CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF NIGERIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICERS' INTERNET NEEDS

By
Shittu, Abdul-Raifu Ayanshola
Department of Mass Communication, Ahmadu Bella University, Zaria
shitturaifu@yahoo.co.uk

Abstract

The objectives of this paper are to: review research in the area of applications of the Internet and web content available from 2001 to date; discuss public relations concepts and roles in relation to the Internet as well as make inferences on needs to be fulfilled in practitioners' communication management roles as it affects the Internet. Documentary analysis approach was used. The paper offers proposals on refocusing Nigerian tertiary institutions' Mass Communication and Public Relations' curricular to incorporate Internet technology topics to empower their graduates with professional skills in managing Internet communications.

Keywords*:* Public relations, public relations roles, Internet communication, practitioners' Internet needs, and curriculum.

Introduction

The Nigerian Federal Government's policy on information technology shows that the Internet and other communication technologies will serve as an engine of national development. The policy indicates that the government will employ information communication technology in all facets of the nation's socio-economic, political and cultural life. In this direction Federal Government of Nigeria (FGN) commissioned the first phase of its telecommunication infrastructure project to interconnect 343 local government headquarters in Abuja in April 2007. Similarly Nigeria's Communication Satellite was launched on May 12, 2007. It has also embarked on E-governance, directing that government and educational services, where feasible be conducted through the Internet. Thus civil servants' employments, salary payments, pension administration, customs services, banking, company registration, Universities' as well as Polytechnics' admissions, course registrations and accommodation allocations are all conducted online. The implication is that Public Relations Officers (PROs) must acquire Internet knowledge and skills for its usage as well as for conducting research.

PROs are employed by major business organisations, banks and nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), FGN and State Ministries, as well as parastatals, universities, WAEC, NECO, the private sector as well as political parties. They are the official communicators for their organizations. The challenges they face in the internet age include knowing their publics' communication behaviours, and opinions. This is due in part to the complexities of the current Nigeria's media technology landscape. Developments in Nigerian telecommunication services raise the following questions: What range of PRO needs can the Internet serve in their communication function? And what are the consequences on PRO's training in meeting professional challenges in the Internet age?

Reviews such as this chapter can raise PROs' awareness of imperatives in their Internet - related duties. Also, it will provide feedback on new media potentials to Nigerian tertiary institutions offering public relations and communication courses as well as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) - the profession's regulatory body.

Definition of concepts

The Internet: Tiamiyu (2000 : 126) defined the Internet as the "... networking of computers by telecommunications media and equipment..." spanning the globe and involving "...millions of computers interconnected by the various telecommunication systems of various countries..." storing, sending, delivering or forwarding messages and computer files in form of electronic signals twenty four hours daily. Gould (2004), regards the Internet as the convergence of all channels which due to its "packet nature" does not differentiate between "...any mass communication channel in transfer of data."

Needs: These are the "... often instinctive human forces that motivate ..." people to act (Arrens 2002: 148). Potential benefit satisfactions often motivate people to action. Need is defined as the potential satisfactions PRW can get from use of the Internet as compared to conventional mass media in achieving professional goal(s).

Public Relations Concept

Ogbondah (2001:159) citing Grunig and Hunt (1984), defines public relations as the "...management of communication between an organization and its publics." Citing the United Kingdom Institute of Public Relation's (2002) definition, Mackey (2003:4 - 5) states that it is a field that: ".... looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics". The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations define public relations as profession concerned with reputation; a "...discipline that looks after reputation with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behavior...." (NIPR 2010).

This paper operationally defines public relations as the occupational functions involved with planning and managing communication as well as the favourable image and positive reputation for organizations or individuals, to achieve understanding and influence the behaviour of publics. Public relations communicators handle the planning and execution of organisations' communication activities to and from the media as well as other publics.

PRO Functions

At least ten common PRO functions are evident from Ajala (2001), Barran (2003) and Sambe (2005) expositions including:

a. Counselling: Organizations' management rely on the public relations manager for information on trends within and outside the organization. The manager would thus carry out research to get solid basis for advising management.
b. Relating well with the employees: The manager should carry along and keep employees well informed all the time.
c. Financial relations: Maintaining good, relationship with the financial public is one priority duty of the manager. The manager ensures constant and intensive communication with the financial public.

d. Relating with the media: The manager should maintain cordial relationship with media personnel. He/she ensures free access, maximum attention, and provide full information whenever the journalists call.
e. Community relations: The manager courts the friendship and respect of the community on behalf of the organization, because the organization cannot function if the immediate community is hostile.
f. Development and Fund raising: The manager participates in mobilising and raising awareness for donations to charity.
g. Lobbying and Government affairs: This involves relating with government executives and the legislatures to facilitate favourable socio-economic atmosphere conducive to the organizations survival.
h. Production: The manager is responsible for initiating and producing the materials for the mass media and communication,
i. Special events: The manager must frequently organize news generating events including facility visits, community day, press conference, seminars and award giving ceremonies.
j. Research and evaluation: The public relations functions involve research and evaluation through various documentary analysis, case studies and surveys.

Literature Review

The present review argues in support of the proposition that the Internet is valuable in public relations. In order to set the tone for the discussion the 'Uses and Gratification' theoretical perspective is used. The theory addresses peoples' purposeful use of the media to attain desired goals. It explains how peoples' needs drive their media use. It answers the question "... Who uses which content from which media under which conditions and for what reasons?" (Folarin, 1998: 65). The Internet enhance PROs' competitiveness, their management performance in large scale businesses, international agencies and government. Kwansah - Aidoo (2004) found in a study of Ghana PROs that Internet use is low. He attributed the situation to: poverty, poor infrastructure, lack of facilities, inadequate training in computing and low literacy levels in that society. Also, the study shows close similarity between the public relations workers and their US counterparts in their expectations from the Internet. The PROs want the Internet for the opportunities it provides to use case studies from other countries, keep abreast of professional trends worldwide as well as plan and do public relations research. Others are to economise time and minimise work interruptions. The Nigerian PROs' Internet usage is unlikely to differ.

Wright (2001) reports that United States' PROs have adopted the Internet to a large extent (98 percent) and use the Web in their duties (88 percent daily). The workers are "... developing electronic newsletters..." and e-mail is their main method of sending news releases to the media (Wright, 2001: 24, 30). Internet has positive effect on the relationship between PROs and journalists. This confirms Ryan's (1999) findings that its utility are for: surveillance of other companies (57 percent), consulting external databases (49 percent), and examining the government activities (39 percent).

The Internet gave practitioners direct access to specific target audiences; bypassing the conventional mass media that previously controlled access. As activist, pressure groups and anti-corporate organisations use Internet interactive facilities to develop relationships and advance their causes, the need arises for practitioners to monitor and manage the challenges.

Porter et al (2001) found that use of online databases enhance tracking clients' news, enabling them to "watchdog" over the media. Further, WWW facilitates two way communications between organisations and their publics; also it raises practitioners' chances to participate in management decision making. They found practitioners Internet skills low echoing Wright's (2001). Similarly, Porter and Sallot(2003) found that practitioner status was associated with usage of the Internet. They concluded that the infrastructure has become a factor in public relations strategy.

Hachigian and Hallahan (2003:60) found that US computer industry journalists were moderately interested in using the web to gather news, but due to its speed advantage, the Internet was their first news source. They need the web for product announcements and current information, through source credibility and reputation as supplier of usable information affects decisions on the web's news values. This reflects Garrison's (2001) findings that journalists rate email low in credibility. It lends credence to Shin and Cameron's (2003) suggestion for PROs to ensure credibility in all online and offline activities due to their finding that the traditional conflict in media - PRO relationship was also present online.

Luo (2002) found that entertainment was the most important factor affecting attitude towards web advertising. Positive attitude correlated with increased web use and higher satisfaction compared to negative attitudes. Okpoku and Khan(2004) reported that Swedish small and medium scale businesses' motives for Internet use were to: provide support, collect feedback information from, and display products to clients. They most commonly used e- mail and hyperlinks for gathering customer information.

Internet's impact on Public Relations Communication

Jo and Kim's (2003: 199-223) experimental study revealed that Internet's "interactivity and multimediality" significantly affected relationship building and organisations' reputations. However, mere sophisticated multimedia does not guarantee effective relationships.

Lawson - Body and Limayem (2004) found that organisation's web presence positively affected customer loyalty. They suggested that websites should feature forms, forum, chat rooms, online conferences, as well as news groups, for developing and maintaining relationships with customers.

Further, studies by Gyotae, Kaid and Pfau (2003) in the US reveals that issues originating online do transfer to and develop offline with consequences. Also, Nisbethand Scheufele (2004) reveals that online political campaign information do set agenda for the public and traditional news media offline. Moreover, strengthening this position, Anderson (2005:521) found that individuals start and sustain relationships online that later migrate offline where they continue to develop.

Supporting, Vander et al (2005) showed how stakeholders exploit Internet resources to promote their causes. Some are now discussed:

a) *Timely and objective access to information:* Independent websites provide information from competing manufacturers on product specifications, dealer prices and test reports for consumers to decide more easily.

b) *Rumour:* Using appropriate software (e.g. Gooey), people browsing the same website in different locations around the globe can recognise each other's presence. They then exchange information on issues they have identified on that website e.g. false claims or infringements of laws or rights.

c) *Complaint websites:* Individuals established websites for customers to complain against organisations. An example is http://www.ms boycott, which devotes its contents to complaints against Microsoft organisation.

The other forms that pressure groups use include: *Banding together to force down product prices* through online Websites like mercata.com and accompany.com devoted to co-operative type activities. *Online meetings to publicise firms 'faults:* where aggrieved people post suggestions to jointly confront large companies.

Vander et al (2005) suggests some online public relations strategies to engage activists including: (i) Organisations should create complaints section on their websites or establish one for aggrieved consumers to lodge protests (iii) A company may act on an ad hoc basis tackling problems on the sites they occur, as they occur; and finally (iv) Organisations can embrace the website - source of the protests - or take legal action. The authors concluded that the right approach is one that should enhance the organization's good reputation.

Internet Resources for Public Relations Workers:

The previous section focussed on online resources' relevance in PROs' functions.The next sections turns to the resources PROs can utilise. These constitute reasonsfor adopting the Internet.

i) World Wide Web:

The essence of the WWW lies in the hypertext transfer protocol (or HTTP) that transports files from place to place. (Barran 2003:306-307). Its effectiveness depends on the site's interactivity, hyper-textuality, asynchronicity and multimediality. Interactivity facilitates two way communications through the web. However, political and governmental websites hardly exploit this feature (Galley 2000 and Oblak 2003). Reasons include: political leaders' negative attitude towards interactivity for fear of critical views from the public as well as the cost of managing the large feedbacks that might result. Campaign website has been found to be an effective public relations tool that influences public opinion and mobilises supporters (Ku et al 2003: 543). Typical political campaign websites contain latest news releases, headlines and URL addresses and achieves of old releases which are indexed topically. Also they feature: daily press briefing to journalists; candidates' manifestoes, constantly changing news photos, emails and voter registration, downloadable campaign materials and facility to donate money online. (Galley 2000; Wicks and Souley 2003).

ii) Electronic mail (Email):

Email's advantages are: reduction in telephoning thus eliminating the incidence of "... missing each other's calls ...", cheapness and speed (Tiamiyu 2000: 124). It is "...easy to sort, filter, store and delete." (Freedman and Giacone 2000). GSM phones now relay Email messages as well as short messaging system (SMS) and multimedia messages (MMS), thus making access even in some remote areas possible (Lee, Tan, and Hameed 2005). SMS/MMS asynchronous natures make them less intrusive compared to cell phone calls (Herring 2004: 30).

iii) Usenets

Usenets (network news) is a network of thousands of individual message forums each devoted to a very specific topic. It enables an online community member in distant locations to discuss and exchange information with others sharing same interest (Ayo 2001), Also, organisations can use it to do research; participants search for facts and others' opinions (Keghku 2006;). The negative side is "flaming" or "flame war", when people take sides and hurl insults at each other (Ayo 2001:88).

iv) Chatting / Instant messaging (IM)

According to Herring (2004: 26 - 34) chatting and instant messaging (IM) provide users typing on their computers in different locations, space to interact almost instantaneously. IM has a "contact list" that shows when a friend is online and is ready to chat. IM's are dyadic in structure and several dyads converse independently and simultaneously around the globe.

(v) Electronic Publications

Deuze (2003: 215- 219) highlights the revolutionary aspect of web journalism. His content analysis of online journalism reveals four major categories. He termed them: "orienting", "instrumental", "'monitorial", and "dialogical" journalism. The last two represent the most radical departure from the conventional print medium. The journalist practicing the monitorial type produces some content, but mainly facilitates connectivity. Anyone interested can post questions on that journalist's website. The journalist responds by using relevant stories and linkages to other sites. Similarly, the journalist practicing the "dialogical" (or "open") type allows other journalists and the public to post stories directly to his/her website. Thus, everyone is a producer and consumer or "prosumer". This type of journalism expands "... the conversation of society and its citizen…" and is a potential tool for advancing Nigeria's democratic aspirations.

vi) Online Databases

An online database is an electronic store of numerical data, text, pictures, video and sound organised in searchable and accessible form (Porter et al 2001). Databases have created infinite sources of information accessible from PROs homes or office, reduced the time for collection and speeded up analyses (Day 2000).

vii) Teleconferencing

Teleconferences enable meeting to hold in cyberspace with people in different geographic locations participating; *Online news conference* involves Journalists' interviews through Skype services or other similar (that enables people to engage in voice calls while seeing one another, through videocam on their computer sets). They could use webconference and chat service to teleconference via the internet (Freedman and Giacone 2000; Hoffman 2002: 11). Further, companies use *Streaming Audio/Video* facility: a video file being downloaded and played simultaneously for product promotion, news and entertainment (Dominick 2000, Hallahan 2004).

viii) The Social Networking Sites (SNS)

These include: Blogs, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, YouTube, which have become recognised as public relations tool. Many commercial and not-for-profit organisations have own blogs and are members of Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Blog is a variant of the dialogic journalism,

which is a text – based HTML document that an individual or a community maintains. Frequently updated, users place messages directly on the web site and in reverse "chronological sequence" (Herring 2004:31). The contents often are criticisms of offline news media articles, or items of self-presentation. Blogs credibility has been questioned as they may fall prey to rumours and serve as vehicles forreputation attacks since the publications do not go through institutional editorialprocess that ought to check such negative influences (Goldstein 2004).

Organisations use the SNS's to publish their product stories and exchange views with other subscribers on issues of public interest, as well as advertise products (Wright and Hinson, 2010). The sites have been used for product and institutional branding with studies indicating preference for this media form over the traditional mass media (Lis, Nienstedt, and Berz, 2011). According to Evans, Twomey and Talan (2011:1):

> Blogs, ...are now a staple in contemporary communications campaigns...Social networking Web sites such as Facebook and Lmkedln are integral parts of ground-breaking public relations plans such as the viral strategy President Obama used during his 2008 campaign....

Organisations including Ernst and Young, the National Institute of Health in US, the World Bank several Fortune 50 firms and the traditional mass media have also been communicating with their publics through SNS's (Evans, Twomey, and Talan2011).

According to Avery, et al (2010)'s study of 275 hospital PROs across US, the adoption of SNS is low with the predominant adopters being the urban based workers. Their findings indicate that the rural workers' reason for none-adoption was mainry due to lack of Internet access.

According to Web Trends Nigeria (2012), Facebook user population in Nigeria is also low. The figure is 901,840 or 02.2 per cent of all internet users in Nigeria. The comparative figures for South Africa and Egypt are 2,318,260 (50.1 per cent) and 2,157,720 (17.1 per cent). However Nigerian youths in particular use several other SNS's including YouTube, Bebo, My Space and Twitter (Vincent,Adekoya, and Qgunde, 2011). From the foregoing, one can suggest that PROs can reach urban educated youths through SNS's.

Nigerian Public Relations and the Internet

Ogbonda (1999) credits the Internet for the spread in the US of stories supporting the Delta activists' stand, and that it led to negative perception of General Abachaby US government. He notes that while activists communicated their case mainly through Internet electronic bulleting boards and similar online resources, the Abacha government never employed the Internet at all; but instead relied on lobbyist/spokesmen of questionable credibility in US.

Nwosu (2000) bemoans Nigerian public relations practitioners' indifference to new information technology adoption. He asserts that "...the profession and Nigerians are the worse for it." Muhammed (2000) argues that the conduct of public relations cannot succeed using old methods in the Information era and that training in modern technologies is necessary for practitioners.

Further justifying the need for applying the Internet in public relations, Sambo (2001) argues that a country's reputation is a critical determinant of its competitiveness globally and declares that

ICT and globalisation has rendered governments open to international public scrutiny. He therefore called for PROs managing the country's reputation to use the Internet and satellite television. He asserted that "...computer literacy has become an imperative for all Nigerians..." (Sambo 2001: 9).

Many Nigerian organisations now have websites and seem to appreciate the contribution of public relations to the effectiveness of the sites, but are a long way from implementing public - organisations compliant interactive sites. This and what follows are based on personal observations and discussions with PROs, due to scarce empirical research. Going through these websites, shovel ware and brochure types tend to be common although media sites such as Punch, Daily Trust and ThisDay seem to integrate interactive features far more than business and even government organisations' sites. As at 2009, GLO, MTN, ZAIN, VISAFONE, ETISALAT and University sites tend to be devoid of features that encourage public feedback. These seem to be one way top-down communication. Even when they provide email feature that allows public to write back to the organisation, they seldom respond to complaints and requests.

PROs themselves, due to lack of technical professional training, do not construct websites, thus the webmasters control the work. They, as the organisations' communication managers however, should control the contents on the sites. This explains Nwosu (2004)'s stress on the need for the PRW to "... master the principles and applications of Digital Public Relations (DPR), if he hopes to remain relevant and useful to his organization. And the first place to start is to ensure he or she is computer literate." According to him, DPR is:

...the systematic and broad-based applications of ICTs in all aspects of modem public relations practice or management. It is public relations practice that is computer compliant, computer driven or computer- mediated. Digital publicrelations is ... communications on the cyberspace, the internet and the World Wide Web.... includes the use of extranet for effective two - way communications with various publics (Nwosu, 2004: 29-30).

According to him, problems of DPR in Nigeria include high costs of computer hardware and software, lack of access in rural areas, viruses, hackers, fraud, and poor electricity supply. One dilemma facing professionals is that the press can side - track PROs because they (the press) can get all stories and pictures they need from the organisation's website. Thus, the PRO's function is weakened. Another is that people can place negative stories on organisation's website.

During the campaigns for the 2011 national general elections, the President, Dr. Goodluck Jonathan, and other candidates had presence on Facebook and engaged publics, to discuss their manifestoes. Nigerian newspapers now republish the public's views from social networking sites. Punch reproduces on its inside pages, postings from the walls of Facebook subscribers about the oil subsidy removal crises, the House of Representative probe of allegations on oil firm's bribery scam against some legislators and the change of the name: University of Lagos to M.K.O. Abiola University, Lagos.

From the foregoing, one can say that PROs' communication needs include:

- Training in Internet skills.
- Using the Internet to research views and gather experts' opinion is an imperative for practitioners in multinational organisations and federal government. Also, monitoring stakeholders' online activities provides data for proactive strategies to face "reputation

muggings" or "morality muggings" (Keghku 2006). These represent activists' disparagement of organization's product or policies respectively. Keghku (2006) avers that the Internet has made reputation management easier but doubts if practitioners are acquiring necessary Internet skills for the function.

- Ensuring credibility in all activities - online or offline to avoid web muggings.
- Political campaign websites has the capacity for diverse communication messages and two-way communication. Researches cited above shows the characteristics of effective public relations websites for practitioners to use.
- Also, they should use dialogical journalism.
- They should use the Internet to collect feedback information from, and display products to their publics.

Recommendations

Educational implications from the preceding include: that public relations communicators should know Internet's terminologies, basic principles as well as strengths and limitations. Further, their training should enable them develop the capability to create a public relations information system for their clients (Nwosu 2000). Consequently, it is recommended that tertiary institutions offering public relations and communication degrees should consider incorporating the following courses in their programmes (based on Garrison 1999 and Okoye 2006):

a. Basic computer literacy, Spread sheets and Database Packages for Communication (at 100 level, for two semesters).
b. Website Design (200 level).
c. Internet for professional application: search engines, online archiving, online discussion, and teleconferencing (300 level).
d. Online / Desktop publishing (300 level)
e. Online Public Relations (300/400 level).
f. Online Advertising Fundamentals (400 level)
g. ICT in Development: - ICT's socio-economic and cultural aspects (400 level),
h. In addition, elective and cognate courses could include: Internet research methods and computer programming.

Also, it is imperative that empirical research on public relations' needs for the Internet be carried out to monitor the development in the Nigerian cultural context. It should be based on the Uses and Gratification theory to provide insights into the socio-psychological motives for Internet use.

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