

## **PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE: IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIAN PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTITIONERS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The implication of the digital age on Public Relations practitioners is the major focus for this work. It looked at the digital age as a period characterized by the systematic transitioning from the industrial age to the era of Information Technology (IT). The major highlight of this change is the advent of the Internet of Things (IoT) which heralded the rapid dissemination of information, making conventional means of information transfer seemingly antiquated at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This study was hinged on Technological Determinism theory, and sets out to examine the impact of technology in the practice of Public Relations. The study reviewed the traditional tools of Public Relations, the advent of the digital age, its impact on PR as a discipline and the practice or role of PR in the digital age. The primary data was generated using Focus Group Discussions which involved 20 public relations practitioners (R1-R20). The findings showed that the major assets of the digital age in relation to PR as a discipline are the internet and social media since the use of online PR is becoming common among practitioners. The study notes that most PR practitioners take preference to the new media over the conventional mass media. The study recommends the training and retraining of PR practitioners and upon employment, the practitioners should be exposed to the use and effects of misuse of social media

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Digital Age, New Media, Nigeria, Public Relations Practitioners

### **INTRODUCTION**

With a history which dates back to the mid-twentieth (20<sup>th</sup>) century, the Digital Age describes an epoch characterized by the rapid transformation from the Industrial Age to the era of Information Technology (Andersson, 2018). This marked the use of electronic means of communication; facilitated by computer technology (The Internet of Things) which is also referred to as "The New Media", (Igben and Ilaya, 2021). Amongst the numerous uses of this technology is that it provides instantaneous access to information regardless of place and time. The achievement of feedback and participation by public and private organizations through Public Relations is a noteworthy application with regard to this discourse (Igben and Ilaya, 2021).

David and Krishnamurthy (2017) posit that Public Relations (PR) may be described as an applied professional practice that is communication-centered, and seeks to influence the building, maintenance, and restoration of reputation by integration of different perspectives and groups; particularly through its enactment of activities such as issue management, crisis resolution, and risk communication. Ejimkeonye *et al.* (2021); Amodu *et al.* (2019) believe that essentially, the role of PR in an organizational structure is to use information to build public opinion and maintain positive perception of the said organization. This endeavor has most recently (within the last century) been achieved through the use of social media and the internet (a major herald of the new media) (Galloway and Swiatek, 2018; Amodu *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, in a bid to enhance capability and efficiency, the PR industry has also co-opted Artificial Intelligence (AI), thus highlighting the main area of synchronization between the digital age and PR (Galloway and Swiatek, 2018).

Ngondo (2019); Sommerfeldt and Yang, (2018) noted that rudimentarily, a Public Relations practitioner/officer (PRO) could be described as an individual through which PR activities (as earlier stated) are executed. However, more extensively, a PRO's duty does not only entail keeping the firm's "public" current on new policy changes and products, but conversely informing the firm's management on the public's reaction to the changes in policy and products, ensuring a bilateral feedback between both parties). A vital channel through which this duty is effectively discharged in relation to this discourse is in media liaison/relations, in which the PRO utilizes elements of the digital age to establish interface between an organization and the public (Kim and Heo, 2018).

Principally, the goal of media relations in PR is to maximize the potential for large and positive coverage provided by the mass media, thus creating a three-way communication between the organization and the public. Information subsidy is a chief advantage which benefits both the media and the organization (Ketelaars and Seevenans, 2021). Consequently, this strategy is also cost effective as it boycotts the need for spending lump sums on advertising when viewed comparatively. However, more advantageous to the organization is the use of the Internet of Things (IoT) for information dissemination (Amodu *et al.*, 2019; Roth and Avidar, 2022). This may be colloquially referred to as the field of "online PR", and its chief foredeal is in the elimination of complete reliance by an organization on mass media, hence, the direct/two-way communication between the organization and its target audience (Roth and Avidar, 2022).

Johnson (2021) observed that with a growing population of about two-hundred and six (206) million individuals, Nigeria's internet presence is as strong as one-hundred and eight million as of July of 2021, growing by approximately 8.4% in the last five (5) years. As of 2020, the number Nigerians utilizing online shopping platforms was well over seventy-six (76) million. These statistics do well in highlighting the pre-existing potential for online PR and provides information to some degree on the extent to which online PR has been used in digital marketing within the last two years respectively. Amodu *et al.* (2019) added that due to the advent of IT and the ease of which information about products and services are made available via the swift and cosmopolitan nature of the internet, PR and its practitioners are now given pivotal roles in profit-oriented organizations and firms seeking to create and sustain a positive outlook from the public on their reputation.

Amodu *et al.* (2019) are of the view that inasmuch as it has a seemingly endless list of fore deals, online PR is not without its demerits. Albeit arguably meagre in comparison to its advantages, the disadvantages of online PR cannot be overlooked as they may range from lack of control of the advertising process, to difficulty in evaluation of the effectiveness of the process, amongst others that will be subsequently discussed. Igben and Ilaya (2021) pointed

that this carries with it the risk of futility in efforts made by the organization or firm to effectively communicate with its target audience. Summarily, it is the intention of this paper to explicate the effects of IT in the sphere of PR by considering its merits and demerits in relation to the activities of its practitioners.

### **Research Objectives**

This paper seeks to:

1. Enumerate the use of tools provided by the digital age in Public Relations as a discipline.
2. Determine how the digital age has affected Public Relations.
3. Determine the effect of these tools in shaping the day-to-day activities of Public Relations practitioners in the modern society.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the uses of the tools provided by the digital age in Public Relations as a discipline?
2. How has digital age affected Public Relations as a discipline
3. What are the effects of these tools in shaping the day-to-day activities of Public Relations practitioners in the modern society?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory which provides a framework for the study is the Technological Determinism Theory.

This theory was propounded by Marshal McLuhan in 1964. The principles of this theory suggest that technology especially the media, decisively shape how individuals think, feel, act and how societies organize themselves and operate. The medium determines the content of communication and has the power to manipulate our perceptions of the world thereby, making mass communication the dominant form of interaction.

According to Marshal McLuhan, the invention of technology invariable causes cultural change. As opposed to Karl Max's theory of economic determinism where production makes change in history, McLuhan's theory of technological determinism says that changes in modes of communication have evolved human experience.

McLuhan sees every medium as the extension of human faculty with the media of communication exaggerating the particular sense. So, whatever pre-dominates the media influences human beings and affects the way they perceive or see the world.

This theory is appropriate for this study because it shows that the media and technology are crucial part of our environment, message and how they are conveyed creating new methods, habits and process through which messages are passed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Public Relations Practice in the Digital Age**

Before the advent of the new media, the PR utilized channels or tools provided by the mass media through which PR messages were passed to stakeholders or target audiences. These include but are not limited to; press releases and conferences, annual reports, company newspapers/newsletters and magazines, bulletins (usually printed version), occasional publications, advertising of the company (using billboards, flyers, posters, banners) and identity media (Kim and Heo, 2018; Amodu *et al.*, 2019).

Obayi and Onwude, 2018; Igben and Ilaya, (2021), argue that the digital age has brought about a means of interaction amongst people which enables the creation, sharing and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Obayi and Onwude,

(2018), postulate that the major selling point of the digital age is its ability to grant access to information with unrivaled speed; making conventional means (mass media) of information dissemination look antiquated. This has been achieved through the IoT, making the idea of “information at your fingertips” more possible than probable. Hence the role of the internet in shaping PR as an evolving practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be over emphasized as effective PR activities and an upsurge in internet use are seen to move *pari passu*

Sengar, (2021) observed that the effect of the internet on PR as a discipline and the activities of its practitioners over the last 20 years cannot be overstated. The advent of the internet has created a milieu through which producers are in direct communication with their customers. PR practitioners experience relative ease in establishing bilateral communications between producer and end user (Obayi and Onwude, 2018). Igben and Ilaya, (2021) added that the most notable advantage of the digital age in the scope of PR is that it provides a cheaper and more ergonomic option for bilateral communications, bypassing tools provided by the mass media in reaching this target. Organizations need not fork out lump sums to mass media outlets to aid in maintaining a positive public outlook on the organization, instead, the organization and its PROs take up the full responsibility of this endeavor (Ketelaars and Seevenans, 2021).

Kent and Li (2020) speculate that if we seek to evaluate the effect of digital era on PR in this century, it is nigh impossible to discuss the role of the internet without talking about the social media. If we consider the internet to be the stage upon which 21<sup>st</sup> century PR is set, then, the social media and social media platforms are the major players. As described by the Oxford Dictionary, social media consists of websites and software programs used in social networking. Hence, if we consider the IoT to be the major herald of the digital age, social media is the *sine qua non*, an indispensable tool for shaping the activities of PR and its practitioners over the past two decades.

Kent and Li, (2020) and Sengar (2021) in their separate works postulate that the fore deals of social media in this day and age are inexhaustible. However, overlooking the speed of information dissemination, an imperative overview of its benefit in the scope of PR is the facilitation of stronger and more impactful communication between an organization and its public through real-time messaging. Roth and Avidar (2022) noted that another merit of this platform is that it communicates with a wider audience, and information is made readily available to any individual with internet access. More so, the advent of social media has created a new area of marketing called “relationship marketing” which increases the perceived friendliness and approachability of organizations (Najib, 2020).

In Nigeria, one way social media has been able to assist practitioners in their daily dealings is in the constant engagement of a company’s target audience on daily basis through feedback (Ogbette *et al.*, 2019). Apuke and Tunca, (2018) detected that feedbacks could be in the form of ‘likes’ and ‘dislikes’ on applications such as Facebook and Instagram with ‘hash tags’ on Twitter and ‘comments’ on YouTube. These are avenues through which PROs can interact with the end users of their products. One advantage of this is that it changes the one-sided ideology around PR through a more engaging and interactive two-sided bilateral approach (Ngondo, 2019; Sommerfeldt and Yang, 2018). Imperatively, prior to the advent of the new media, the impact of PR activities was not easily measured. However, social media has made quantification of investments made in PR measurable through several metrics available on the platform (Bakir *et al.*, 2019).

Apuke and Tunca, (2018) were of the opinion that albeit as scintillating as the advantages of social media for PR and PROs may be, the malefits of this technology are not meager. Still on the context of Nigeria, due to the fact that a vast number of our population is

not “tech savvy”, the potential for misunderstanding and inadvertent misuse of this platform is high. Additionally, due to the novel nature of this technology and the fact that majority of the content on this platform is open to interpretation, information on social media is very volatile, and sometimes the aim of communication may end in futility if not properly controlled (Ogbette *et al.*, 2019).

Tandoc *et al.*, (2018), posit that, the major drawback of social media in Nigeria and the world at large is misinformation and disinformation, known as “fake news”. Tandoc *et al.*, 2018; Jahng *et al.*, (2020) further said the ability of social media to discriminate against information on a qualitative basis is limited by a bad blend of the user’s limited attention in a pool of information overload. Inasmuch as both are equally dangerous and misleading, the variation between misinformation and disinformation is the intent of the outlet providing the information (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). Misinformation is not deliberately targeted at confusing the audience and could come in form of conspiracy theories and click-baits, while disinformation is intentionally targeted at causing confusion and may present itself in the same forms as previously stated (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018). This poses a major threat to the identity and integrity of organizations seeking to promote their brand and maintain positive outlook of the public on their activities.

Interestingly, the implication of this deleterious scenario created by fake news for PR practitioners is that it proverbially cements their position in organizations that utilize social media, as more organizations seek to enlist the help of PROs in tackling the pathologic spread of fake news as quick as its onset is detected (Ogbette *et al.*, 2019). Consequently, practitioners are compelled to a high level of cautiousness in their pitching process and increased emphasis on fact finding and fact checking (Jahng *et al.*, 2020). Analogously, PROs must be prepared to debunk fake news targeted against the brand by maintaining a good working relationship with journalists and media outlets thereby altering any prejudice by creating a good first impression (Jahng *et al.*, 2020).

Summarily, it goes without saying that the digital age has fast tracked the evolution of ~~evolved~~ PR by leaps and bounds within the past two decades. The internet has become an integral component for a fully functional society and knowledge of how to use the internet and its devices is a basic requirement for any individual or profit oriented organization seeking to excel in their sphere of influence. However, inasmuch as the internet has a seemingly endless list of advantages, fake news is chiefly a downside to the prevalence of the internet in this century as posited by this paper. Amidst the quagmire, PR practitioners and professionals are charged with the responsibility of debunking and communicating the truth bilaterally, but more importantly in the direction of the end user by helping to filter through a pool of information overload. Conclusively, the role of PR practitioners in the digital age in both profit and non-profit organizations are considered chiefly and foremost as suggested by the review of relative literature.

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research design adopted a qualitative research method. The instrument employed for the collection of the necessary data in this study was focus group discussion (FGD). Five (5) groups of four (4) practicing Public relations in each group making a total of twenty 20 discussants were selected.

Data for this study was collected purposively from a sample size of twenty (20) represented by the tag R1-R20 via direct solicitation, face to face conversations and phone call interviews. The participants are Public Relations practitioners from different works of life such

as: The Ministry of Information (4 participants), a lecturer from Mass Communications Department at Bingham University (1 participant), Federal Ministry of Labor and Employment (4 participants), Nigeria Centre for Disease Control (3 participants), Petroleum Equalization Fund (3 participants), National Assembly (2 participants), and Office of the Accountant General of the Federation (3 participants).

### Data Analysis

The choice of FGD as an instrument for sourcing the required data from the participants was informed by the literacy level and exposure of participants with regard to the subject of study.

The demographic details of participants were represented in tabular form. Information obtained cuts across gender age, state of origin, occupation, ratio of male to female (percentage), age groups (percentage) and years of work experience (percentage).

**Table 1: Demographic Analysis of the Discussants**

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage (%)	
<b>Sex</b>	Male	10	50
	Female	10	50
	<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Age of Discussants</b>	25-30	3	15
	31-35	2	10
	36-40	6	30
	41-45	1	5
	46-50	5	25
	51-55	2	10
	56-60	1	5
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Occupation of Discussants</b>	Employed	20	100
	Self employed	0	0
	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source: Field Survey, 2022**

The above table shows the number of PR practitioners classified by their sex, age range, state of origin, and years of experience. The participants were 20 in number with males constituting 10 (50%) and females 10 (50%). Three (3) participants were from the age of 25-30 (15%), two (2) participants were from the age 31-35 (10%), six (6) participants were from the age of 36-40 (30%), one (1) participant was within the age of 41-45 (5%), five (5) participants were within the age of 46-50 (25%), two (2) participants were within the age of 51-55(10%) and one (1) participant aged 56-60 (5%). The demography of the discussants' occupational status showed that twenty (20) participants are employed (100%) and no participant is self-employed (0%).

During the study, a total of seven (7) questions were asked and the participants' responses were presented in percentages. The questions were divided into two categories: the first contained three (3) which sought to investigate the use of the internet by PROs, while the second had four (4) questions that sought to evaluate the impact of social media among practitioners who use the internet.

### **Q1: Use of internet by PROs in their activities**

100% of all discussant gave a positive answer and, in most cases, they stated why they use technology, with one of the discussants, R5 stating that:

“It is almost impossible to exist in this era without using the internet. Personally, it helps me connect with family and get the latest gist and follow the trends and professionally, it helps me keep in touch with new information and follow up on my organization’s activities”.

Discussant R1 supported this statement with a brief comment following the question and stated that:

“The internet has simply made life easier and it’s hard to imagine life without the internet”.

### **Q2: How has the internet aided the activities of PR practitioners professionally**

Most of the discussants about 70% agreed that the internet has helped to facilitate all the activities of the PRO in their professional capacity. Amongst the affirming percentage, 8 discussants were within the age bracket of 25 and 40, with the remaining scattered between other age groups. This suggests that PR practitioners who utilize the internet in performing work-related tasks are to a large extent within the younger and more youthful population.

One discussant, R15, in her follow-up statement on the ease of work using the internet emphasized that:

“It’s way easier to get information these days. Instead of sorting through large texts and buying newspapers and magazines, you could easily just use your preferred search engine to look up whatever information you need in real time”.

At the other end, those who did not subscribe to the idea that the internet has helped the PR practitioners professionally did not generally dismiss the merits, but reasoned that information overload, poor network from servers when work needs to be done using the internet, inconsistency in data and information on different websites on similar topics were among the factors that influenced their choice.

As one discussant, R6 disclosed during the discussion,

“I am not saying the internet is not good, it has its benefit like every other invention made by man. However, if we are to consider the reality of it, sometimes you may go in search of an information, may be during a write up for a presentation you wish to make and you may visit a website to validate a fact which you want to add and then discover that the information is totally different from one you saw on another website which claims to be authentic. This can affect your publication. Also, there are many distractions on the internet. At least when you are flipping through newspapers, you don’t get as distracted as you probably would when you are using your phone or computer”.

### **Q3: New media VS mass media, the preference of discussants**

Following a brief discussion which comparatively analyzed the new media and mass media as effective tools of PR in the digital age, the practitioners were asked to choose their preference on the basis of effectiveness and ease of use as their third and final question in the first category. 75% of the respondents chose the new media, 15% were indifferent and appreciated both tools equally, while 10% chose mass media.

Again, of the 75% that chose new media, all 12 participants were within the ages of 25 and 40, while 3 were between 45 and 55. This suggests that the new media may appeal to youthful practitioners. One discussant from the National Centre for Disease Control (NCDC), R11 surmised during her follow-up comment that:

“Taking all things into consideration, reaching out and connecting with people is much easier and better. On our website for instance, we use frequently asked questions (FAQs) to know what complains the public has and how we can tackle them. Also, nowadays, polls are a thing. You could easily set up a poll on your website or insert an online questioner with a few questions and anyone who visits the website can see and provide answers. This method allows for easy public feedback and helps us serve them better”.

Among those who appreciated both techniques in PR were individuals with an average of 20 years work experience. It stands to reason that older and more seasoned PROs recognize the benefits of the new media but also cannot dispense the advantages that come with mass media.

#### **Q4: Uses of Social Media by PR Practitioners**

The second segment began with an inquiry on the use of social media by practitioners in their personal and professional capacities to which they all gave a positive answer (100%). As one practitioner R18 disclosed,

“If not for social media, I probably would be spending lots of money traveling from Abuja to see my grandchildren. But ever since Facebook came around, I can connect with family and friends that I haven’t seen in years, even old school classmates I never thought I’d see again. Now we even have WhatsApp that’s better than SMS... It really is a wonderful thing”.

Many other follow up comments were skewed towards this direction.

#### **Q5: Major Challenge of Social Media to Public Relations**

The sixth question sought to determine the major challenge social media has introduced to the sphere of PR and 60% cited fake news, 15% suggested hate speech, another 15% recognized total misuse of the platform by end users and in some cases, the organization providing the information, while 10% offered other reasons.

To buttress the point, a discussant, R12 disclosed,

“Had it not been for our efforts during the pandemic and the months following the vaccine’s distribution in Nigeria, we would have had more severe cases and deaths in Nigeria because of the rapid spread of rumors around the country about how the vaccine kills. So far, no Nigerian has died from taking the vaccine. However, if we did not make a conscious attempt to sensitize Nigerians on the benefits of these vaccines to their survival through our websites and social media platforms, including phone calls and text messages, a lot of Nigerians would’ve still though the they could light up a bulb magnet a metal to their skin by placing it on the injected site”.



Additionally, the view of discussants from the National Assembly and the Office of the Accountant General of the Federation tilted towards hate speech and platform misuse respectively.

## **DISCUSSION**

The data obtained from this study has provided information aimed at answering the research questions and satisfying the objectives proposed by this study.

The first objective was to enumerate the use and effect of tools provided by the digital age in Public Relations as a discipline. This study was able to highlight and comparatively analyze the tools provided by the mass media and new media as techniques valuable to mass media. As revealed by data analysis obtained from this research, most PR practitioners prefer the new media to the conventional mass media as suggested by data analyses, theoretical frame work and related literature (Kent and Li, 2020; Sengar, 2021; Asemah, 2020) due to its noteworthy advantages and changes in modes of communication which has evolved human experience over the latter.

The second objective was to decipher how the digital age has affected Public Relations. The objective of this study was achieved based on the agreement and statements of discussants that emphasized the internet as a herald of the digital age. Most participants of the research confirmed the use of technology in their daily and professional lives. Furthermore, 70% affirmed that the internet has helped to facilitate all the activities of the PRO in their professional capacity. Amongst the affirming percentage, 8 discussants were within the age bracket of 25 and 40, with the remaining scattered between other age groups. This may suggest that PROs who utilize the internet to perform work-related tasks are to a large extent within the younger and more youthful population.

In correlation with the objective of this study, findings showed that social media is the major tool behind the domination of the internet and digital age in today's PR scope. Review of relevant literature suggested that the fore deals of social media outweigh the disadvantages; however, the research data suggested otherwise as the opinion of discussants were skewed predominantly in the negative direction by 55% to 45%. More so, a concurrence between related literature (Tandoc *et al.*, 2018) and data analyses from discussants was observed on the subject of demerits of social media, which posited fake news as its major malefit amongst others.

Consequently, the effect of this on practitioners was an apt attention to fact finding and checking; and emphasizing and describing the pivotal role of practitioners to their organizations. This area also showed a correlation between the literature review (Ogbette *et al.*, 2019) and the data analyses by general consensus.

## **CONCLUSION**

Summarily, through review of relative literature and the opinions of PR practitioners obtained during the research, the research was able to reveal that the role of a PRO in any organization seeking to maintain a positive outlook on the public is pivotal to their success in their field of endeavor.

The study also revealed that the major selling point of the digital age is its ability to grant access to information with unrivalled speed, by making conventional means (mass media) of information dissemination look antiquated. This has been achieved through the IoT which makes the idea of "information at your fingertips" more possible than probable. Hence, the role of the internet in shaping PR as an evolving practice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be over

emphasized as effective PR activities and an upsurge in internet use are seen to move *pari passu* due to the advent of new technologies provided by the digital age. Proper utilization and flux control of information by PROs has helped to sanitize the information pool and ensure that only the best quality of information is made readily available for consumption (Obayi and Onwude, 2018).

It is clear from public relations practitioners that the implication of the digital age on PR practice is very high as it has not only facilitated the style and practice of professionalism but also aided its means of communication therefore indicating that technology changes the modes of communication and has evolved with human experience.

### **Recommendations**

In view of the information provided by this paper, the study recommends that:

1. Training and retraining of PR practitioners on use and effects of misuse of social media should be encouraged and carried out upon employment whether at government sectors or private parastatals.
2. The government should organize campaigns that sensitize the general populace and consumers of information about the woes of fake news and its counterproductive effects on society.
3. Rigorous authentication of information by source verification, fact finding and checking should be done by PROs before releasing information to the general public. This helps to streamline and direct the information to its consumer in an “easy to understand” or “difficult to misinterpret” fashion, curbing the potential for misinformation.
4. To stay afloat in the era of digital transformation across the globe, PR practitioners must and should build their capabilities and capacities to handle more digital task creatively.
5. Universities should introduce curricula that would boost the technical know-how of Public Relations students.

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