

**INTERNATIONAL PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE NEW MEDIA****Okafor Godson Okwuchukwu*¹**¹Department of Mass Communication, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka.**ABSTRACT**

This study assessed the influence of new media in occupying significant status in human communication culture. The study submits that the new media has brought about radical changes in the functioning of public relations, whether international or otherwise. Findings showed that the new media has increased interactivity in international public relations (IPR) communication thus making it a real two-way process with regards to the positive contributions of the new media. Further revealed was that tremendously reduced cost as well as eased research challenges in IPR campaign by minimizing financial and logistical hurdles inherent in the traditional IPR research channels. Also, the new media was found to represent an auspicious attempt to tackle the problem of cultural diversities in IPR by enhancing the emergence of global village of cultural mutuality. On the negative side, the new media presents for the IPR practitioner a new problem of poor Internet penetration in many developing countries making it difficult for the practitioner to reach all his publics via the new media. In the same vein, the new media poses for the International PR expert the challenge of contending with the anonymity of many of his publics hence exposing him and his organization to all sorts of mischief possibly coming from the unscrupulous ones. In addition, it was found that the new media presents to the IPR professional the challenge of managing the gamut of messages travelling at stupefying speed which the new media PR entails.

Keywords: Campaign, Communication, Culture, Organization, Internet.**1. INTRODUCTION**

The practise of Public Relations has become an essential part of modern management such that organisations that are worth their salt have got to make it a priority (Gross, 2012). The reason for this trend is straightforward: public image of any organisation is most essential for its success and indeed survival. Public relations can be viewed as a professional area which is diverse and is practiced by trained and experienced professional who operate efficiently and competently in the various fields. It requires a great deal of competence, knowledge and integrity to function effectively in any given area of the profession. This fact is valid for International Public Relations (IPR) as it is for Public Relations (PR) at national, regional and local levels.

However, being a communication endeavour, IPR cannot be executed without recourse to a communication medium. In other words, every PR endeavour (international or otherwise) involves one form of communication or the other and consequently, must be carried out via one form of communication medium or the other. Traditionally, Public Relations employ communication media such as newspaper, magazine, radio, television, billboard, bulletins etc. This class of media is referred to as the traditional/conventional and/or old media. The arrival

of what is now known as the new media, however, has resulted in a paradigm shift in the dynamics of PR communication and indeed human communication in general. This paper will hence focus on the impact this novel class of the media (new media) has had on International Public Relations.

1.1. Defining International Public Relations

Public Relations have been given varied definitions right from its professional inception. These definitions stem from the professional, practice, personal, and commonsensical angles and have developed over a period of almost seven decades. These many definitions oftentimes becomes confusing, and keeps people ignorant of what public relations really is all about (Adamolekun and Ekundayo, 2002). This perhaps is the reason Black (1989) suggests that we might not need to make much emphasis on questions of definition. Therefore, it is only wise that we first revisit some of the definitions of public relations which industry professionals and practitioners have tagged “commonsensical”. PR has been defined as “Doing good and getting credit for it”; “Doing good and letting others know you have done the good”; “Making friends and keeping them”; “Reconciling the private and public interest”; etc

According to Lee and Bernays (1992), Public Relations (PR) can be viewed as a management function, which tabulates public attitudes, defines the policies, procedures, and interests of an organization... followed by executing a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. The key objective of Public Relations is to achieve and sustain mutual understanding, mutual goodwill and mutual faith between an organisation and its publics.

However, at the first World Public Relations Forum, held in August 1978, in Mexico, representatives of more than 30 national public relations associations, in what was termed the “Mexican Statement” defined Public Relations as “the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organizational leaders, and implementing planned programs of action, which will serve both the organization and the public interest.” This Mexican Statement has been adjudged one of the best definitions of Public Relations and thus one of the most widely consulted.

International Public Relations, therefore, is simply PR planned and executed at a multinational (or international) level. Omenugha (2002) surmised that when Public Relations is planned to bring mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics in various countries where the organisation operates, that PR is said to be international. She further explained that when Public Relations policies and programmes are used in projecting a favourable image of the organisation, its business and its country in the global community, in an interdependent world, that PR is international... [It is] a deliberate, planned and sustained effort geared towards securing the desired favourable image for the organisation in the international community, paving way for profitable operations.

The basic difference between Public Relations and International Public Relations is that while the former targets its activities to publics located within a country, the publics of the latter are found across national boundaries. Hence Nwosu (1996) sees IPR as “deliberately planned,

systematic and researched activities of an organization or nation which are aimed at maintaining sound, productive and mutual relations with international publics such as customers, agents, government, business and non-business organizations". In essence, international public relations occur when the geographical scope of a PR campaign has been expanded to cover more than one national territory. This time the planning, research and communication that accompany public relations campaign at this level are all targeted at publics across national borders.

1.2. What is New Media?

Scholars have found it a bit problematic defining the New Media because the term is admittedly a loose one. Nelson (2011) explained that "the term New Media refers strictly to no particular class of communication hardware but only to some form of functionality; that is, some particular results associated with applying some form of technology in communication". In this vein, Okoye (2011) sees the New Media as "that class of communication platforms that integrate the 'mass' strength of the traditional media and the interactivity cum participatory advantages of the interpersonal media to give the audience greater control over the communication process". The New Media are basically founded in the computer and internet technologies and thus have equally been seen as synonymous with the internet and its multifaceted communication platforms. Thus, Nelson (2011) describes the new media to include the following:

- Internet publishing (books, newspapers and magazine)
- Social media (blogs, e-mail, SMS)
- Internet broadcasting (online radio and television)
- Internet Audio and Video Streaming

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

Naturally, these qualities found in the new media would in one way or the other reflect in the theory and practice of public relations in the light of the new media technologies. Scholarly discussions have tended to view this effect of the New Media on Public Relations from the perspective of advantages and/or challenges posed by new technologies to practices. In fact, Quinn-Allan (2011) uses the word "disruptive" to describe the effect of the New Media on PR; in other words, the New Media have brought about some turbulence (both positive and negative) in public relations practice.

1.3. Theoretical Framework

In placing this paper in a proper theoretical framework, the dialogic Public Relations theory is adopted. The theory is an attempt to picture Public Relations in a dialogic sense; seeing it as a process of dialogue, as an interactive process such as represented by the new media.

This theory could be adjudged to stem from the work of German Theologian Martin Buber (1970) who is considered to be the father of the modern concept of dialogue. Buber suggested that dialogue involves an effort to recognize the value of the other to see him/her as an end and not merely as a means to achieve a desired goal (Kent and Taylor, 1998). His work on the concept of dialogue is reputed to be based on reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness. However, with time, indeed dialogue has become a very critical point in public relations practice today. Earliest elaborate studies on the dialogue concept are attributed to Pearson (1989a and 1989b). According to Deuze (2007), the dialogic theory has it that:

Dialogue as an orientation includes five features: (a) mutuality, or the recognition of organization–public relationships; (b) propinquity, or the temporality and spontaneity of interactions with publics; (c) empathy, or the supportiveness and confirmation of public goals and interests; (d) risk, or the willingness to interact with individuals and publics on their own terms; and finally, (e) commitment, or the degree to which an organization gives itself over to dialogue, interpretation, and understanding in its interactions with publics.

Kent & Taylor (1998) elaborate on these features as follows:

- **Mutuality:** Mutuality refers to an acknowledgement that organizations and publics are inextricably tied together. Mutuality is characterized by an “inclusion or collaborative orientation” and a “spirit of mutual equality.” Today, with globalization, what happens in one nation may affect organization–Public Relations in other nations. Thus, organizations must extend beyond the usual communication perspectives that they take when they plan, conduct and evaluate the effectiveness of their communication efforts. Their communication with their publics must be characterised by collaboration and spirit of mutual equality.
- **Propinquity:** At the most basic level, propinquity advocates for a type of rhetorical exchange. It is an orientation to a relationship. For organizations, dialogic propinquity means that publics are consulted in matters that influence them, and for publics, it means that they are willing and able to articulate their demands to organizations. Propinquity is created by three features of dialogic relationships: immediacy of presence, temporal flow and engagement.
- **Empathy:** Empathy, also called sympathy, refers to the atmosphere of support and trust that must exist if dialogue is to succeed. Empathetic communication is important because practitioners can improve their communication by “walking in the shoes” of their publics. This feature of dialogue is characterized by supportiveness, communal orientation, and confirmation.
- **Risk:** As noted by Leitch & Neilson (2001) a genuine dialogue is a problematic concept for system[s] public relations because it has the potential to produce unpredictable and dangerous outcomes.” Although parties who engage in dialogue take relational risks, dialogic

participants also risk great rewards. Implicit in all relationships—interpersonal, organizational and public—is risk. The assumption of risk is characterized by three features in dialogic exchanges: vulnerability, unanticipated consequences and recognition of strange otherness.

- **Commitment:** The final principle of dialogue, commitment describes three characteristics of dialogic encounters genuineness and authenticity, commitment to conversation and commitment to interpretation.

Many of the studies and research literature on this theory link dialogic theory with relationship management theory. They posit that both dialogue and relationship management argue for a public-centred approach to public relations. More so, allusion has also been made to the similarity between the dialogic theory and the two-way symmetrical model of new public relations. However, Kent and Taylor (1998) made a clear differentiation between the two conceptualisations. Their point of differentiation, according to Kent & Taylor (2002) was that the symmetrical model was a procedural way to build relationships – actually, to listen, or solicit feedback – but that it did not involve actually responding to stakeholders as equals. The focus was on feedback not relationships.

In the area of building relationships with the publics, Deuze (2007) offers dialogic theory as a means for media professionals to adapt to the new global environment. Websites, a new digital media have become key public relations tools for both profit making and non-profit organisations. Using the dialogic theory of public relations as the theoretical framework, Kent & Taylor (1998, 2002) provided a strategic framework to facilitate relationship building with publics through the World Wide Web (WWW). They offer five web site design features to serve as guidelines for the successful integration of dialogic Public Relations via the World Wide Web: usefulness of information, ease of interface, rule of conservation, generation of return visits and finally feedback loop (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

With the dialogic theory of Public Relations, the role of the New Media in IPR practice becomes understood – the New Media technology could help to advance IPR effort by making communication between an organisation and its international publics happen as dialogue; in other words, interactive and mutual. Within the framework of this theory therefore, this paper now proceeds to examine the role of the New Media in International Public Relations.

2. POSITIVE IMPACTS OF THE NEW MEDIA ON IPR

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

International Public Relations employs both interpersonal media and mass media. Traditionally, when the mass media are employed in International Public Relations, one naturally expects the IPR message to be relayed via channels like radio, television, newspaper and magazine, etc. This category of the mass media is referred to as the traditional media.

However, with the arrival of the internet and the attendant convergences and liberalisation, these traditional media now became categorised as the “old media” to differentiate them from the “New Media” which the internet and its numerous platforms have come to represent. Given the inseparable link between Public Relations and the media, this shift in media paradigm was bound to trigger corresponding shift in IPR paradigm.

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

2.1. New Media Facilitates More Interactive IPR

The New Media essentially differ from the Old Media due to their interactive nature. The New Media afford users the rare opportunity of becoming both content creators and content consumers. At the same time, feedback, unlike as in the Old Media, is immediate in the New Media (Okoye, 2011). These special features of the New Media become reflected in Public Relations as noted by Phillips and Brabham (2012):

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

Consequently, with the new media, International Public Relations becomes more interactive. There comes a shift from the top-down approach to real time interactivity in IPR communication. The IPR publics now have the opportunity to ask questions and receive immediate feedback as never available with the Old Media of Public Relations.

2.2. New Media Makes IPR More Cost Effective

Similarly, the new media makes International Public Relations more cost effective. This advantage is hinged on a fundamental shift which the new media has brought about in the dynamics of information generation and distribution; the media technologies have made generation and distribution of information very cheap and now at the reach of everyone as observed by Abati (2009):

The Internet now ensures that individuals and institutions can, at minimal cost, become media gatekeepers. Any Internet-literate user can now set up personal sites for news publication as well as video and sound streaming. This is what is meant by independent or alternative journalism – a new movement coming as a challenge to the monopolistic domination of the traditional mass media platforms by few rich individuals and corporations.

In this way, the New Media has brought to the IPR practitioner a new leverage, a new flexibility in terms of cheap communication. Such practitioner is no longer encumbered by the old media imperative of bearing heavy financial burden of placing his message in television, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. In line with this, Meiners (2010) observed that the Internet has made it easier to find media contacts and form relationships with journalists, but more importantly the rise of social media and online PR has meant bypassing the media and going directly to your audience. He surmised that online PR has changed the PR industry and it is not going back. Therefore, rather than contending with the highly capital intensive media campaign (made even more exorbitant by the international scope of IPR), the international public relations manager is able to take the advantage of the new media to reach his publics at very cheap cost.

2.3. New Media Makes IPR Research Easier

The new media also makes it more convenient for the IPR professional to conduct his research. Discussing the important place of research in public relations, Okafor (2002) maintained that research helps to feel the pulse of the people; that is, it helps to understand the people and why they feel the way they feel about the policies, practices and services of an organization. He further noted that research helps in planning. It provides all the necessary information, data and knowledge required for an organization to plan effectively.

The modern day IPR practitioner ought to be thankful to the New Media for making the measurement of public opinion more easy and convenient. The New Media sphere is one where people freely give out their views without fear or pretences – an advantage which the traditional methods of PR research may not always guarantee. Secondly, such internet-aided research could cover a much wider geographical area and populations in a very cost-effective way, as data gathering is electronic rather than physical. Writing on the less logistical demand involved in new media research, Meiners (2010) surmised that the Internet helps research in a way that is irreplaceable with the traditional research tools. According to him, with Internet platforms such as e-mail, teleconferencing and USENET, survey and FGD research could be conducted with the researcher remaining in one location; the research population could be reached through these platforms as long as access and literacy issues are sorted out before hand. He concluded that this method ensures not only reduces research cost significantly, but also guarantees conserves time and labour.

2.4. New Media Helps Reduce the Cultural Barrier of IPR

Cultural differences are one of the hurdles facing International Public Relations from the beginning. Concurring, Omenugha (2002) identified culture as one of the factors that make IPR complex, stating that “it is believed that custom is a function of culture, which defines the way of life of any given society. Culture varies greatly from country to country... Care therefore, should be taken so as not to cause hostility or indignation among the target audience.”

However, the New Media has created a global village which continues to blur cultural barriers among various peoples of the world. Writing on this globalizing impact of the new

media, Agba (2002) observed that the Internet today is the most technologically advanced medium of communication. He further explained that “it is a multimedia information superhighway that facilitates business, sports, politics, entertainment and other endeavors across international boundaries. It is a technological revolution of monumental capabilities. In fact, it is the information revolution that has turned the world into a “global village”. It is man’s most ambitious attempt yet to miniaturize the physical planet earth”. Having miniaturized the physical planet earth, the Internet is contributing to the emergence of a new global community that today many cross-cultural interactions that were either impossible or quite difficult have been eased. This is a new global culture which International Public Relations would benefit from by keying into the New Media.

Another way through which the New Media can ameliorate the problem of cultural barriers in IPR is by aiding cross-cultural research. Omenugha (2002) advised that “Through regular research, possible areas of culture conflict and misunderstanding should be identified early enough to establish the right environment for the realization of set objectives.” The New Media provides the invaluable channel for accessing and studying these varying cultures.

3. CHALLENGES POSED TO IPR BY THE NEW MEDIA

While the New Media promises some advantages to International Public Relations, it at the same time entails some challenges to it. These challenges are highlighted in the sub-headings below.

3.1. Poor New Media Penetration in Many Countries

Though the new media has become a key communication platform in the contemporary world, access to it is still below average among developing nations including Nigeria (Internet World Stats, 2010). With basic communication infrastructure problems, economic and awareness challenges bedeviling these nations, organisations carrying out IPR campaigns in relation to Nigeria and other developing countries must contend with these obstacles of new media access. For the new Media to prove effective for IPR campaigns the target countries of such campaigns must have a reasonable degree of Internet penetration, if not PR communication would be ineffectual.

Similarly, there is the problem of new media literacy on the part of the populations of many developing countries. According to James (2007), “the entrance of the Internet into today’s public relations has naturally demanded specific new competencies from the PR expert and his publics. Communicating through the Internet cannot be possible without the requisite computer and Internet literacy. Internet literacy has many aspects; it goes beyond sending and receiving mails, meaning that both the communicator and the receiver must pursue Internet literacy to all extents required by their tasks”. Without such mass New Media literacy, the IPR professional would hardly be able to integrate his publics into the new media communication space where their interaction could occur.

3.2. Anonymity of Users

Another challenge which the new media era has brought to the practice of International Public Relations is the tendency of the internet to conceal the identity of users. In other words, the audience of the new media could be veiled, faceless, giving rise to a new kind of

challenge to the IPR practitioner. Phillips and Brabham (2012) highlighted this when they noted that the New Media technologies allow users to remain anonymous as they participate in information exchange online, throwing accountability and authenticity into question. This user anonymity is otherwise referred to as “disembeddedness” with reference to which Bucher (2002) summarizes:

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

Thus, the New Media are in a sense resistance to social control and institutionalisation. Garba (2012) argues that the non-institutionalized nature of the new media; their weak linkages with other social institutions, makes them poor builder of institutions. According to him, while the media can easily unsettle and turn the social order on its head as witnessed in Egypt and Tunisia, it can hardly rebuild the institutions. With particular reference to social media (an aspect of the New Media), Garba (2012) opined that “as it is today, the new media which has catalysed the uprisings in the North Africa is yet to efficiently mobilise the people for social order and stability. The new media is hardly able to rally the society around a particular personality as done by the traditional media in relation to persons like Gandhi and Luther. The discussions going on in the social media are akin to the dialogue of the deaf where everyone is talking and nobody is listening. There are hardly opinion leaders to who the crowd look up”.

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

3.3. Difficulty in Management of Quantity and Speed of Message Flow

The fact that the new media have immensely increased the message-generating power of the audience may place the IPR practitioner in a difficult situation as he/she becomes confronted by the delicate task of maintaining control in the face of endless barrage of these audience-generated messages disseminated even beyond the geographical scope of a given public relations programme. Quinn-Allan (2011) submitted that “the most significant change in terms of control and Public Relations in the new media era concerns the ability for users to quickly and easily produce and distribute content to a global audience. In today’s ... era of the Internet, we have seen an upsurge in user-generated content.”

For this same reason, the International Public Relations practitioner in the new media era is left with little time for planning and systematization amidst the astounding speed of information generation and distribution which the internet entails. Modern public relations practitioners are facing more difficulties and challenges as information speed ... alter the pace ... of the profession (Quinn-Allan, 2011).

4. CONCLUSION

The reality of today is that the new media has come to occupy a pre-eminent position in human communication culture. Consequently, any form of communication which includes Public Relations must come to reckon with this fact. It is based on this argument, the present

study focused on the relationship between the new media and International Public Relations. The study posits that the new media has brought about radical changes in the functioning of public relations – whether international or otherwise. On the positive aspect, it was found that the new media has increased interactiveness in IPR communication thus making it a real two-way process. Similarly, findings revealed that tremendously reduced cost as well as eased research challenges in IPR campaign by minimizing financial and logistical hurdles inherent in the traditional IPR research channels. Also, the new media was found to represent an auspicious attempt to tackle the problem of cultural diversities in IPR by enhancing the emergence of global village of cultural mutuality. On the negative side, the new media presents for the IPR practitioner a new problem of poor Internet penetration in many developing countries making it difficult for the practitioner to reach all his publics via the new media. In the same vein, the new media poses for the International PR expert the challenge of contending with the anonymity of many of his publics hence exposing him and his organization to all sorts of mischief possibly coming from the unscrupulous ones. Furthermore, it was found that the new media presents to the IPR professional the challenge of managing the gamut of messages travelling at stupefying speed which the new media PR entails. Nevertheless, the foregoing discussion has generally underscored one fact; that the new media has become part and parcel of the modern International Public Relations.

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