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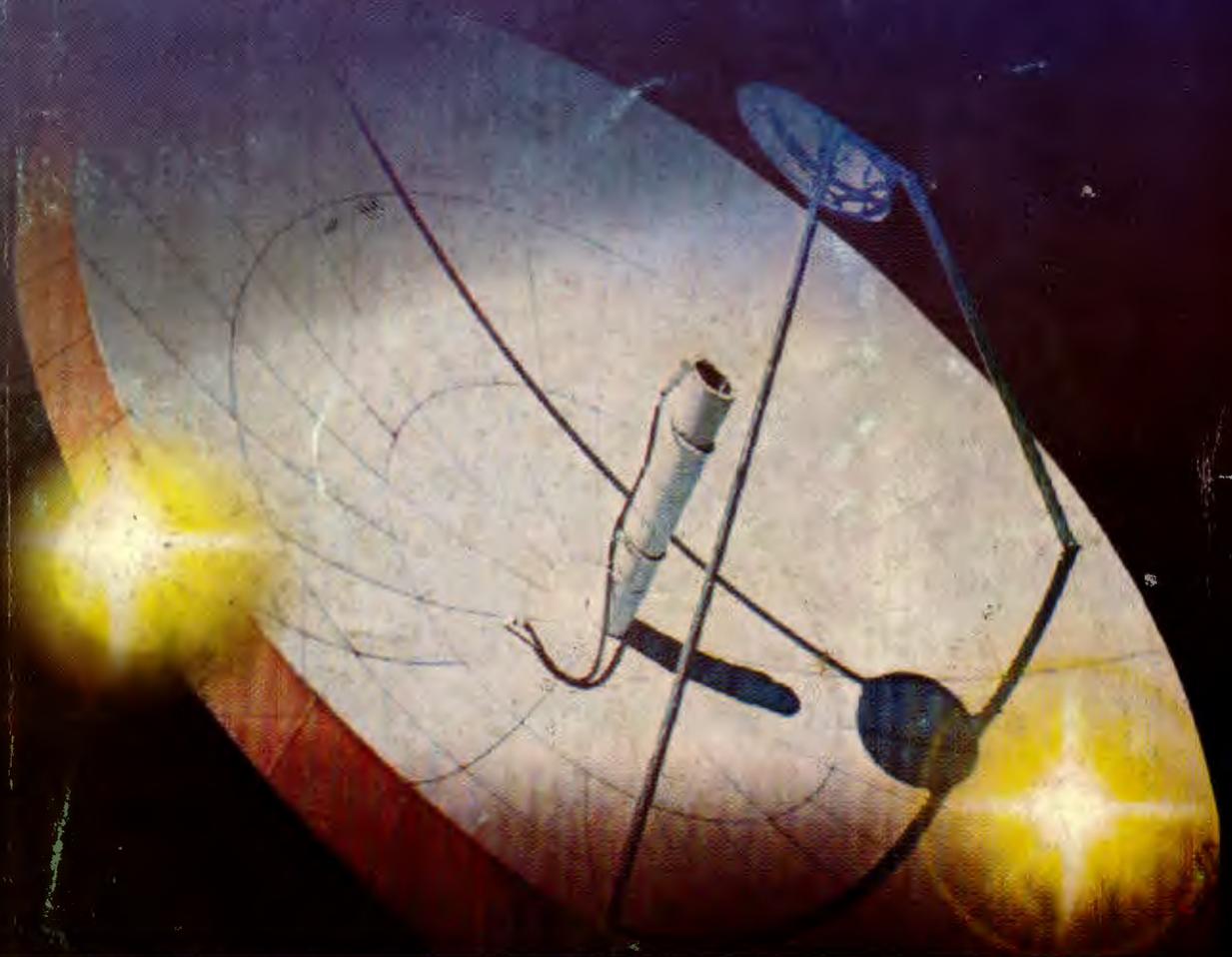
GLOBALISATION: THE CHALLENGES OF PUBLIC RELATIONS IN A CONTRACTING WORLD.

By

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ABSTRACT

    This paper examines the challenges that are faced by the public relations practice as a result of the contraction of the world culture. The practice is plunged into a boundless space of communication as engendered by the continual collapse of the restrictive boundaries of world's communication culture. As a result of this disintegration of boundaries, the public relations practitioner is confronted with an enormous growth of his publics. This engenders a desperate need to re-strategize. The implication of this expansion necessitates the exertion of more effort towards creating more meaningful mutual understanding and acceptance. The shrinking of the information space also denotes the impossibility of any crisis encountered by a public relations practitioner to be locally handled because it instantly becomes a global affair. Consequently, it becomes pertinent for a practitioner to seek more than ever to monitor, anticipate and forestall crisis rather than manage them. Also, another great challenge of publics relations is what should have otherwise been its asset, that is, communication. Communication has become so advanced and sophisticated that it becomes a challenge to catch up with it. This paper therefore examines the need for the development of public relations' communication standards to meet the technological requirements for effective performance.

INTRODUCTION

    There probably have been only few phenomena that have generated as much publicity and controversy as globalisation. This is due to its multi-faceted nature and far reaching implications on every aspect of living. It can be said with a high degree of accuracy, therefore, that there is hardly a person who is not affected by the implications of globalisation.

The term "globalisation" has been subjected to almost as many definitions as there are scholars and fields of study; maybe even more, since some scholars gave more than one definitions. But in order not to plunge into the impossible task of rendering all the definitions of globalisation, we shall only limit ourselves to a few within the confines of this study.

According to Friedman (1999:1),

    Globalisation is the inexorable integration of markets, nation-states and technologies to a degree never witnessed before-in a way that is enabling individuals, corporations and nation-states to reach round the world farther, faster, deeper and cheaper than ever before.

Ritzer (2004:72) defined it as "the world

wide diffusion of practice, expansion of relations across continents, organisation or social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness." In yet another contribution, but this time on a more encompassing level because of its identification of other areas of human life, Holton (1999:1) defined it as "the intensification of economic, political, social and cultural relations across boarders."

Among the factors and forces propelling globalisation, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) stands out unequalled. It is specifically responsible for the contraction of the world due to the elimination of distance and communication barriers, thereby creating a free flow of information. In this study, we shall examine the implications of ICT on public relations practice.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICT)

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can be described as a revolutionary advancement in communications, possessing possibilities far too numerous to count. It creates a "next door" effect whereby distance is completely exterminated and far-reaching possibilities are brought to our reach. Cumbersome tasks in data processing, sending and receiving are simplified and reduced to the push of a button. ICT presents an experimental ground that is limited only by the imaginations and creativities of its users.

The introduction of ICT into any sphere generally engenders unprecedented level of transformation. This assertion has been proved in politics, culture, education and economy to mention a few. According to Brown (2000), the development so far is just the tip of an enormous iceberg. The advanced countries are developing and using technology to enhance their competitiveness at a most alarming rate. This is more dramatically evident in ICT than in any other area. The developing countries are not excluded in this unique revolution because by eliminating distance and time, poor and isolated communities can also gain access to the critical information that will inform their development provided the facility is available.

The most prominent of the manifestations of ICT is the Internet. The ability of the Internet to maintain open standard for transmitting digitised data-voice, video or text- from one computer to another has constituted its single most important reason for success. According to Baran (2002), the Internet is most appropriately referred to as a "network of networks" that is growing and expanding at an incredibly fast rate. These networks consist of Local Area Networks (LANs), and Wide Area Network (WANs). LANs connect two or more computers, usually ones within the same building, while WANs connect several LANs in different locations. Consequently, the Internet, being the "network of networks" serves as a connection for WANs. The Internet therefore connects every individual user to a complex network whereby

information can be accessed with a total disregard for time and space.

It is almost an impossible task to specify the number of users that there are on the net. According to the research company, IDC, there were 196 million users worldwide as at 2000, meanwhile, the Computer Industry Almanac counted 349 million users at about the same year. The Internet has precipitated the growth of many organisations whether profit- making or not. This was engendered by the realization by such organisations that with the alarming degree of adoption of the Internet by individuals, the Internet instantly becomes their greatest opportunity to reach their target audience.

The Internet also addressed two of the major challenges faced by organisations, that is, time and money. Information is disseminated to huge audience within a short time and at a minimal cost. Another benefit enjoyed by organisations and individual businesses is the acquisition of web sites, which enjoy a high degree of patronage. According to Baran (2002), by July 2000, more than two billion pages were available on the web, and since about 7.3 million new pages are added everyday, by the middle of 2001, the number would have reach 4 billion. If the progression is still applicable, then by my estimation, the number would have reach 12 billion by the middle of 2006.

The above stated information crystallizes the deep involvement of organisations and individuals in communication processes via the "new technology." Communication is undoubtedly the most important element of success in any organisation. It involves creating shared meaning and establishing mutual understanding among the publics involved; and this is a public relations function. Public relations in any organisation seeks to establish and maintain mutual understanding and acceptance between the organisation and its various publics. If public relations includes communication, and communication has gone "Internetal", then public relations must also upgrade its activities technologically.

ICT AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Public relations (PR) is no longer a new field of study. But consequent on its emerging status, it has experienced a lot of attempts at its definition over the years. Most scholars and practitioners have defined the field according to their requirements and focus at the time. In fact, Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997) described public relations as being difficult to sum up in a brief statement. They also said that the very nature of the profession and its constant adaptation to the needs of the society make it at best a moving target of definition. Nevertheless, among the most prominent and widely accepted of the varying array of definitions is the one given by the British Institute of Public Relations (BIPR) stating public relations as "the deliberate, planned and sustained effort to establish mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics" (see

Daramola, 2003).

Public relations activities in an organisation are designed and structured to acquire understanding, provide information and obtain feedback or reaction from those affected by the operations of that organisation. As it has been rightly observed, ICT makes a vast array of opportunities available, and PR is not left out among its beneficiaries. Among the benefits of ICT to public relations are the following;

1) Access to vast information: the internet provides easy access to vast information thereby solving the problem of ignorance. It brings information from across the world in a matter of seconds and this is particularly useful to PR because its practitioners can always evaluate their performances by the world's standard.

2) Fast information circulation: through the use of the internet, information can be gathered and distributed much faster.

3) Target marketing: internet makes target marketing and audience specialization possible. This means that a PR person can easily select the audience he requires and communicate with them without interference. This can be done through direct e-mails and other specialized avenues (Clear and Weideman, 2002).

The above are some of the numerous benefits of ICT to public relations.

Nevertheless, the same technology precipitates a number of critical challenges for the practice of PR and these challenges are capable of having significant effect on the practice.

PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF ICT

Through the advent of ICT, the public relations practice has been exposed to some pertinent challenges that are capable of negating all the potentials it possesses if not well managed. Among those salient challenges are the following;

* The Magnification of PR Publics

Jefkins (1980) defined publics as those groups of people both internally and externally with whom an organisation communicates. In other words, the publics of an organisation are the stakeholders and they can be employees, customers, and shareholders to mention a few. We refer to "publics" rather than "the general public" because it has been discovered that nothing is so general about the publics, that is, they don't share the same characteristics, (Okafor: 2002). This also means that among the general audience of PR, it is still possible to segment them according to their similar characteristics.

One of the major challenges posed by the advent of ICT is the enormous and sudden growth of the publics of PR. The elimination of communication barriers confronts public relations practitioners with an unlimited number of publics. This in itself could have been beneficial

to the PR practitioner since his aim is to reach as may people as possible, but if he is not ready to "meet the world" it can be a great problem. Also, the classification of such publics becomes a very complex challenge since they can no longer be simply grouped as internal and external publics. PR has to come up with a new and more encompassing way of describing its publics.

*   Mental and Cultural Barriers.
It is of immense importance to note that the barriers that ICT has removed are mainly physical, diplomatic and economic. What about the mental and cultural barriers? There is enduring perception in some parts of the world that supporters of ICT have a hidden agenda to undermine the independence of developing countries. Some people also believe that the Internet projects a high level of cultural domination since its major content, in their own opinion, is western. The embrace of ICT by a public relations practitioner therefore, has the tendency of confronting him with a great level of hostility from some of the very publics he hopes to win.

*   **Complication of Functions.**

PR functions also become more complex, because to be successful and competitive, the practitioner must think globally. This specific factor therefore mandates that every PR function conforms to international public relations requirements and standards. This is necessary because with ICT, there is no local news;

anything placed on the net instantly becomes a global item. This can be a major problem because the PR practitioner is forced to relate with and attempt to create mutual understanding between his organisation and these diverse and dynamic publics whether he is prepared for it or not. He is faced with a major question. Does he create a unified message for all his global publics or does he take factors such as culture and religion into consideration since most of his publics will view it at the same time?

If he decides to create a homogeneous message, the fact remains that a particular message may be acceptable in a country and yet be offensive in another. Whereas if he decides to take culture and religion into consideration, how many different messages can he generate at a time? Creating mutual understanding therefore becomes a colossal task more burdensome than beneficial. It is also important to note that the benefit of ICT in respect to audience specialization does not eradicate this problem. This is so because each specialized segment of the audience in the "global village" cuts across nations, cultures, languages, economies, political systems etc. Consequently, a single segment of PR publics may be larger than all its former publics put together before the advent of ICT.

*   **Effects of ICT on Crisis Management.**

Folarin (1998) described crisis as the

matured stage of the metamorphosis of an uncontrolled relationship between an organisation and its publics. The first stage is that of "issue" and it was defined as any matter or event that has potential or realized consequences for a public(s) of an organisation or an institution. When an issue is not well managed it engenders conflict, which in turn ends in crisis.

With ICT, crisis has become even more difficult to manage. Through the use of this technology, crisis experienced by any organisation can easily and speedily be transferred to the global scene, which automatically eradicates anything called "local crisis" management. It used to be at a time that an organisation capitalizes on the ignorance of its larger publics about a particular crisis, to buy enough time to investigate and plan a programme of action to handle the crisis. It was also possible to employ the public relations officer's (PRO's) goodwill and trustworthiness with the press to create understanding and to reduce the amount of damaging article published about the crisis; not so as to deceive the public, but just to give enough time to conduct a sincere investigation. All of these have become history since a single article by an uninformed person is enough to tour the whole world bearing the incorrect news about the crisis.

* **Challenges of Speedy Advancement and Total Dependency.**

Among the questions that are providing

focus for mass communication in the 21st century is one that sought to know how the "new technology" can be managed or monitored (Baran and Davis, 2003). Technology advances at such an alarming rate that it becomes a feat to catch up with it. This mounts a great pressure on PR, particularly the one in developing nations, as it is forced to catch up with the trend.

Another salient challenge faced by PR is the challenge of total dependency on ICT. Because of the marvelling possibilities available through this medium, it is very possible for a public relations practitioner to focus all his efforts on his Internet using publics while neglecting the others, for instance the employees of the organisation. This will be a great blunder because crisis will eventually erupt from the neglected publics. This factor is even more pronounced in some developing countries in which a major part of the populace is not exposed to internet facilities.

Also, in the process of providing and also obtaining feedback, the PRO is bombarded with more information than he can ever hope to deal with. This can do more harm than good because it becomes a feat to sort out relevant and useful information from junks.

* **Challenges of Irreversible errors.**

With the Internet, the immediacy of any message is guaranteed. This asset can also prove to be a liability in that any message placed on the Internet cannot

be retrieved for correction before circulation. This may have been possible with the "old media" since an editor can be appealed to for the delay of the publication of the concerned article, or broadcast of a certain material because of some error; but this is impossible with the Internet. At the press of a button, the message has already been "globalised."

* **Potential Health Risks:** According to Clear and Weideman (2002), it has been discovered that the new media (ICT) can pose potential health risks to users, particularly those risks associated with electromagnetic radiation. Because of this, PR can not afford to rely entirely on the Internet since health conscious people may stay away from it as much as possible.

* **Creation of Information Gap:** the advent of ICT tends to widen the gap between the information-rich and information-poor people. For instance, the people who find the Internet easily accessible will derive the most benefit from it while those who can not access it will be deprived of the information it provides. The effect of this on public relations is that some people will know a lot about its activities while some others will know little or nothing about them.

MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF ICT

It must not be assumed however that ICT is more of a stumbling block to PR than a stepping-stone; moreover, with every new technology usually comes new challenges. Public relations must therefore de-emphasize the weaknesses of ICT and capitalize instead on its strengths. Hence, in order to effectively maximize the potentials of ICT for the successful execution of PR functions, the following critical recommendations are made;

1. The practitioners must note that it is easier for them to change and adapt to current trends in ICT than for them to expect the global trend to change. Consequently, they must constantly expose themselves to the new advancements in communication technology so that they can derive adequate benefit from them.

2. More research must be conducted so that PR can have better and more encompassing criteria for classifying its publics. This becomes necessary since it now has to communicate with the global community. As far as ICT is concerned, dealing with diversified PR publics, functions and messages may not be optional; this therefore justifies the need for a thorough research.

3. PR must steer clear of the raging battle of whether or not ICT is a weapon created by developed countries to erode weaker cultures. It must also not attempt to influence people's mental or cultural perception on the issue. Rather, it must concentrate on the message it wants to pass across and how

best to utilize the medium for the purpose.

4. Public relations practitioners must take up the responsibility of monitoring, anticipating and forestalling crisis. Never again will reactive public relations be acceptable if their organisations want to remain in business. Proactive public relations must therefore be instituted.

5. Practitioners must develop a sense of responsibility and be more accountable for all information released to their publics. They must proofread all materials and confirm all information and details from the management of their organization or the personnel in charge before placing any information on the Internet.

6. As much as it has become necessary for public relations practitioners to be trained in the use of ICT, they must not abandon the "old media." This is very important particularly in developing countries where ICT facilities may not be adequate, or the people may not be very much exposed to the technology.

PROs must utilize the Internet fully to constantly keep their net-using publics informed about relevant development in the activities of their clients, and still not neglect those who do not use the net yet. They can also create a special website for the public relations activities of the organisations they represent and frequently chat with their publics. Through this, people will be able to ask bugging questions directly and also feel like relevant parts of the whole process. PROs can also initiate clubs for their various publics. It is usually easy and cheap to interact with customers thereby creating a forum for club members to share their thoughts on the services they have bought. According to Cairncross (2000), an important effect of internet-related technologies is to shift the emphasis of companies away from recruiting new customers and toward building deeper relationship with the existing ones. She believes that it is less expensive to sell the same product to someone who has already bought it once than to build new markets. This can also prove invaluable to a PRO because he can easily refer new customers to the club site where they can be the judges themselves. Nothing provides a better certification than a satisfied customer's testimony.

CONCLUSION

Information and Communication Technology has come to stay as a most versatile agent of change and development. However, with its great potentials also come great challenges. Public relations practice must be ready to firstly understand what ICT stands for, and then implement its use in such a way that it will enhance and not

obstruct its function of creating mutual understanding with its publics. It has become too obvious beyond argument that ICT cannot be ignored; consequently, PROs must not allow its challenges to rob them of its benefits. Only when this is done can public relations meet the technological requirements that are needed to compete effectively in the global community.

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