

**AN APPRAISAL OF THE USE OF DIGITAL AND TRADITIONAL MEDIA FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS
PRACTICE IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CALABAR**

By

Dr. Stephen Regie Nyong

Department of Mass Communication,
University of Calabar,

stephenregienyong@gmail.com

08037929156.

Dr. Effiong Edet Okon

Department of Mass Communication,
University of Calabar,

effiongedetokon536@gmail.com

08032624895.

Mr. Erikav G. Asher

School of Postgraduate Studies,
University of Cross River, Calabar

Ashergurenen6@gmail.com

09067579091

Mrs. Egaga Rose

School of Postgraduate Studies,
University of Cross River, Calabar

08140004110

Abstract

Advancement in technology has changed the practice of public relations among business organisations. The current digital stage of technology has ushered in a shift of the practice of public relations from its traditional stage to the digital stage. This study therefore, appraised the use of digital and traditional media for public relations practice with University of Calabar (UNICAL) as case study. Three research objectives and three research questions were formulated for the study. The qualitative/descriptive analysis was used as the research design. The theory used for the study was Technological Determinism theory propounded by Marshall McLuhan in 1964. Conceptual review of terms such as media, digital media, traditional media, and public relations was carried out. The roles of both digital and traditional media and the strength and weaknesses of each of the media were examined. The study found out that both traditional and digital media are relevant tools for the practice of public relations in UNICAL. It was therefore, recommended that both media should be used hence each of them have their strength and weaknesses and using both will complement the weaknesses of the other.

Keywords: *Media, Digital Media, Traditional Media, Publics, Public Relations*

Introduction

The trend in technological advancement which has altered or facilitated the art and process of communication, the means of sharing and transmitting information, messages, ideas, feelings, interest, opinions and taught have changed drastically as new forms of faster and efficient communication technology emerged (Aliede & Modinat, 2022). This trend has led to the increase in the provisions of information and number of media of communication, which refers to as Digital Technology.

However, before the advent of digital technology, traditional media such as print, radio, television, as well as traditional media of communication were used in the practice of public relations, to relate with the various publics of organisations in both government and non-governmental agencies to disseminate information for their publics' consumption. For instance, Ezeah (2005) argues that the world today is ruled by an ever-changing information and communication technology revolution. The advent of both technologies have significantly impacted on the practice of public relations by business organisations and institution. This is to say that information and communication technologies has affected all aspects of public relations, corporate identity, product packaging, media relations, corporate social responsibility, crisis management, environmental scanning and issues management (Ezeah 2005).

Public Relations (PR) according to Onyemechi (2023) 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) 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 as note Amodu *et al* (2019) 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). These established facts clearly show that the practice of public relations evolves around technological inventions and innovations. However, the advent of new technologies does not eliminate the existing ones hence even with the advent of digital technologies and their application in the practice of public relations in UNICAL there is still the use of traditional media such as newspaper, radio, television, etc. for the same purpose. It is on this note that this study seeks to appraise the use of digital and traditional media in public relations in UNICAL. The study examined both forms of media and how they are used as tools for public relations by the institution.

Statement of the Problem

Since the advent of digital technologies public relations as was practiced during the reigning days of the traditional media such as newspaper, radio, television, etc. has assumed the digital stage, although it has not completely shifted out from using traditional media hence both are still in use. The problem of this study therefore, is what role do both media play as tools for public relations in UNICAL? What are the strength and weaknesses of each of these media? These and other similar questions were answered in the course of this study.

Objectives of the Study

The study is carried out with the overall objective to appraise the use of digital and traditional media for public relations practice in the University of Calabar. The specific objectives include to:

- i. Assess the role of digital and traditional media on the practice of public relations in UNICAL.
- ii. Find out how effective both digital and traditional media are used for public relations in UNICAL.
- iii. To ascertain the strength and weaknesses of both traditional and digital media in the practice of public relations in UNICAL.

Research Questions

The following three research questions guided this study:

- i. What are the roles that digital and traditional media play in the practice of public relations in UNICAL?
- ii. How effective can digital and traditional media are used for public relations in UNICAL?
- iii. What are the strength and weaknesses of both traditional and digital media in the practice of public relations in UNICAL?

Research Methodology

The study strictly made use of secondary data from literatures. In this regard, qualitative/descriptive analysis was relied on. It provided the relevant and contemporary literature for the illumination of the study.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on the Technological Determinism theory that 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.

Technological determinism is a reductionist theory that aims to provide a causative link between technology and the nature of the society. It tries to explain as to whom or what could have a controlling power in human affairs. The theory questions the degree to which human thought or action is influenced by technological factors (Asemah, Nwammuo & Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017).

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. The traditional media technologies that brought into existence print and broadcast media were used for public relations practice just the same way digital media have done same.

Literature Review

Media/ Digital Media: Conceptual Review

Media is the plural form of medium which implies channels of communication. They are the means through which information is effectively conveyed from the sources to the receiver. Patel (2022) conceives of media as communication outlets or tools used to store and deliver information or data. They refer to the communication channels through which people receive varied information such as news, music, movies, education, promotional messages, and other data. Media play a very important role in our everyday life because in as much as it is not possible for a person to travel around the whole world or have a connection with the whole world to receive the news, the media help or allow people to receive the local, national as well as international news. Through media information is created, stored, shared, and received in distance places. When these media could reach out to a large, dispersed, heterogeneous, and anonymous audience simultaneously with the same message such media are termed “mass media.” Different types of mass media of communication include traditional media which as used in this context include newspapers, magazine, radio, television, etc. and digital media.

Digital media according to Smith (2013) is any communication media that operate in conjunction with various encoded machine-readable data formats. Digital media can be created, viewed, distributed, modified, listened to, and preserved on a digital electronics device. This according to Dan (2012) also includes text, audio, video, and graphics that are transmitted over the internet for viewing or listening to on the internet. Examples of digital media include software, digital images, digital video, video games, web pages and websites, social media, digital data and databases, digital audio such as MP3, electronic documents and electronic books. Digital media often contrasts with print media, such as printed books, newspapers and magazines, and other traditional or analog media, such as photographic film, audio tapes or video tapes.

Digital media has had a significantly broad and complex impact on society and culture. Combined with the Internet and personal computing, digital media has caused disruptive innovation in publishing, journalism, public relations, entertainment, education, commerce and politics. Digital media has also posed new challenges to copyright and intellectual property laws, fostering an open content movement in which content creators voluntarily give up some or all of their legal rights to their work. The ubiquity of digital media and its effects on society suggest that we are at the start of a new era in industrial history, called the Information Age, perhaps leading to a paperless society in which all media are produced and consumed on computers (Dewar, 1998).

Traditional Media

Traditional media in the Western context refers to both print media such as newspapers, magazines, books, etc. and broadcast media like radio and television. It is a one-to-many distribution process (broadcasting) where the same message is directed at everyone. Any form of mass communication available before the advent of digital media. Valencia (2022) points out that the notion of ‘traditional media’ refers to the forms of mass communication, including print media such as newspapers, magazines, books, etc., and broadcast media, such as television and radio that were originated prior to the internet and before the advent of digital media which according to Rayburn (2012) are all forms of communication media through which text, audio, video, and graphics are transmitted over the internet using digital electronics devices.

Although traditional media has slowly evolved into new media, however traditional media outlets differ from social media outlets in many ways (Agichtein, et al., 2008). The main difference is that traditional media to a large extent, is a one-way communication (information flows from the sender to the recipient with no feedback from the latter) while some forms of digital media such as social media allow two-way communication because there are avenues through which the recipients can provide feedback to the sender. In this digital era, technology has resulted in the traditional media being edged out in favour of social media platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms, which have gained much more importance and become an indispensable part of our daily lives (Turner, 2022).

Public Relations

There are plethora of definitions given by different scholars on what public relations is all about. However, one thing common among these definitions is that all of these scholars conceive of public relations as the organization’s management function that is strategically aimed at sustaining good and mutually beneficial relationship between organisations and their constituent publics. One of the definitions put forward by Hassan (2013) conceives of public

relations as a management function that involves monitoring and evaluating public attitudes and maintaining mutual relations and understanding between an organization and its publics. This definition bothers on organisation been conscious of its environment of operation by building a mutually beneficial relationship with its constituent publics.

To Rodman (2006) public relations is defined as the art or science of establishing and promoting a favourable relationship with the public. It is all activities that maintain a beneficial relationship between and organization and its various publics. Rodman conceives of public relations as an art of science because it involves strategic activities of understanding the situation and psychology of the people that the organization deals with and then identifies the right approach to handle every situation that presents itself.

Agreeing with Rodman, Hassan notes that public relations involves evaluation of public attitude and opinions, formulation and implementation of an organization's procedures and policy regarding communication with its publics, coordination of communication programmes, development of rapport and good-will through two-way communication process, and fostering a positive relationship between an organization and its public constituents.

Moreover, the most acceptable definition of Public Relations according to Okudo (2014, p. 21) is the definition by the British Institute of Public Relations (IPR) which States that "Public Relation is the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish a mutual understanding between an organization and its publics." In this definition three key terms come to mind – that public relation is deliberate meaning that it is conscious efforts by the organisation aimed at achieving predetermined goal (mutual understanding with its constituent publics). Also, public relations is planned. This implies that public relations involves a series of planned and organised activities that executed to achieve certain goals and objectives.

In public relations "Publics" referred to members of the local community, employees, investors, electors, donors, distributors or various kinds of consumers and users, according to the type of organization. These groups can be subdivided into even more specialized groups e.g. a company has many grades of staff. When we consider that PR is undertaken by every organization, commercial or non-commercial and in both public and private sectors, the identification of publics and the use of different techniques to reach them, becomes a very important aspect of campaign planning.

The British Institute of Public Relations (IPR) defines public relations as "the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish a mutual understanding between an organization and its publics." "Publics" as used in public relations is an address to specific groups of people or special sections of the general public (audience). These publics may be referred to as members of the local community, employees, investors, electors, donors, distributors or various kinds of consumers and users, according to the type of organization. Public relations is used in different ways by various individuals to educate people on the profession. It has also been compared with many management courses. This makes PR an entity of its own.

Functions of Public Relations

The basic function of Public Relations in a business organization is to manage its relationship with its constituent publics. Other functions include:

One of the functions of public relations is the management of public image of organisations. This is done by working with top executives in order to craft a visual image of how a company desires to be perceived by the public. This could include focusing in on proper messaging, and then determining the outlines of a campaign in order to disseminate that message.

Another function of public relations is to organise outreach events for the host community of an organisation. To actualise this, public relations professionals often work with brands to help set up events or even partner with other organizations in order to increase brand awareness. For example: if you own a carpet cleaning company a PR professional may encourage you to connect with a Breast Cancer awareness organization in order to sponsor a Breast Cancer Walk event.

Public relations officers also perform media relations where the organisation relates with media organisations to project their activities to constituent publics. One of the key functions of public relations is media relations. This

involves the practice of building and maintaining relationships between an organisation and the media to secure media coverage and manage the organisation's public image. **This helps to build positive image for the organisation among its publics. Public relations** professionals work with local and national news reporters in order to arrange interviews for press exposure. This helps the organization to publicize the information they want about their organization to the public.

Public relations also perform social media function for organisation. One relatively new function of public relations is to determine ways that they can maximize an organization's social media presence. This includes but is not limited to Twitter, Facebook and Instagram posting and engagement. It is also a great way for organizations to connect with potential customers and stock holders. an organization's positive use of social media to build its image. Managing a Twitter feed, a Facebook page and a YouTube channel are all vital ways to connect with possible new customers or stakeholders

Public relations equally performs the function of handling emergencies in organisations. Emergency situations are those situations that stand to threaten the reputation of the organisation. These situations are termed crises and they are inevitable according to Coombs (2007), hence proper handling them should be given priority by every organisation. Sometimes a company or organisation is hit with a problem that threatens to ruin their public image. This is what is refer to as crisis and it needs immediate action so it could not escalate and affect the organizational image. As such crisis communications becomes necessary. However, in terms of crisis communications it is always better to plan for the worst before it arrives. Through public relations an organisation could manage its crisis.

The Role/Benefits of Digital Media in the Practice of Public Relations

The adoption and application of digital media has significantly improved the practice of public relations in organisations which makes it beneficial according to Aliede and Modinat (2022) in the following ways:

One of the significant advantages of the use of digital media for public relations is that it is more cost-effective than using traditional media. For instance, messages could be easily sent through organizational websites, social media platforms such as Facebook, X handle, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, YouTube, etc. by an organization to its publics without having to spend huge amount of money in the name of buying space or air time as it is obtainable in the use of traditional media for the same purpose.

Another advantage is that using digital media for public relations guarantees wider reach to the organisation's target audience. It allows business organisations to tailor their messages to specific demographics, interests, and behaviours, resulting in improved engagement and conventions.

Also, the use of digital media for public relations in organisations helps to increase access to journalists. For instance, the use of social media by organisations helps public relations pros get closer to reporters. By following a journalist on social media, public relations pros can learn about a reporter's tone of voice, opinions on relevant topics and recent work.

Digital media also make public relations affordable for small businesses. Today, even small businesses can afford to hire a college student studying communications, journalism or public relations to manage their online presence. This makes public relations affordable to the businesses that need it, and who cannot afford more professional and experienced public relations assistance.

Digital media encourage and facilitate organisations to focus on and relate with its customer more broadly and specifically. The use of social media by organisation for example, compels many brands to start focusing more on their customers, and building positive relationships. Customers can always go on Twitter and Facebook to sound off about bad customer experiences. This forces companies to resolve issues speedily to avoid a public relations crisis. Companies also use interactions on social media to improve their business as a whole, especially where complaints and kudos are concerned.

Digital media public relations provides real-time feedback, allowing organizations to respond quickly to customer queries and concerns.

Weaknesses/Disadvantage of using Digital in Public Relations

As beneficial as it seems, digital media is not bereft of some weaknesses when used for public relations activities. Wilson (n d) identifies the following weaknesses that are matched with using digital media a tool for public relations:

One of the biggest challenges of using digital media for public relations activities is the overwhelming amount of information that is available online. With so much content being produced and shared daily, it can be challenging for business organisations to cut through the noise and deliver their message effectively to their target audience.

Another challenge or weakness in using digital media for public relations is shorter attention spans. In the digital age, people's attention spans have decreased, making it more challenging for business to communicate their messages effectively within a short period.

Digital media public relations depends entirely on technology and internet access, limiting the audience's reach who do not have access to modern technology. Technological divide as such could impede audience accessibility to organisation's information which will consequently lead to futile public relations effort by the organization. Also, technical glitches and downtime can disrupt advertising campaigns, wasting marketing resources.

Advantages/ Strength of Traditional Media for Public Relations

The following are some of the advantages or strength of using traditional media tools for public relations: **Building Long-Term Relationships:** Traditional PR emphasizes long-term relationships with stakeholders, including journalists, editors, and community members. Building trust and goodwill with these stakeholders can help businesses secure favorable media coverage, establish brand identity and increase loyalty.

Credibility and Trustworthiness: Traditional PR lends credibility and trustworthiness to a brand's message. Editorial coverage and endorsements carry more weight with the public compared to paid advertisements, enhancing the brand's reputation and gaining the public's trust.

Tangible and Lasting Impressions: Traditional PR creates tangible and lasting impressions with the audience. Newspaper clippings, physical advertisements, and radio spots have a tangible and lasting impact, allowing the audience to recall the brand's message over an extended period.

Access to Non-Digital Audiences: Not all audiences are digital, and traditional PR offers access to non-digital audiences. For instance, print advertisements can reach older demographics who prefer physical newspapers.

Shortcomings of Traditional Media as Tools for Public Relations

The following are the shortcomings that are inherent in using traditional media for public relations in organization:

Using traditional media for PR can be more expensive and less focused than digital PR: With the rise of digital media, traditional PR has lost some relevance and effectiveness, limiting the audience's reach and fostering a longer turnaround time for campaign insights.

Using traditional media for PR also lacks some of the real-time analytics and reporting options that digital PR provides.

The reach or coverage of traditional media could not be as wide as using digital media. Some traditional media like radio and television lack permanency. This is to say that such media lack the ability and capability to save information broadcast through them in a permanently retrievable format unlike the digital media that information could be saved on.

Empirical Review

Alie and Yusuf (2022) carried out a study with the aim of appraising the influence of digital technology in the practice of public relations in some specific sectors and industries, the study used secondary data sources and adopted Technological Determinism theory to further illuminate the study. The researchers conclude that digital technologies have provided an open arena with limitless accessibility opportunities to public relations practitioners. However, to further enhance the benefits of digital technology in the public relations profession, it recommended that the government cheapen the cost of acquisition of these technologies, while public relations practitioners should engage in enhanced education and training to equip themselves with more knowledge, skills and expertise on their applications in line with global best practices.

Another study by Uygun and Dongul (2022) on digital public relations practices maintained that Public relations activities, which are managed in order to ensure and maintain positive communication between the target

groups of the institutions and the public, have started to be carried out in the digital environment through social media. The concept of public relations, digital public relations practices, corporate reputation concept and online reputation management and digital public relations practices carried out in public institutions were explained. The study found out that that the Ministry uses the social media channel intensively. It has been seen that event management and information messages are mostly used in the classification of public relations according to their purposes. It is seen that the impressions in the public are tried to be measured by giving weight to the two-way communication model of public relations. In addition, elements containing corporate identity were included in most of their messages on social media accounts and were supported with photographs and videos. It has been observed that all these digital public relations practices provide positive feedback on the institutional reputation of the Ministry of National Education, which is a public institution.

Okocha and Ojochide (2023) studied public relations in the digital age, focusing on its implications for Nigerian public relations practitioners. The study looked at the digital age as a period characterized by the systematic transitioning from the industrial age to the era of Information Technology (IT). It was anchored on Technological Determinism theory. Focus Group Discussions involving 20 public relations practitioners were organised for the gathering of primary data. The findings showed that the major assets of the digital age in relation to public relations as a discipline are the internet and social media since the use of online public relations is becoming common among practitioners. The study notes that most public relations 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.

Conclusion/Recommendations

Public relations is a vital tool that help organisations build, manage, maintain and sustain good relationship with their constituent publics. Both digital and traditional media have helped organisations in carrying out public relations activities. Hence each of these has its own strength and weaknesses organisations including UNICAL need to consider using a mix of digital media and traditional media for public relations so as to create and maintain good relations amongst their constituent publics. Digital PR offers a cost-effective, precise, and real-time approach to reaching a wider audience, tracking and measuring campaigns, and engaging with the online public. However, digital PR has challenges, such as managing negative publicity and overwhelming information.

The use of traditional media on the other hand for public relations may have advantages, such as creating tangible and long-lasting impressions and reaching non-digital audiences, but digital media channels are more focused and effective. By weighing the pros and cons of each approach, an organization can leverage on the benefits of both traditional and digital PR to create a comprehensive and robust public relations strategy.

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