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Public Relations Practice in Nigeria's Corruption-Ridden Environment: Challenges and Prospects

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Abstract

This article discussed public relations practice in Nigeria's corruption-ridden environment: challenges and prospects, and specifically identified the functions and objectives of public relations, highlighted the extent corruption has characterized the socio-economic and political environment of Nigeria, and discussed some of the challenges facing public relations practice in Nigeria and pointed out how the challenges could be overcome. The theoretical framework of this article was anchored on the excellent theory which resulted from a study about the best practice in public relation. In the article, write-ups from available relevant literature were considered and used to analyse public relations practice in Nigeria's corruption-filled environment, and discuss the challenges and prospects of public relations practice. In the conclusion, it was noted that truly, corruption is evident in the Nigerian socio-economic and political environment and it poses challenges to the practice of public relations. Nevertheless, ways to overcome the challenges were pointed out and all concerned were encouraged to follow the steps as public relations practice in Nigeria has great prospect to flourish.

Keywords: *Public relations, Nigeria's corruption-ridden environment, challenges and prospects.*

Introduction

It goes without saying that the practice of public relations globally has a long history. Of course, the history of anything is the social essence of its life, showing the developmental stages of that thing. (Onyiaji, 2016:8). Obviously public relations practice began since the earliest time when the practice was not even known by the term public relations as we know it today. Black (1989:198) wrote that public relations has been practised sporadically since the earliest of time even though the name is of comparatively recent origin. According to Onyiaji, (2016), in ancient times, what was practised had not gotten the name public relations, but in essence, it was what we call public relations today.

There is ample evidence in the records of the early Greek and Roman empires to show that great care and attention was devoted to the influencing of public opinion. Public relations in those far off days appears to have been an integral part of government. The Romans dramatized the importance of public opinion in the slogan vox populi, vox dei – the voice of the people is the voice of God. (Black, 1989:198). In Greece, it was the games that were used as a mode of PR. The Olympic games of Elis in Greece were used as PR to publics (Onyiaji 2016).

By 1835, Public relations had started to put on some garb by which it is known today. A man called P.T. Barnum was operating a Circus (a show-business) and used for his publicity what is today known as press Agency. The press Agency publicized his show-biz in magazines and newspapers. (Onyiaji, 2016). All the same, the advent of the 20th Century marked the rise of public relations with figures such as Ivy Lee and Edward Bernays, who are often credited

as the fathers of the PR Profession. It was during these formative years that PR distinguished itself as a strategic discipline, essential for crafting public perception and managing information flow between entities and their audiences. (Joriwhite pr-co-uk).

In Nigeria, the practice of public relations has experienced considerable growth especially when you juxtapose present realities alongside what obtained some decades ago (Olisa, 2021). Key practitioners in the profession worthy of mention include Bob Ogbuagu whom many regard as one of the founding fathers of public relations in Nigeria.

According to Olisa (2021), Ogbuagu is regarded as one of the founding fathers of public relations in Nigeria; Ogbuagu and his contemporaries set the tone for the model of public relations practised in Nigeria today, with of course, some novelties introduced along the line, Nigeria public relations journey. In one of his writings, Ogbuagu defined public relations as ‘the art of building bridges of rapport’ between an organization and its public. Even though the public relations of then was principally press agency and publicity-based, Ogbuagu’s definition still has validity today. (Olisa, 2021).

Public relations practice according to the Institute of Public Relations (IPR) is defined as “the planned and sustainable effort to establish and maintain good will and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics. (Black, 1989:3). According to the Mexican Statement signed by representatives of more than 30 national and regional public relations associations in Mexican city on 11th August, 1978, Public relations practice is the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences and counseling organization’s leadership, and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization’s and the public interest.

From the forgoing which highlighted what public relations practice is all about, it is easy for us to see public relations practice as very crucial to harmonious, peaceful and happy human relationships. Obviously, expectations would be for public relations practice to thrive especially in this era of information and communication technology (ICT). But, in reality, though today’s world is driven as it were by ICT, many nations cannot boast of a flourishing public relations practice due to different kinds of challenges relating to their peculiar circumstances.

In Nigeria, for instance, the prevailing socio-economic and political environment is corruption filled and this possess some challenges to public relations practice in the country. But are there some prospects of doing it right? This article will discuss these matters.

Objectives of this Article:

The main objective of this article is to discuss public relations practice in Nigeria’s corruption-filled environment: challenges and prospects. Specific objectives are to:

1. Identify the functions and objectives of public relations practice
2. Highlight the extent corruption has characterised the socio-economic and political environment of Nigeria, and
3. Discuss the challenges facing public relations practice in Nigeria and point out how the challenges could overcome.

Theoretical Framework

The Excellence Theory

The excellent theory resulted from a study about the best practice in public relations, which was headed by James E. Grunig and funded by the foundation of the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) in 1985 (Ogbuoshi, 2020:124). Ogbuoshi also said that the Excellent Theory explains that the value of public relations lies in organization-public relations, good relationship with its strategic public and this is helpful for an organization to develop and achieve goals desired by both the organization and its publics, reduce costs of negative publicity, and increase revenue by providing products and services needed by stakeholders. (Ogbuoshi, 2020:124). No doubt, the excellent theory is concerned with the practice of public relations that is wholesome and would make an organization more effective through the employment of cordial relationship with its publics. In Nigeria, challenges posed by corruption to the practice of public relations should be given serious attention to enable public relations practice to flourish.

Literature review

Concept of Public Relations

As the name implies, public relations has to do with human relationships. Down from history humans have been having dealings with one another in the course of daily activities and the cordiality of such relationship has been key to their happiness and enjoyment of peace. No one should take the achievement of peace and mutual understanding for granted. People must work for it and naturally there had always been people so gifted in communication skills that they could always endeavour to build a bridge of good relationship among groups of people even though the activity of such people in the distant past was not tagged, “public relations practice”

Black (1989:198) was in agreement with this fact when he wrote that public relations has been practiced sporadically since the earliest time even though the name is of comparatively recent origin. As we gained more understanding of what public relations practice is all about in recent time, many scholars in the field of public relations and many other people from different walks of life gave various definitions of public relations practice.

In Nwaeze (2015), public relations practice is seen as a distinctive management function which evaluates public attitude, identifies the policies and procedures of an individual and organization with the public interest, and plans and executes a programme of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. Rft; '[This entails monitoring, assessing, managing and evaluating public reactions, perceptions, views and opinions on organizational policies and programmes of action.

The British Institute of Public Relations, cited in Yaroson et al (2007) defines public relations practice as the deliberate, planned and sustained efforts to establish mutual understanding between an organization and its public. Elem, (2018) explained that the practice of PR in organization aims at achieving distinctive outcomes which help establish and maintain mutual communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between organization and its publics, result in successful management of problems on issues and help management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion, and define and emphasize the responsibility of management to serve the public interest.

According to cut lip, center and Broom (2005), cited by Kanu (2021), Public Relations practice is the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationship between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends. Dr. Rex Harlow, a veteran public relations practitioner of San Francisco examined 472 different definitions of public relations practice and distilled them into a working definition

thus: public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problem or issues; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools (Black, 1989:4).

According to Ogbuoshi and Abugu (2007:60), public relations is the activities of an industry, union, corporation, profession, government or other organizations in building and maintaining sound and productive relations with special publics such as customers, employees, stockholders and with the public at large so as to adapt itself to its public in order to gain public acceptance, understanding and goodwill.

Ndolo (2011:42) stated that public relations as a field of study is concerned mainly with the onerous but most often, exciting task of uniting the various constituencies or publics of an organization. He added that it builds bridges across organization's internal and external publics, in such a manner as to promote goodwill and mutual understanding to facilitate the attainment of goals and objectives of any organisation, using the mass media and other channels of communication for this purpose.

Edoga and Izuta (2015) pointing at the early concept of public relations said that PR began as a government information and propaganda machine during world war one and was then used more extensively in world war two. Without a doubt, as has been observable, definitions of public relations practice are legion indicating that public relations has fast become a fascinating subject of study. Most of these definitions captured the functions and objectives of public relations which we shall now discuss briefly. Of course, the mention of functions and objective at the first thought may appear as one saying the same thing and, of course, there is an apparent co-relationship between the words.

According to Onyiaji, (2016:8), in a simple language, objectives are things aimed at, the ends-in-view of someone's actions. That being the meaning of objectives, the co-relationship between functions and objectives should not be in doubts. One does what one does, that is performs one's functions in order to achieve one's objectives.

Now, let's first consider the functions of public relations.

Functions of Public Relations

Public relations performs very important functions in order to achieve its objectives targeted at bringing benefits to both an organization and its publics. According to Moore and Kalupa (2005:45), the process of establishing public policy, securing action on policies, and communicating information about policies to the public, so as to effect a two-way formal or informal exchange of ideas between an organization and its publics, constitutes the function of public relations.

Onyiaji (2016) while discussing the functions of public relations outlined nine lines of actions that public relations should perform as follows:

- (i) Writing and editing PR works
- (ii) Relating to media and media establishments
- (iii) Doing field research work
- (iv) Communicating and informing internal and external publics of an organization
- (v) Carrying out strategic planning
- (vi) Engaging in management and administration of an organization
- (vii) Counseling the top management and primary publics of an organization on proper line of action to take in an issue

- (viii) Speaking by themselves or preparing others to speak on behalf of the organization.
- (ix) Crisis management and conflict resolution between the organization and its publics by means of communications and information.

The functions of public relations according to Cutlin, Centre and Broom (1985) include the following:

1. Monitoring awareness, opinions, attitudes, and behaviour inside and outside the organization.
2. Analyzing the impact of organizational policies, procedures, and actions on various public.
3. Adjusting those policies, procedures, and actions found to be in conflict with the public interest and organizational survival.
4. Counseling management on the establishment of new policies, procedures, and actions that are mutually beneficial to the organization and its publics.

Of course with these functions public relations aims to achieve certain objectives.

Objectives of Public Relations;

As could be noted from the definitions of public relations, the things that public relations practice aims to achieve are quite obvious. Some of these objectives are:

1. Establishing and maintaining good will and mutual understanding, acceptance and cooperation between organizations and their public which will make for peaceful and happy relationship.
2. To create, maintain, and protect the organizations' reputation, enhance its prestige, and present a favourable image. (Edoga and Izute (2015).
3. Endeavouring to harmonise the organization's and publics interests.
4. To educate certain audiences about many things relevant to the organization – including the business in general, new legislation, and how to use a particular product as well as to overcome misconceptions and prejudices. (Edoga and Izute: 2015).
5. To create goodwill for an organization.
6. Emphasize the responsibility of the management of an organization to serve both the internal and external publics interests.

Of course, from a few objectives of public relations practice which we mentioned above, one can easily see that the importance of public relations practice to the progress, happiness, peace and harmonious relationship among people in any given society, cannot be over stressed. All the same, public relations practice in Nigeria is fraught with many challenges relating, in most cases, to corruption-ridden environment. In this article, we shall discuss some of these challenges and how they could be overcome. But first, let's take a look at the corruption-ridden environment in Nigerian

The smear of corruption in the socio-economic and Political Environment in Nigeria

When in 2022, Nigeria was reported as the 150 least corrupt nation out of 180 countries, according to the 2022 corruption perceptions index reported by transparency international, it became a matter of big concern to many honest hearted Nigeria which, of course, they would desire to simply wish away. According to Word Data Information (online) with the heading, "Corruption in Nigeria," the 'Corruption perceptions Index' for the public sector showed 76 points in Nigeria for 2022. The scale has a range from 0 to 100. The more corruption rises, the higher the number is.

Corruption according to Webster Unabridged Dictionary (2001, p. 456) cited in Ike and Udeze (2015:232), is “the art or state of being corrupt; moral perversion, depravity; perversion of integrity; corrupt or dishonest proceeding; bribery.”

According to Ike and Udeze (2015:232) all these forms of corruption are things that hold a nation down, stagnate development, fuel crisis and paint a nation’s image bad. Of course, if an environment is filled with corruption, besides stagnating national development, it negatively affect many things including public relations practice.

According to Aja, Chukwu, and Odoh (2019), public relations has stuttered along and is yet to gain effective recognition and acceptance as a reputable profession in the country. Existing literature has blamed this anomaly on some factors which include corruptions, lack of academic exposition, career determination, finance, personnel, Nigerian government and entrepreneurs.

So, it is incontrovertible that the corruption-filled socio-economic and political environment in Nigeria poses great challenges to the practice of public relations in the country.

Challenges of public Relations Practice in Nigeria’s Corruption-ridden Environment

Some of these challenges are as follows:

1. **Confused understanding of what public practice is all about:** According to Aja, Chukwu, and Odoh (2019), two important questions often confront practitioners whenever public relations is mentioned. These are WHAT IS PUBLIC RELATIONS and WHAT DOES PUBLIC RELATIONS DO? Questions such as these frequently arise because, a vast majority of people form their impressions of public relations more, by what those who confess and profess the practice DO, than by what practitioners aspire to BE and to DO. Thus, PR finds itself in the paradox of being a very familiar subject, but yet, the most misunderstood and misconstrued. So, following this, it is quite obvious that today in Nigerian, what many people do and call public relations practice is actually not public relations practice. For instance, the use of money to “buy” favour, and different forms of monetary inducement in order to achieve a purpose which in the real sense should be called bribery are today regarded as public relations practice. Since this ‘brown envelope’ public relations practice, which is, of course, an act of corruption is now being highly regarded, it becomes a big challenge to the real public relations practitioners since the public would always expect them to accompany whatever message they want to communicate with money. In a nutshell, it is an open secret that today in Nigeria, bribery is almost generally seen as public relations practice. This is a big challenge to public relations practice.

2. **Non Professionals Flooding the field:**

The field of public relations practice in Nigeria presently is inundated with non professionals who parade themselves as it were as public relations practitioners. Their whole idea of public relations practice ends with the same mentality of buying favour with money and the use of deceit to achieve a purpose. Aja, Chukwu and Odoh (2019) wrote that as one scholar puts it, “ex-convicts, child molesters, rapists, political fixers, hawkers and their procures, jamblers, casino bouncers and a wide variety of advance fee fraud gangsters who pose with exotic brands of flashy cars or even with Lexus cars, have been variously described as public relations”. Of course, many corrupt politicians and government officials as well as some dubious business organizations use these fake public relations practice in their attempt to buy their publics’ good will. This gives public relations practice in this country a wrong image.

3. Organization's short-coming in the Area of Matching the Effort at Image polishing with Good Deeds.

Many organizations which employ the services of public relations practitioners often fail in their major responsibility of devoting their greatest effort to doing good deeds but would want good image for themselves by all means. This situation usually makes the job of public relations practitioners very difficult because naturally good image usually comes from good deeds. According to Sam Black (1989): "public relations is a function of management, and public relations considerations should be taken into account when formulating policy, for subsequent public relations campaigns can never be a satisfactory substitute for correct initial policies. It has been said with some truth that public relations is "90 percent doing good and 10 percent talking about it."

Nevertheless, in Nigeria, drunk with the wine of corruption some organizations would want public relations practitioners to talk about good deeds that were never done. This is also seen in government activities. It is no secret that today many governments misuse or embezzle government funds meant to provide amenities for the public; yet they would want the public to see them as good governments through deceit by the voice of their public relations representatives.

4. Organizations stinginess with Regard to openness in some matters of organizational policy and programmes.

Igben, H.G.O. (1997) stated that Public Relations performs a staff role in the management process. It assists management in reaching decisions that will result in the enthronement of mutual understanding, acceptance and goodwill. As a management function, it analysis the possible effects of management policies and corporate behaviour on various publics, gives warning early enough to enable management adjust through relevant programme of action which will translate corporate image from negative to positive direction.

Performing this management function sometimes has its own challenge because some organizations at times have secret policies which are not made known to public relations representatives. In this case, the management policies which the PR representatives worked with may turn out not being the real policies executed by the organization hence the public relations effort would not achieve its purpose.

5. Lack of Adequate attention to public opinion by organizational leadership

As noted from the definition of public relations practice according to the Mexican statement, implementing organizations' planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization's and the public interest is key to the success of public relations practice. Public interest is usually identified through public opinion research by the PR representative.

According to Igben, H.G.O (1997), attitudes of the public represent that interest, which are often expressed through their opinions. He added that the success of public relations effort is largely dependent on the attitudes of the various publics.

But unfortunately even when the PR representative had done a good job of communicating public opinion to organizational leadership with adequate counseling, some governments and business organizations sometimes ignore public opinion when their own interest conflicts with that of their publics. This is usually the case in Nigeria where many government functionaries embezzle government funds for their personal use instead of executing projects that would serve public interests. This situation is a difficult context for public relations practice.

6. Traditional Media frequent Demand for Gratification or Advert Money before Disseminating public Relations Message.

These days, most traditional media in Nigeria tag almost every extraneous message they disseminate commercial, even news stories and press releases. Of course, it is no longer news that in Nigeria traditional media have what they call commercial news. This poses a challenge to PR representatives in their use of the traditional media to carry out their public relations activities.

From the above discussion, it is clear that corrupt environment poses daunting challenges to public relations practice in this country. Nevertheless, the situation is not hopeless - there are prospects.

The Prospects:

With careful observation and consideration of various life experiences, one could see that there is always truth in the following scriptural saying: “For there is hope even for a tree. If it is cut down, it will sprout again. And its twigs will continue to grow. If its root grows old in the ground and its stump dies in the soil, at the scent of water, it will sprout; and it will produce branches like a new plant’ (Job 14:7-9).

Of course even when a situation seems too bad, there is always opportunity to entertain at least a bit of hope that things would change for the better. So it is with the practice of public relations in Nigeria - there are prospects. These prospects are anchored on some practical steps that could be taken by all those concerned with the future of public relations practice in this country. These practical steps are ways to overcome the challenges facing the practice of public relations in the country.

Overcoming the challenges of public Relation practice in Nigeria

The challenges facing the practice of public relations in Nigeria could be well tackled when some useful steps are taken. Such steps include:

1. Public Enlightenment

Public relations practitioners should ensure that the confusion regarding the real understanding of what public relations practice is all about should be cleared through public enlightenment. Regarding this, practitioners of public relations especially members of their professional body (the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations) should ensure that practitioners of public relations must undergo some kind of training besides providing public enlightenment through the media to help people to understand what public relations practice is all about.

2. Insistence on Professionalism:

Public relations practice should not be for all comers. Trained public relations practitioners should insist on professionalism. The foremost way they can do this is by carrying out public relations job the way it should be done so that people would easily see the difference between professional public relations practitioners and those who are not. In line with this, the Group Managing Director, CMC Connect Ltd, Mr. Yomi Badejo Okusanya while talking about 10 Big Things that will shape the future of public relations in Nigeria during the Nigeria Institute of Public Relation Clinic held in Lagos, said, among other things: “Competency is the key and one of the major big things that, will shape the future of public relations, and it will distinguish between those that are core Professionals from those that cannot do the job.” (Marketing edge com.ng).

From this, one can see clearly that the need for insistence on professionalism cannot be over-emphasized. Again, in this regard, we believe that the Nigeria Institute of Public

Relations (NIPR) has a big role to play - specially, the professional body should ensure that its members must do their jobs in the Professional way instead of allowing themselves to be influenced by the nation's corrupt environment to cut corners. This will make the future of public relation's practice in Nigeria very bright.

3. Constant Meaningful Communication

Public relations practitioners, in the discharge their advisory role, should drum it into the ears of organizational leadership that there is no substitute for doing good deeds if an organization wants to build good reputation by means of public relations practice. Granted that skillful public relations practitioners use modern methods of communication and persuasion to help establish mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, it should be noted that such understanding is conditioned, among other factors, by reputation. Therefore, public relations practitioners should help an organization to build good reputation. According to Sam Black (1989) "To cultivate a good reputation, a credible identity and a positive corporate strategy are an important integral part of most public relations programmes.

4. Organisations should be more open in Discussing management policies with their PR representatives:

If an organization has secrete policies which are not made known to its public relations representative, this could work against the public relations effort at good representation of the organization.

5. Organisations should give attention to public opinion as may be revealed by their PR representative.

Granted that it is the function of public relations to research into public opinion so as to properly advise an organization as to how to design its policies to gain public acceptance, but the public relations effort in this regard, will not achieve the desired objective if an organization ignores public opinion. Therefore, to make the job of the PR representatives easier, organizations should seriously consider public opinion in harmony with the PR advice.

6. Cordiality in Relationship Between Public Relations Representatives and Traditional Media Organization

Without equivocation, we can say that public relations practitioners and traditional media workers should be seen as partners in progress, hence a cordial relationship is expected to exist between the two groups. Frankly speaking, honest, meaningful communication would help them achieve mutual understanding concerning areas they may previously have reservations. For instance, public relations representatives should be honest about the message they want to air on the traditional media. When the message is pure advert, they should pay advert money. With such honest relationship, media outfits would always be moved to accept public relations' message without indiscriminating tagging every message, commercial "this" or "that."

Conclusion

In truth, one cannot help accepting the fact that the rate of corruption all over the world is rising almost in geometrical proportion. The situation is truly disheartening and unfortunate generally but when one gives thought to how deep corruption has eaten into the fabric of Nigeria, one really sheds tears especially as many socio-economic activities in the country are adversely affected. As we have noted in this paper, public relations practice is no exception as we have pointed out some of the challenges corrupt environment posses to the practice. We have also made it clear that even in this unhealthy environment, public relations practice has some prospects. The steps to overcoming the

challenges of public relations practice in Nigeria should be followed by all concerned as public relations practice in Nigeria has great prospect to flourish.

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