this theory is that any new media (Internet) affects the audience attitude to things. Therefore Public Relation Practitioners uses the internet to change the audience perception, attitude or opinion that is unfavorable to an organisation or clients.

Importance and challenges of Internet in Public Relation

This is a great way for companies to keep their finger on the pulse of public opinion, increasing company's customer base, learning about their preferences and then using this information to successfully tailor future Public relation activity. Vistis Public Relations (2011) stated the importance of internet in Public Relation

- **Faster, widespread coverage:** The Internet enables instant sharing of information and, as the number of people using the Internet continues to rise, with many blogging themselves, releases you post can be easily picked up and posted by other bloggers and online journalists. This offers you wider coverage of your news and ensures it reaches a larger target audience.
- **Visibility:** It can be used to help you improve the public's awareness of your company and your overall business image as blogging and online mentions

help to spread the word about your company. When your company establishes its presence online, it will become more visible which can be used to promote your business. The more readers you attract, the higher your number of followers will be and increasing your readership also increases the reach of your communications and how effective they are.

- **Increased communication:** With the internet especially the social media, everyday people can post their thoughts on a variety of topics. Social networking sites allow you to ask questions and get answers quickly from any number of readers, with varying enthusiasms and experience. By using these communications channels, you can develop relationships with readers, which you can then use in PR activity and stakeholder targeting to ensure your posts are relevant and of interest so more likely to be read. Building on this initial relationship to engage and keep readers, and anyone they forward your blog link to, increases traffic to your website, giving it a better standing on search engines and attracting even more readers. Companies are also able to know what people are saying about their business so they can respond quickly to anything that arises or use their followers to dispel bad 'word of mouth'.
- **Easy integration:** Most people know how to use the internet tools so that the company should aim at maximizing its reader base by using staff's online connections to promote businesses, giving a bigger reader base. The more people who know about the company, and what it does, the more likely the business will succeed and attract loyal customers.
- **Links and SEO:** Including links to relevant info and supporting documentation within your online content gives your copy authority which, in turn, means search engines notice it. If you link to established and respected domains, your web ranking will increase and bloggers and online journalists will think it is worth checking out and may even include links to it – or a mention – within their own content. To ensure your website climbs the search rankings, make sure everything you write is strong, topical and has lots of good information in it that will continue to engage readers. There is some evidence that 'likes' and links in Twitter are recognized by search engines – potentially improving your search rankings.

Deepti (2010) gave detailed explanation on the importance and challenges of the use of internet in Public Relation Practices.

The instant availability of real-time information with social media tools such as Really Simple Syndication (RSS) news feeds, blogs and social networks can be used by public relations practitioners for research, media monitoring and issues management. This ease of information access assists in the strategic planning of communication campaigns and in the early identification of issues which helps practitioners mitigate crisis; however, it has also been argued that the speed and



networking capability of the Internet act as a facilitator of crises and bring global disrepute to an organization because 'anyone' can share 'any kind' of information with 'any number' of people at a great speed.

It has been noted that while the public relations practitioners are increasingly monitoring social media like the blogosphere, their relationship with citizen journalists like bloggers remains tenuous due to their desire to maintain control over information and its dissemination. The challenge for a practitioner is that controlled messages have the risk of being treated like propaganda in the blogosphere whereas uncontrolled messages have the possibility of being misinterpreted or inadequately placed.

It has been acknowledged that a primary advantage of the Internet is that it allows direct access to the publics via channels such as blogs, micro-blogs and other social media websites bypassing gatekeepers like the traditional media advocated that organisations should be more proactive in communicating with their target publics and not wait for a crisis to occur and necessitate conversation, however, it is understood that interactivity is the key in building relationships via social media, it is also observed that transparency and credibility are equally important to establish trust. This implies that practitioners need to abide by the ethical principles of the practice even while communicating with their publics online, if the practitioner does not abide to ethical practices like honesty then there will be a problem.

Institute of Public Relations (2012) explained that although the Internet is one of the greatest inventions in human history, it has dramatically changed the world and above all, the communication. The World Wide Web has opened a number of opportunities but it has also opened a number of challenges, especially for the PR sector that has mastered communication with and through the traditional media. The institute stated that PR specialists virtually had no competition in the era of the traditional media, the democracy of the Internet has forced them to compete with the entire world. The Internet has given just about everyone the ability to share their opinion just about everything with the entire world in a matter of seconds. The ability to reach thousands or millions of people in virtually no time gave PR specialists a powerful tool but it also made their jobs more difficult, especially in case of an attack on integrity of their clients. Just imagine restoring the client's reputation if the first page of search engine results contains mainly compromising or damaging content. For instance if a PR practitioner is trying to restore the image of a client or company through the internet, he/she will find it difficult because of the barrage of already negative opinion being peddled by different persons in the internet.

However, why businesses and individuals who want to succeed in the modern world cannot afford not to utilize the Internet PR is clearly evident from the example of

Embracing the Information Superhighway: A Look at the use of Internet in Public Relations Practice

“anti-campaigns”. These can either be an unfortunate incident or a carefully devised plan of unethical competition. But regardless of who stands behind and why, negative campaigning can have a devastating effect on public reputation of a company or an individual. The risk of negative publicity, however, is not the only reason why the Internet PR is increasingly gaining in importance. This means that apart from using the internet to defend a company's product it becomes equally effective in sales.

The Internet has a major influence on people's opinion and the decisions they make, especially when they are uncertain. For example, let's say Joe has difficulties deciding which anti-acne cream to choose. He will open his search engine and look for information about the creams he is considering buying. He will most likely take into account a variety of factors including the price and other people's opinions but his decision will also be influenced greatly by the information he will be able to receive about a particular product. And if he finds little information about how the product is supposed to work, how soon he will be able to see the results, etc. there is a great chance that he will not buy that product. In order to encourage Joe to at least consider buying your cream, he needs to be provided accurate, trustworthy and up-to-date information about both the product and your company. And this can be achieved only through an effective Internet PR.

What then is the future of the Role of Internet in Public Relations?

The use of the internet has its challenges and barriers militating against its effective function in Public Relation. The internet plays a crucial role in Public relations; the PR man uses the internet for propaganda, public opinion, advertisement and so many other functions. The indispensable function to public relation which is stated below has made the future of the role of internet in Public Relation glaring. Some of these roles according to Gbam (2017) include:

Enhance two way Communication:

The new media (internet) makes two way communication which is a core aim for public relations. Pubic relation man can make use of the social media (Facebook account, chart room) for discussions where clients have the opportunity to contribute or make known their opinions about a company.

Enhance the Development of a positive Image

If an organisation has a website that is well organized and constantly updated the image of that organisation can be boosted. This can encourage international recognition. If a website owned by an organization is globally known it will be difficult for that company to be destroyed because of a rumour. A company with such reputation through the internet.



Ease Assessment of current Corporate Image Position

The internet gives room for a two way communication process; therefore it creates a platform for feedback mechanism from the publics. It also provides the organisation with a platform to justify their actions and also explain the company's mission and their reactions to certain issues. The internet makes it possible for the PR man to be aware of what their publics think about the cooperate image of their organisation so that they will not face the danger of having false assumption. The internet makes it easy for the PR man to know what the organisation think about them and why they think about. This can also help and eliminate crisis that could have arisen between the publics and the organisation.

Make planning and implementation of Public Relation Easier

The internet makes Public relation faster and easier. A PR man can easily asses information through the internet, carry out quick and cost effective research and also distribute messages fast example through mails.

Conclusion

Just like every profession or area of study evolve over time so has communication technology evolved to the internet era. A seasoned Public Relation officer cannot afford not to flow with the trend and must get his skills atoned to the new media. The new media (internet) naturally has its own unique features that are both challenging and intriguing to a new entrant into this magical new medium of mass communication. The internet has the strange nature of being both personal and at the same time collective. Ordinarily a participant in internet communication can easily personalize the information that is general and its appeal though targeted at diverse groups can be appreciated by individuals in personalized manner. The tremendous speed at which information is transmitted and assimilated in the internet possess a challenge that demands absolute commitment from the PR man to be on top of the situation as it emanates.

It is therefore pertinent that the Public Relation Department must get improved funding and assume its place of prominence in the era of internet communication. This is because as the internet has proved to operate at supersonic speed, information gathering and analysis should be able to match it in other to enable the organization stay afloat.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

- Public Relation Practitioners should embrace and adapt the use of the Internet in other to be one step ahead in the field of Public Relations.
- Public Relations Practitioners should make sure that whatever they post online is true. This will help build public trust, however, if they carry out fake information, this will destroy their image.



References

- Baduru, .A. (2017). History of Public Relation in Nigeria. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/doc/113786446/History-of-public-Relations-in-Nigeria>
- Cornelius, P.B. (1991). Public Relations: The empirical research on practitioner ethics . Retrieved from <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00383160>
- Deepti, .B. (2010). The Use of Public Relations and its impact: New Zealand. Retrieved from <http://aut.researchgateway.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/10292/1052/BhargavaD.pdf?sequence=3>
- Federal Networking council. (1995). The Internet. Retrieved from
- Goodwill Community Foundation. (2003). The Internet Today. Retrieved from <http://www.just.edu.jo/~mqais/cis99/PDF/Internet.pdf>
- Institute of Public Relations. (2012). Public Relations and the Internet. Retrieved from <http://www.ipr.org.uk/public-relations-and-the-internet.html>
- Jeflins, F. (1985). Introduction to Marketing, Advertising and Public Relations. London: Macmillan Publishers.
- Jacob,.N. (2013).Examining the internet as a strategized cooperate communication tool in Public Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=3&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwjg4>.
- Kemehan (2001) Top Six Internal Communication Channels. Retrieved from <https://comstudies.files.wordpress.com/2008/04/internalpr.pdf>
- Ndolo, Ike. (2005). Mass Media System and Society. Enugu: RhyceKerex
- Rowan University Communication Institute. (2000). A brief History of Public Relations . Retrieved from <http://www.larrylitwin.com/handouts/History%20of%20PR%20090104.pdf>
- Vivitis Public Relations (2011). Benefits of social media in Public Relations.



Retrieved from <http://www.vitispr.com/blog/benefits-of-social-media-in-public-relations/>

William, .K. & Vincent .H. (2005). Internal Public Relations, Social Capital and the Role of Effective Organizational Communication. Retrieved on 28 June, from <http://www.painepublishing.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Hazelton-Social-Capital.pdf>

Winston, B. (2017). Roles of Public Relations in an Organization. Retrieved on 27 June, 2017 from <http://smallbusiness.chron.com/roles-public-relations-organization-24139.html>

Rapheal, .C. (2011). History of Internet. Retrieved from <http://www.hull.ac.uk/rca/docs/articles/internet-history.pdf>

Shri, A. Shri S. (2017). Training program on Public Relations. Retrieved on 28 June, 2017 from http://persmin.gov.in/otraining/UNDPProject/undp_modules/PublicRelationsNDLM.pdf

Offonry, K.H. (1985). Guide to Public Relation Practice in Nigeria. Imo: New Africa Publishing Co. Ltd

Okafor, O.C. (2006). Public Relations: Principles & Practice. Enugu: Ceeta publishers limited.

Oyodokun, K.K. (2012). History of Public Relation in Nigeria. Retrieved on 28 June 28, 2017 from <http://toyexeternity.blogspot.com.ng/2013/03/history-of-public-relation-in-nigeria.html>

