The Use of Internet in Public Relations in Some Selected Federal Establishments in Sokoto State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Over the last decade, public relations have grown to include much more than traditional media in their activities; the practitioners now used the Internet or new media to reach out to target publics. This paper examines Internet use in public relations practice of federal establishments and how practitioners are responding to the new media in their day-to-day activities. The study identified factors that are responsible for Internet application in public relations practice. Focus group and in-depth interview were used to generate data from twenty-two participants from the selected federal organizations. The findings of the study indicated that diffusion of the Internet among federal establishments and their practitioners is taking place in different dimensions, depending on the technology richness of the organization as well as the expertize of their practitioners. The results also revealed management decision, e-governance policy and internet adoption by other organizations to be the major factors responsible for application of the technology by practitioners.
***Key words**: Internet, In-House, Public Relations, Practitioners, Federal Organizations*

Introduction

The growth and development of the Internet could be said to gather pace with the advent of World Wide Web which heralded its prominence and signaled a turning point in the history of communication. According to Papoola (2014), it was at this stage that the Internet's pushiness into people's lives and business became prominent and pervasive. Akumu (2021) adds that the Internet keeps public relations practitioners informed on the local and global scale that makes information accessible 24/7. It could be said that the Internet has established itself as a powerful medium of communication which provides access to instantaneous information across the globe. Bittencourt, Barros and Pimentel (2020) say that the superb ability of this technology enabling communication with tremendous speed, efficiency and economy attracted its application across different endeavours and industries including public relations.

There is no doubt that Internet revolution has brought about a new era of change and newness within modern culture that underlines its normalization in public activities (Reckwitz, 2018). Therefore, in order to unlock the potential of public relations and develop good practice, the public relations profession has to be part of the Internet revolution (Kent & Li, 2020). The beginning of the Internet could be traced to the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network (ARPANET) established by the United States Department of Defence in 1960s for collaboration in military research among business and government laboratories (Paloque-Bergès, & Schafer, 2019; Mueller, & Badiei, 2020). Many governmental organizations and educational institutions started using it in 1980s (McIlwain, 2019).

However, the public's use of the Internet has developed steadily since the launch of the World Wide Web in the early 1990s, and its application in numerous fields has grown rapidly all over the world since then (Javed, Afzal, Sharif, & Kim 2018). In Nigeria, Internet communication started to manifest in the late 1990 following the efforts of a pioneering group of people that offered limited e-mail service (Greenstein, 2020). Adomi in Anyira (2011) states that the Internet as a medium of communication started in Nigeria by the Regional Information Network for Africa (RINAF) in 1995 at the Department of Computer Science, Yaba College of Technology in collaboration with Rose Clayton Nigeria Limited. Also, Anyira (2011) highlighted that the pioneering efforts were mainly e-mail related services. He further concludes that full-blown Internet services commenced in Nigeria in 1998 with the advent of World Wide Web in the country in 1996.

The increased usage of the Internet in Nigeria reveals that online communication in the country is growing at a sporadic rate and still has the potential to grow higher. Consequently, the growth of the technology has changed the way public relations officers conduct their practice in Nigeria, as they rely on computers and Internet tools to accomplish the traditional public relations tasks (Amod et al., 2019). According to Whynne (2015), the Internet has changed the media landscape; it has changed the way news is delivered, zapped our eyes with blinking lights and radiation, and ushered audiences from print to online to social media, all the way to mobile. The Internet allows the public to see the opinions of friends, enemies and strangers through social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. As a result of that, today many organizations have corporate homepage and websites with informative and persuasive details about their

operations and services and the image of the organization is communicated to the public across the globe.

Statement of the Problem

As a result of the rise in Internet access and usage among different consumers around the globe, there has been an increase in the application of the Internet as a medium of public relations by many public relations practitioners. Also, as the Internet continues to grow in usage, studies that explore the application of the Internet for organizational public relations in Nigeria remain scanty (Allagui & Breslow, 2016). Most of the earlier studies conducted in this area reflected experiences in countries like UK, US, New Zealand and Australia. At the moment, very little has been done to reflect the Nigerian experience or in-house public relations practitioners of federal government organizations. Little studies have been identified in online public relations, and the few ones found have explored only the general impact of the Internet on the public relations, but have not deeply investigated the specific factors influencing the internet usage and how in-house public relations practitioners are using the new technology in government establishments and parastatals.

Furthermore, Wright and Hinson (2017) state that there are fewer studies that looked at how public relations practitioners are actually using the Internet. A majority of the previous studies were survey methods that engaged consultants or independent practitioners. The few qualitative research studies in the area mostly obtained their data through telephone interviews. Face-to-face interviews are rare in the previous studies. On this premise, the study attempts to cover the aforementioned gaps by investigating in-depth, the use of the Internet for public relations practice of Nigerian federal organizations in Sokoto State.

Research Questions

The study examines the use of the Internet for public relations by federal organizations in Sokoto State. Hence, the research questions are: to what extent are the in-house public relations practitioners using the Internet for public relations activity? What are the factors determining the adoption of the Internet in public relations practice of the selected organizations?

Literature Review

Studies on the internet public relations differ in their focus, scope and methodology. Despite these differences, all of them attempt to answer the questions of the effects of the Internet on public relations practice and how the practice can be improved using the new technology by the public relations practitioners?

The use of the Internet as a public relations tool poses concerns over best practices. Professionals are responsible for managing contact with an organization's public. Thus, the Internet is a must for effective information dissemination (Sommerfeldt, Yang, & Taylor, 2019). Report indicates that public relations and marketing professionals without new media and social communication skills cannot, and will not satisfy the requirements of today's organizations (Kent & Li, 2020). Hence, public relations practitioners should seek out internet training opportunities and skills to enable them to update their traditional public relations tactics for effective and efficient performance.

Toogood and Lloyd (2015) state that the Internet is the largest source of the shifts we now see between the complementary trades of journalism and public relations. The ease of access to it, its vast memory, and its huge data banks make all activities to greater openness. This means that the Internet increases transparency and opens up an infinite demand for engagement at every level, from mighty cooperations to the individual. This puts a high premium on a constant flow of messages from prominent institutions to individuals, proactively and reactively.

A majority of the research on internet usage and public relations indicates that factors such as relative advantage, market competition and profitability are the leading forces that favour internet adoption in public relations (Ramdani, Kairalek, & Lorenzo, 2009). Public relations professionals use internet technology for media relations, using their organizations' websites to post news releases for journalists to review. Professionals also use organizational web pages as important communication tools for distribution of messages to their organization's key public (Wang & Yang, 2020). A relevant advantage of using online public relations is represented by message accuracy, and precision. Online public relations use the webpage to inform the audience, with the advantage of publishing the message correctly and diminishing the possible noises that may occur during communication (Amalia, 2014). In spite of this advantage the Internet provides too many of the public relations functions, the technology is still under-utilized in so many quarters of the practice.

In a study on the use of social media in public relations in the Ghanaian Financial Services Industry, Turban, Pollard and Wood (2021) found that the technological advancement of the 21st century has revolutionized the business environment in such a way that cooperate communication has been migrated from offline to online. The use of social media in public relations has resulted in the use of Facebook as a public relations tool for organization. The purpose of the research was to find out how organizations use Facebook as a public relations tools to foster relationship with current and potential customers as well as the general public. Purposive sampling was used to select four companies from the financial services sector of the Ghana club. Content analysis was used for data collection and both qualitative and quantitative analyses were utilized for data analysis. The result indicated that all the selected companies use Facebook often as public relations tool; however, there is more one-way communication resulting in less interaction to increase the relationship and foster closer relationship between the organization and its public. The interaction is more from the organization to the customers and the public with few responses from the customers. The study concluded that there is a need for more two-way interaction between the organizations and their public for greater achievements of organizational goals.

Public relations practitioners are shifting to the Internet and social media as the lines between online and offline promotion becomes blurry (Turban, Pollard, & Wood, 2021). Taylor and Kent (2007) maintain that in spite of its great potential for communicators, the Internet remains underused by many organizations and relatively understudied by scholars as a medium for building two-way symmetrical public relations. Bhargave (2010) adds that "Practitioners tend to be attracted towards a tool that entails writing (such as e-mails and blogs) rather than other tools that use multi-media formats (such as video/photo sharing, webcasts and podcasts). The study by Bhargave explored the use of the Internet by practitioners in New Zealand and found that practitioners do not have full grasp of the online tools and their scope of utilization in the practice. It also revealed that practitioners are lacking in technical know-how of the Internet.

Some scholars raised concern on whether the Internet could be used for crisis management as one of the functions of public relations activities. Apuke and Tunca (2018) pointed out that public relations practitioners had not yet comprehended how

the Internet could be used for crisis management. They say organizations that handle crisis using internet services normally use traditional media tactics and upload them online to engage the publics, but not solely through two-way conversation on the net. This show that practitioners are yet to come to grips with the Internet and its utilization in public relations practice. Its utilization in the practice is primarily for information gathering and dissemination and not an integral part of organization communication strategy.

From the previous discourse, it has been observed that the Internet has empowered consumers and activities and democratized communication sphere. There is a debate among scholars between those who see the Internet as the ideal medium for smooth and fair connectivity, as well as those who are afraid of its messy existence (Hindman, 2018). However, it could be said, despite the limitless opportunities and benefits the Internet provides to the public relations, that it also poses new threats to the practitioners who are now poised to share information online in a non-linear manner and more transparent environment that requires them to relinquish control (Dimitrov, 2017).

Moreover, the scholar explains that internet tools can serve as important communication facilities for practitioners to conduct research, monitoring and issues management. The Internet when used properly can help mitigate crisis or nip in the bud any potential threat to organizational reputation. This simply means diverse number of organizational publics can be reached with a great speed but at the same time caution must be exercised in internet usage for anyone can share any kind of information with any number of people. One critical challenge which the internet presents to public relations especially in developing countries like Nigeria is poor penetration to every nook and cranny. A study conducted by Okwachukwu (2014) revealed that the new media presents for practitioners a new problem of poor internet penetration in Nigeria, making it difficult for the public relations practitioners to reach all his/her publics via the new media. Moreover, the study found that the new media poses for the practitioners the challenges of contending with the anonymity of many of their publics, thereby exposing them and their organizations to all kinds of mischief possibly coming from the unscrupulous people. Furthermore, "managing the gamut of messages traveling at stupefying speed" which the online public relations entails are another challenge to the practice (Okwuchukwu, 2014).

In another study by Ikpe and Olise (2010) on new media technologies and the challenges of media relations practice, it was found that though new media (Internet) are becoming gateways for effective media relations, planning, implementations and practice; regrettably, it seems that countries like Nigeria are still lagging behind in the development and utilization of new media in all spheres of life, media relations practice inclusive. The study further linked some of the responsible factors for this ugly trend to cyber crisis, corruption, low penetration of New Information and Communication Technologies in Nigeria, poor funding of public relations department, lack of expertise and poor power supply.

The discussion revealed that in the existing body of literature on online public relations, reviewed by the researcher, not much has been done to reflect the Nigerian context or in-house practitioners. In fact, no single study was discovered to reflect federal organizations in Nigeria. Also, not many studies applied a combination of focus group and in-depth interview in gathering their data. This clearly indicates the gaps in the literature which this study intends to fill.

Theoretical Framework

Communication theories aim at improving our general understanding of how communication works in relation to our environment. They help in testing or explaining various phenomena in mass communication. Same theories try to answer the question of what people do with the media. Hence, this study adopts Diffusion of Innovations theory as a theoretical framework to guide this research work.

Diffusion of Innovations is a theory that seeks to explain how, why and at what rate new idea and technology spread. The theory was popularized by Evereth Rogers. Rogers argues that diffusion is the process by which an innovation such as the Internet is communicated overtime among the participants in a social system.

According to the theory as proposed by Rogers, four main elements influence the spread of a new idea, namely the innovation itself, communication channels, time and social system. This process relies heavily on human capital and the innovation must be widely adopted in order to self-sustain. Within the rate of adoption, there is a point at which an innovation reaches critical mass, i.e., a sufficient number of

adopters of the innovation in a social system thereby realizing self-sustenance and further growth. The theory advocates that the innovation is made known through communication channelizing people or organizations are unable to find out about an innovation, diffusion simply cannot occur. Therefore, in this regard, mass communication channels contribute to awareness about the new idea and in the transfer of information from one point to another. The decision to adopt an innovation largely depends on discussion with peers or parties who have already evaluated and made a decision about whether to adopt the innovation.

Similar research works on internet usage in public relations have been explained within the framework of Diffusion of Innovations theory (Sharif, 2003; Carol, 2005; Alshohaib, 2010). Hence, this study adopts this theory as being appropriate for the fact that public relations practitioners are the members of the social system that were studied in this research. And social system is one of the important elements of this theory that determines the adoption and spread of a new idea or practice such as the internet. The major limitation of this theory is lack of cohesion in its application with consistency to new problems. Secondly, human networks are complex. As such, it is difficult to quantify or measure what exactly causes adoption of an innovation. However, despite its limitations, the theory is still relevant for the study.

Methodology

This study adopted focus group and in-depth interview method. Focus group is a useful method to explore the depth and tones of participants, opinions regarding an issue and to capture the interpretations of a communication phenomenon by the target audience (Ryan et al., 2014). Focus group can reveal a wealth of detailed information and deep insight. It creates an acceptable environment for the participants to be at ease in answering questions in their own words and add meaning to their answers. Hence the researchers conducted two sessions of the focus group discussion in which six participants were recruited per group. On the other hand, in-depth interview involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to gauge their perspectives on a particular idea, programme or situation (Adhabi & Anozie, 2017). The rationale behind choosing this two-phase design of explanatory nature where the collection of focus group data is subsequently followed by the collection of in-depth interview data is to ensure adequate exhaustion of different views and opinions of participants on the subject matter. The study started with the focus group and then moved to the in-

depth interview. The goal was to get more depth and detail on the topic and to expand its coverage.

The population for this study is all Nigerian Federal Government establishments that have websites and other social media platforms. The method of sampling for this study was purposive sampling. It is non-probability sampling technique where elements selected for the sample are chosen by the judgement of the researcher (Berndt, 2020). Homogeneous purposive sampling was drawn from in-house public relations practitioners of Federal Organizations selected for the study. A total of twenty-two participants were chosen purposively for the study based on the researcher's sound judgement that the selected organizations are compatible with the study and their practitioners possess necessary expertise and position to participate in the study. As such, 12 participants were engaged in two sessions of the focus group, while 10 participants were selected for in-depth interview.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure for the focus group involved the use of audio recordings, observation of non-verbal communication issues and note taking. At the commencement of the focus group, the researchers explained the study, its purpose, the role of the moderator and the assistant moderator, use of the digital audio recorder and how their responses would be confidential through the use of pseudonyms.

The researchers employed a semi-structured focus group guide to lead the discussion and kept it on track of the topic. At the end of the focus group, the researchers provided a summary of the major point of discussion and gave the participants the chance to confirm or clarify any of these points. This summary technique, according to Lewis in Dawn (2011), will confirm that the participants' feelings and their thoughts are well interpreted by the researcher.

For the in-depth interview, face-to-face structured interview was the procedure used for data collection. The participant selected for the in-depth interview session and their responses were secured using the semi-structured interview by face-to-face and the interview guide serves as the major instrument for data collection.

Discussion of Results

The findings of the study are presented under the coded themes. Relevant quotations from transcripts are used frequently to illustrate findings and to support results in the course of analysis and interpretation. Two themes emerged from the study that includes adoption of internet by organizations and factors that are responsible for internet adoption.

First Theme: Adoption of Internet by Organizations

Most of the focus group participants advocated that internet usage is now part of their routine activity in their organizations. The participants agreed that the internet had brought about an important transformation of communication in their work environment. For instance, participant No. 2.1 representing Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto (UDUS) submits that his organization has adopted the use of internet for application and registration of students seeking admission into the institution, phasing out the old method of manual application.

Commenting on internet relevance, participant 2.1, 5.2 (representing NHIS), and 6.1 (representing NYSC) say any organization that want to succeed in its day-to-day activities must adopt internet for the organizational wellbeing in modern society. They emphasized the obligation of using internet technology upon every organization and public relations practitioners in order for them to remain relevant in the profession. They are also of the view that the internet is a positive communication medium that is inevitable for the success in a modern organization.

Participants have divergent views on the dominant platforms adopted for public relations activity. But majority of them maintain that e-mails and Facebook are the main platforms on which the practitioners send and receive information in their organizations. The focus group discussions reveal that most organizations especially organizations that tend to be more secretive and closed in their PR activities use more of e-mails, while those that are open to the public use more of Facebook and other social media platforms.

In summary, the result of the focus group discussions revealed that the practitioners agreed that internet usage in their organizations is now part of their everyday communication functions. There was a consensus that they used the technology mainly for information dissemination through e-mails and for interaction with their public through social media platforms. A majority of the participants agreed that

the Internet had change the way public relations practice is conducted. Those changes, according to them, were apparent in terms of speed of communication and other messages shared with their public.

The practitioners were divided in terms of social media usage, as some believed that social media platforms are important tools of interaction with the public as submitted by participants of NYSC, NAFDAC, UDUS and NTI while some were skeptical of using social media to reach their public. This was highlighted in the submission of practitioners representing correctional service, NPC, and INEC, as they consider it to be porous and as such some categories of practitioners are afraid to use it for fear of hackers and amateur posts in the name of their organizations.

Second Theme: Factors for Internet Adoption

Participants of the focus group sessions have divergent views about what led their organizations to adopt the Internet for their day-to-day activities. Five of the participants held the view that the Internet was adopted for use in their organizations as a result of management decision of their respective organizations. Five were of the opinion that adoption of internet technology by other organizations influenced their decision to adopt same in order not be left behind in the new trends of communication sphere in the world.

The focus group results found that management decision and adoption by other organizations, organizational policy and presence of facilities were the main factors of internet applications in Federal Organizations. On the other hand, the in-depth interview found e-governance policy as a factor apart from some other factors similar to that of the focus group assumed adoption by other organizations as the motivating factor in the application of the technology in federal organizations. This view resonated with the answer of some participants of the in-depth interview. Also, results of new trends and societal influence were in conformity with the in-depth interview.

On the e-governance findings, there was a consensus among six participants of the in-depth interview that e-governance policy was the main factor responsible for internet adoption in their organizations and for public relations functions. E-governance is an attempt by government to embrace new technology especially the

Internet in delivering government services to the public and in facilitating communication and general exchange of information among government or other business entities.

Research Question One: To what extent are the in-house practitioners using the Internet for public relations activity?

There is general consensus that the Internet is effective for public relations practice. This is because it plays a significant role in engaging the public and in facilitating public relations work by transforming communication between an organization and its public. This study indicates that public relations practitioners of hi-tech organizations depend to a certain extent on the internet technology to reach their diversified publics. This finding corroborates the finding of Jacob and Iyamabo (2003) which revealed that internet technology has brought new changes in the Nigerian public relations practice by making practitioners conduct their practice as they rely on internet tools to accomplish their PR tasks.

The reverse is the case for low-tech practitioners who because of lack of facilities or of technical know-how do not employ the facility for PR communication. The findings indicate that usage of the internet technology is of different dimensions, depending on the technology-richness of an organization vis-à-vis technical-cum-knowledge capacity of a practitioner.

Research Question Two: What are the factors determining the adoption of the Internet in public relations practice of the selected organizations?

The finding revealed that the reason why diffusion of the Internet is taking place among the practitioners and their organizations is manifold. The study indicates that management decision, e-governance policy and adoption by prior users are the key factors that led to the application of internet technology in the federal organizations. The factor of management decision resonates with the findings of Saudi Arabian study of Alshohaib, Fredrick, Abbas, Alkandari and Dorsher (2010) that for non-western organizations, decision making style in either private or public organizations are relevant factors for internet adoption.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The public relations practitioners of federal establishment that participated in this study demonstrated varying degree of Internet usage for their routine public relations functions. Most participants believed that the Internet had brought new

changes to the practice of public relations by affording wider opportunities to engage their public with tremendous speed. The paper highlighted that a majority of the practitioners use e-mails and Facebook to communicate with their public. The intensity of their usage of the Internet is more in e-mails than websites and other social media platforms. Based on the findings of the study, the researchers recommend the following:

i. Public relations practitioners should embrace the technology in its fullest in order to maximize the benefits associated with online public relations.
ii. Practitioners should be abreast of the current changes of internet technology website operation and evolution of new media platforms.
iii. Government should redesign its online communication strategy by empowering its communication agencies in order to provide unlimited internet services to its organizations.

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