DIGITAL MEDIA AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN NIGERIAN ORGANISATIONS

By

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Abstract
The purpose of this work, "Digital media and public relations practice in Nigerian organisations" was to ascertain the forms of digital media that are relevant in public relations practice, as well as the tasks which these digital media are used for by public relations practitioners and the challenges encountered in the use of digital media in Nigeria. Using a survey of 120 purposively selected public relations practitioners in various organisations (banks, hotels, schools, government agencies, churches, etc.) in Abuja, the study finds that, bulk SMS is the most frequently used digital media; digital media is often used to project the image of the organisation and; financial constraints often hinder public relations practitioners from effective use of digital media. Furthermore, findings from the study point out that organisations should provide adequate funding for public relations officers to explore the many advantages of digital media. The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) should enlighten management about the many benefits of digital media in public relations practice.

Key Words: Relevance, Digital media, Public Relations, Officers, Practice, Bulk SMS

Introduction

There has been tremendous growth in the development, spread and use of digital media across various professions. These digital media are applied in various fields such as agriculture, meteorology, health care, air transport, road safety, education, banking, religion, etc. Sterne (2005:250) aptly puts it when he writes that, "... there is no question that digital media are a concern across the disciplines." The versatile nature of these digital media raises questions of its applicability in public relations. In other words, if digital media have been found relevant in other professional fields, what effect do these digital media have on the public relations practice? The introduction of digital media in the world is revolutionary and has brought about changes in various spheres of endeavor. Sterne (2005:249, 250) notes that, *Countless authors have argued hat the rise of digital media-the Internet, computers, video games, compact discs, DVDs—marks one of the great events of our time..., the advent of digital media could also be historically significant in ways we cannot yet even fathom.*

There is need to find out about the influence of digital media in public relations practice especially in Nigeria. Furthermore, digital media technology is constantly in a state of flux. Various aspects of digital media keep changing as improvements are introducted. Bentwood (2005:14) captures the situation when he writes,

> *If there's one constant in digital media, it's change. Every 12 to 18 months the landscape expands. New channels seem to join*

> *existing, more mature formats that only started to dot the horizon a few months earlier.*

Groepper in Swallow (2010:1) highlights the ever changing nature of digital media when he writes this very personal statement, thus,

> *When I first began my career in R.... we would e-mail or fax ...the full press release text to the press. What we see now is new methods of distributing the info, driven by social media. Rather than e-mailing a press release, PR people are sending journalists to custom landing pages created just for that specific announcement, contacting them via Twitter with a URL link to the release, or even directing them to a YouTube video with a message from the CEO making the announcement.*

With the constantly changing digital media landscape, it is pertinent to note the effect of newly introduced digital media on public relations practice. The influence of digital media on public relations practice needs to be explored because it is obvious that public relations practice in this age cannot afford to ignore digital media.

Definition of terms

Digital media

Digital media are an improvement on analogue methods of communication. For instance, the compact disc is digital media which is a marked improvement from the Long play vinyl record. There are many other examples of digital media which have replaced other inefficient methods of storing data in the past. In order to identify what is meant by digital media Sterne (2005; 251), asks a pertinent question thus,

> *How does one organize or hierarchize the various different things that fall under the rubric of "digital media": the Internet, DVDs, video games, computer-mediated-communication, digital special effects, computer art, and so forth?*

Digital media include the following: tracking and pings; blogs; feed and really simple syndication (RSS); content management systems and wikis; intranets and extranets; internet forums; chats and instant messaging; email; File transfer protocol (FTP); the internet and the World Wide Web, etc. Howard (2005:11,12) offers a distinction between mass media and digital technology when he writes,

> *Digital communication technologies, however, are fundamentally different from mass media structures. Whereas mass media systems for broadcasting content had distinct roles for the elite- producers of content and the mass consumers of content, digital communication technologies are networked, and digital media systems for narrowcasting content blur the distinction between producers and consumers of content. Despite the difference between mass and networked media systems, some scholars expected that the Internet would become a mass communication technology as more people used it.*

Statement of the problem

The introduction of digital media and its ever changing nature as well as its popularity raises pertinent questions in the practice of public relations. Top among these questions are: whether these digital media can improve public relations practice; how can digital media be applied in public relations practice; what is the nature of problems posed by the use of digital media in public relations practice, etc. These are the main issues which this study seeks to address.

Research Questions

i. What particular forms of digital media are useful in public relations practice?
ii. What specific tasks can digital media accomplish in public relations practice?
iii. What are the challenges of digital media use in public relations practice especially in Nigeria?

Theoretical framework

Technological determinism

Technological determinism was espoused by Marshall Mcluhan. The concept of technological determinism holds that technology is a steering force in society because it directs its evolution, values, development and structure. Mcluhan (2005:8) writes that, "Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication." This statement is validated by the fact that communication media have continued to evolve to the point of digital media. At this stage of human development, digital media is lauded due to its many advantages over less efficient options. Kinesei (2007:21) notes that technological determinism,

> *...argues that technology is the principal driving force in society determining its mode of operation, development, course of history, structure and values in a decisive manner. The effects of any opposing direction are taken into account to a limited extent, fully disregarded or disclaimed. Technological development is thought to be propelled by the logic of science alone.*

Technological determinism holds that advancements in technology bring about change in society. By extension if society adopts technological advances with which it is presented, this will result in prosperity, improved methods and the solution of many problems that are faced in society. Burgess (2007:2) notes that:

> *Technological determinism can be defined as the view that social organization and culture are predominantly and ultimately shaped by the technologies of production, exchange, communications and consumption. As societies and cultures have to organize themselves in space it follows that the ultimate determinants of the system, form and structure of cities are to be found in the introduction and application of these technologies. Social and cultural change is generated by transformations in these technologies and this process unleashes a spatial dynamic that transforms the form and structure of cities.*

Technological determinism explains this study because digital media have reshaped public relations practice to a large extent. The relevance of digital media in public relations practice has led to the concept of "digital public relations." On the basis of this it is important to examine the relevance of digital media in public relations practice. In other words, it is pertinent to ascertain the extent to which digital media can enhance public relations practice. These digital media include: electronic presentations, bulk SMS, blogs, social media, websites, instant messaging services, electronic billboards, etc. Digital media are largely emerging technologies with innovations on a regular basis.

Review of related literature

Digital media in public relations practice

The use of digital media is essential in public relations practice because of the many advantages which it affords. In the first place, digital media enables public relations practitioners the opportunity to reach various publics in a unique way, via websites, sms, podcasts, online social networks, etc. With its multimedia approach, digital media ensures that public relations campaigns can reach an "inestimable" number of people. Secondly, digital media is noted for its immediate feedback mechanism through which members of the public can express themselves concerning the organizations products and services. Thirdly, digital media are effective in measurement. Public relations practitioners need to quantify as well as establish in qualitative terms the impact of their communication. In other words they need to determine whether their efforts are yielding the desired outcome. Measurement in public relations is important because it establishes the rationale for public relations. If public relations can achieve a desired result which supports sales, marketing and indeed the entire organization, then it is relevant. On the basis of the following, Grunig (2009) writes that,

> *...it is not surprising that so many public relations practitioners view the new digital social media as a revolutionary force that changes the way they think and upsets the way they practise public relations.*

The effect of digital media on public relations practice is awesome. In the first place digital media has a compelling influence on public relations practice. Grunig (2009) is of the opinion that digital social media has a number of potentials with regard to public relations practice and this includes: the ability to make the public relations profession more global; strategic; two-way; and interactive and; symmetrical. In other words, it will be more dialogical. If public relations is dialogical, it becomes more socially responsible because members of various publics can use existing lines of communication via digital media to express their feelings, requests and suggestions to the organization. Sol is and Breakenridge (2009:1) agree with the notion that digital media will change the face of public relations practice when they write that,

> *...it is hard to avoid making the claim that 'the internet changes everything.' ...for public relations the unavoidable conclusion is that nothing will ever be the same again*

However, it is important to note as Grunig (2009) warns that although digital media may have the potential to revolutionize public relations practice, it can only achieve this feat if there is a paradigm shift in the thinking of public relations scholars and practitioners. According to Grunig (2009), the expected revolution which digital media is expected to bring to public relations will not occur if public relations practitioners use digital media as a means of "dumping" messages on various publics. Rather, messages targeted at various publics should elicit a response which is

useful in decision making within the organization. Furthermore, public relations practitioners are fond of using digital media in the old way as highlighted in the symbolic or interpretative paradigm which is put forward by Hatch (1997). Phillips (2009) suggests a new adaptation of the models of public relations with regard to digital media. In this model, Phillips (2009) identifies digital media that can be used for propaganda and information, as well as those which are symmetrical and asymmetrical. Grunig (2006), emphasizes that the full potentials of digital media and its effect on public relations practice cannot be realized using the interpretative paradigm rather the strategic management paradigm should be used. This emphasis is highlighted in the statement by Mark Westaby in Grunig (2005:19) thus, "allow it to become a new medium in its own right." Key (2005:19) writes that,

> *Public relations in the digital age requires understanding how your key constituents are gathering and sharing information and then influencing them at key points. Doing so requires strategies that embrace the digital age.*

Digital media is indeed a "new medium" in its own right and public relations practitioners should view and treat it as such if the full potentials of digital media will accrue. This notion stirs criticism as Weaver, Motion, and Roper (2006) note that the call to use digital media in its own right exists only in the minds of scholars and not in reality. In other words, it is an ideal that is yet to be achieved.

Unlike traditional media where public relations practitioners are able to control the flow of information, with digital media Grunig (2009) posits that controlling theflow of information is not possible. With the many social networks occasioned bydigital media members of the public can share information about any organization and talk about the organization in any way they please. This makes targeting information at the particular "public" very difficult to do. Kim (2006) extends the
situational theory of publics to explain how people control their exposure to information, form cognitions as well as pass information from one person to the other. This scenario was earlier predicted by Chaffee and Metzger (2001: 370) thus,

> *In the near future, the issue may be less about what media companies are doing to people and more about what people are doing with the media . . . as the mass-ness of the media declines and as new technologies continue to empower individuals, social control by elite groups in society may become more difficult.*

In this way, publics are not just a group of people which face similar conditions but they are also active spreaders of information. In this digital age, people who are members of various publics are effective in passing relevant information to other people via social networks such as facebook, tweeter, blogger and also via sms, podcasts and video messages. In this digital age, dialogue between individuals is often mediated by the internet and other digital media such as mobile phones. Such dialogue is relevant to public relations practice because it may be across such channels that publics share information that is integral to the existence, reputation and sustenance of the organization. Phillips and Young (2009:252) describe such internet mediated dialogue as "... a conversation that is enabled and given form and substance by the interlinked,

aggregated messages that emerge from internet-mediated social networks." Bentwood (2005:2) notes that,

> *For the first time in history, technology has reached a point where everyone has a voice. This voice, articulated through social media, can be extremely powerful and can force individuals, companies and communities to change the way they behave.*

The advent and widespread use of digital media across the globe highlights the need to use digital media in public relations practice. In a bid to catch up in the use of digital media, public relations practitioners are classified in four distinct stages. The Conversation Agent (2010) identifies four stages in the use of digital media in public relations practice. These four stages are as follows: the crawling stage; the toddling stage; the walking stage and; the running stage.

Public relations practice has a lot of compelling reasons to go digital. In the first place, much of the world is online now so in order to reach these vast numbers of people, public relations practice needs to embrace digital media. Newrly (2009:1) estimates that, "Nowadays more than 250 million Europeans are regular visitors to the Internet." Therefore public relations practice cannot afford not to use digital media. The growth of internet use in the world is a compelling force which illustrates
the impact of digital media on public relations practice, Grunig (2009:3) writes that:

> *As of June 30, 2009, there were 1,668,870,408 internet users in the world—24% of the world's population of nearly 6.8 billion (Internet World Stats, 2009). The percentage of the population that uses the internet ranges from 6.7% in Africa to 73.9% in North America. Internet usage is higher in developed regions of the world (50.1%in Europe and 60.1% in Oceania/Australia) than in developing regions (23.7% in the Middle East and 30.0% in the Latin American/Caribbean region). Although only 18.5% of the Asian population uses the internet, 42.2% of all internet users in the world are in Asia. In addition, internet use worldwide grew 362% from 2000 to2009, including 516% in Asia, 1,360% in the Middle East and Africa, and 873% in the Latin American/Caribbean region.*

The popularity of the internet across the globe is a major indicator of the advantage which digital media presents the practice of public relations. With widespread numbers of people using the internet, the reach of the medium is assured. Among the many advantages which internet use offers public relations practice are: wider reach; linking with other public relations practitioners and; saving money via online public relations campaigns. Apart from the Internet, there is a convergence that is characteristic of digital media which is relevant in public relations practice. Galloway (2005: 573).

Converging mobile technologies that combine the functions of messaging with calendaring, computing, phoning, browsing, purchasing, photography, and entertainment offer a more fluid environment for the practice of public relations. Keeping in touch with the online but wireless publics of "cyber public relations" as part of a relationship building process means thinking of

public relations as a communicative activity that entails stimulating feelings such as connectedness, involvement, appreciation, and meaningfulness.

On the basis of the literature reviewed, the study will take the next step to gather data in order to answer research questions posed herein.

Related empirical studies

The digital conversation: digital media and public relations in Hong Kong

In the study, "The digital conversation: digital media and public relations in Hong Kong," Devereux (2007) examines the challenges facing the public relations profession in the age of digital conversation. The study also ascertains the extent to which public relations programmes implemented by multinational organizations in Hong Kong are utilizing digital media to achieve their communication objectives. Using survey, the study finds that: the employment of digital media within Hong Kong public relations is here to stay and likely to increase; the overall perception among the sample is that the use of digital media benefits the practice of public relations; there is concern about the potential loss of personal contact with audiences through the use of digital media and ; there is considerable variation in the level of knowledge about digital media among the professionals interviewed. Devereux (2007:10) concludes that,

> For Hong Kong public relations professionals, digital media tools represent powerful channels of communication for building relationships between organisations and their publics, both internal and external. Digital media offers a scale of interactivity between senders and receivers not possible before in traditional models of communication.

Public relations, education and social media: issues for professionalism in the digital age

In the study, "Public relations, education and social media: issues for professionalism in the digital age," Quinn-Allan (2010) examines the use of social media by public relations practitioners for education and lauds the ability of digital media to reach target audiences in effective ways other than previously used media. The study uses a qualitative approach and argues that social media should be understood for the unique ways in which it can impact on the relationship between an organisation and its various publics. Social media is also relevant in the curriculum of public relations students so that they will be adequately grounded in the professional sense. Quinn-Allan (2010:52) concludes that:

> ... social media provides a timely opportunity for rethinking approaches to the teaching of core public relations theory. Bringing relationship building to the fore and privileging it along with economic and other organisational imperatives makes it possible to better understand the role that social media can and ought to play within Public Relations and Public Relations education. This view enables social media to be treated as more than just a set of communication technologies.

Research Method

The study uses survey research design. The population of this study is public relations officers and information officers in selected organizations in Abuja which is the capital of Nigeria. These organizations include: banks, hotels, government parastatals, hospitals, schools, churches, etc.

Purposive sampling was used to select organization based on those who accepted to partake in the survey. Organizations which refused to partake in the survey were excluded. Also, the study selected public relations officers and information officers that were knowledgeable about digital media and had used it in public relations practice. Since the study area is Abuja (due to its cosmopolitan nature), it was easy to find respondents who fit the criteria stated above.

Sample size
The sample size for this study is 120 respondents.

Instrument of data collection
The instrument of data collection used for this study is questionnaire, containing nine (9) close ended questions.

Data presentation

Table I: Relevant digital media in public relations

Digital media	Frequency	Percentage
Bulk SMS	52	43.33
Social media	20	16.67
Electronic billboards	12	10
Websites	10	8.33
Blogs	05	4.17
Online surveys	02	1.67
Groups on instant messaging	05	4.17
Internet adverts	14	11.66
Total	**120**	**100**

Table 1 presents a distribution of respondents according to the most relevant digital media which they use in public relations practice. According to the table, 52 respondents (representing 43.33 percent of the total population) indicate bulk SMS; 20 respondents (representing 16.67 percent of the total sample) indicate social media; 12 respondents (representing 10 percent of the total sample) indicate electronic billboards; 10 respondents (representing 8.33 percent of the total sample) indicate websites; 5 respondents (representing 4.17 percent of the total sample) indicate blogs; 2 respondents (representing 1.67 percent of the total sample) indicate online surveys; 5 respondents (representing 4.17 percent of the total sample) indicate groups on instant messaging while; 14 respondents (representing 11.66 percent of the total sample) indicate internet adverts.

Most respondents (by 43.33 percent of the total sample) indicate bulk SMS while few respondents (by 1.67 percent of the total sample) indicate online surveys. Other relevant media in public relations practice include: social media; electronic billboards; websites; blogs, groups on instant messaging and; internet adverts.

Table II: Tasks of digital media in public relations practice

Tasks	Frequency	Percentage
Clarify issues	19	15.83
Counter negative information	18	15
Encourage discussion	10	8.33
Ascertain public opinion on issues	15	12.5
Inform relevant publics	20	16.67
Project organizations' image	27	22.5
Raise salient issues	08	6.67
Challenge/attack the competitors	03	2.5
Total	**120**	**100**

Table II presents a distribution of respondents according to the most frequent tasks which digital media are used to accomplish tasks in public relations practice. According to the table, 19 respondents (representing 15.83 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media clarify issues; 18 respondents (representing 15 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media counter negative information; 10 respondents (representing 8.33 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media encourage discussion;15 respondents (representing 12.5 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media ascertain public opinion on issues; 20 respondents (representing 16.67 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media inform relevant publics; 27 respondents (representing 22.5 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media project the organizations image; 8 respondents (representing 6.67 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media raise salient issues while; 3 respondents (representing 2.5 percent of the total population) indicate that digital media challenge/attack competitors.

Other tasks which digital media accomplish in public relations include: clarify issues; counter negative information; encourage discussion; ascertain public opinion on issues; inform the public and raise salient issues.

Table III: Challenges of digital media use in Nigeria

Challenges	Frequency	Percentage
Technology illiteracy	22	18.33
Epileptic data services	20	16.67
Poor technical support	15	12.5
Technophia	18	15
Inaccessibility to digital media	19	15.83
Financial constraints	26	21.67
Total	**120**	**100**

Table III present the challenges of digital use among public relations practitioners in Nigeria. According to the table, 22 respondents (representing 18.33 percent of the total population)

indicate technology illiteracy; 20 respondents (representing 16.67 percent of the total population) indicate epileptic data services; 15 respondents (representing 12.5 percent of the total population) indicate poor technical support; 18 respondents (representing 15 percent of the total population) indicate technophobia; 19 respondents (representing 15.83 percent of the total population) indicate inaccessibility to digital media while; 26 respondents (representing 21.67 percent of the total population) indicate financial constraints.

Most respondents (21.67 percent of the total population) indicate financial constraints while few respondents (12.5 percent of the total population) indicate poor technical support. Other challenges of digital use among public relations practitioners in Nigeria include: technology illiteracy; epileptic data service; technophobia and; accessibility.

Findings

Bulk SMS is the most relevant digital medium used among public relations practitioners in Abuja. The service is used to reach a large number of relevant publics in a short time and at minimal cost. Most public relations practitioners in Abuja find it useful in their daily activities. The uses of bulk SMS is versatile and can be applied in multiple purposes. Apart from this, bulk SMS saves both time and money.

Digital media are used most frequently by public relations practitioners in Abuja to project the image of their organization. The main aim of public relations is to create a favourable atmosphere between the organization and its publics. This is evident and applied in the use of digital media. Organizations that do not have a good relationship with their publics will most likely fail in achieving its overall goals.

Financial constraint is the major challenge of using digital media among public relations practitioners in Abuja. Digital media are often costly to acquire, operate and maintain. A lot of this cost is to be borne by the organization for which the public relations effort is initiated. Technical support provided for majority of digital media does not come cheap. For instance, designing and hosting a website on the internet costs a lot of money. Apart from this maintenance of the website by the administrator takes its toll on the organizations finances.

Conclusion and recommendation

Funding is a major obstacle in the use of digital media among public relations practitioners. Toward this end, organizations should provide adequate funding for public relations officers and information officers so that they can afford to use digital media which they find relevant in their daily activities. Public relations officers too should intimate management of the benefits which accrue from the use of digital media. When this is done, management is aware the gains that are made from the use of digital media. Thus, they will not be reluctant in releasing funds for digital public relations projects that are initiated in future.

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) has an important role to play in promoting the use of digital media in public relations among organisations in Nigeria. The NIPR should enlighten management (of organisations in Nigeria) about the many benefits of digital media in public relations practice. Also, the NIPR should ensure that digital media is incorporated in the curricula of public relations training institutes and universities, so that the future crop of public relations practitioners are well grounded in digital media.

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