

THE DIGITAL DILEMMA: PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE AGE OF CYBER-ACTIVISM IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The job of public relations professionals across the world is not only difficult but was recently complicated by the advent of digital platforms. With a population largely dominated by active youths who have access to the internet and digital platforms, Nigerian PR professionals have found the PR job more tasking, tiring, and complicated. The Internet penetration and availability of smartphones among Nigeria's youths created the opportunity for millions to express their views on public and private matters. One of the downsides of this is the rising attitude of the Nigerian youths to rebel, protest and attack organizations, politicians, celebrities, etc., on social media while they hide under their virtual identity. This paper discusses the professional landmines that PR professionals have to contend with as many youths are becoming critical of organizations, politicians, celebrities, etc., under the banner of activism and freedom of speech. The systems theory of PR was reviewed in lieu of the issues commonly faced by PR practitioners on the web. Discourse analysis was used to focus on issues of cyber-activism, content sharing, comments, and social media influencers. It was concluded that contemporary PR professionals in Nigeria must carefully thread the digital space as the web space is constantly evolving and digital natives are attacking any content with rage. Nigerian PR practitioners should take cognizance of the legal issues, digital copyrights, and privacy concerns that pose actantial threats to the digital space.

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Introduction

The job of a PR executive is a difficult and complicated task because it involves handling people and trying to make them accept or see reasons with the PR executive's principal. With the advent of the internet, everyone celebrates the modern wonder technology, and many believe that the PR executive's job is now easier. While this is true about the internet with regard to PR practice, the internet has made the job of the PR executive more complicated (Lang, 2023). Handling and controlling information among humans is tedious, and executing the same function online is even more risky. The online public, especially the digital natives, present new challenges as they assume different online personalities and easily get influenced, virtually by unintelligent people, sometimes by intelligent ones, with odd and misplaced motives. Moreover, digital natives are double-faced, saying one thing on the virtual platform while they believe, feel, do, and act otherwise in real life. The Spiral of Silence proposition is better understood by the web public who are afraid of taking a dissenting view on public discussion. Instead, they would remain with popular views because they do not want to be scorned. For the PR executive, communication is multi-faceted, multistep, and multi-directional, and the complex nature of man makes it difficult to give a general blueprint or result for a target audience (Brown, 2024; Digital Marketing Institution, 2024). Digital natives are even more complicated. Gregory (2000, p. 87) explains that the traditional model and channels of communication used by PR practitioners have been largely altered by Internet communication. This means that a new effort, skills, and strategies for the PR practitioner are required. She pointed out that the internet is not just like every other channel of communication, but a channel that is used to transform, alter, correct, attack, and/or support a message in unique ways. What Gregory means is that a message printed in the traditional press remains the same, but on the Internet, the message can be edited or distorted by anyone. In effect, the Internet is not a medium that the user has full control of and cannot assume that the message sent is received as sent. The PR executive is not always in control of the messages they send online, and when this happens, a new problem looms for the executive and their principal (organization/individual/party/individual).

Another issue prevalent with digital natives is that they can dabble into information shared by the executive at all campaign levels. They could disrupt, support, or complicate matters through comments. Digital natives are more active and largely aware of issues than those reached in person. The internet provides them with quick search engines to substantiate public relation information sheared online. While the virtual public are actantial friends of an organization, they could easily pose problems for the organization (Gregory, 200 p. 89). The medium's encyclopedic nature makes alternative information readily available to a target audience who could surf for it and counter or concur with an organization's shared public information. Statistical materials, government documents, academic and scholarly works, research findings, directories, rival products/services, and many more information are readily available on the web, and the organization must carefully choose its public information. Hence, the PR executive must look out for common situations or people who could ruin their online public information plan. For the image maker, a quick way to begin with is to know some common facts about digital natives on their fingertips. Nigeria's public relations manager is faced with many socioeconomic challenges and now has digital natives to contend with.

Digital Public Relations: A Conceptual Clarification

According to the Digital Marketing Institution (2024), digital PR is a strategy used to increase brand awareness and visibility using online channels. Unlike traditional PR, digital PR allows organizations to interact directly with their target audience without the barriers of time, space and restrictions. Kati (2022) believes that digital PR helps organizations communicate appropriately with their actantial prospects. She explains that with digital tools such as social media, the internet, and email, PR managers can easily share information about their brands, products, services, candidates, and artistes with a large heterogeneous public. While digital PR is about attaining brand

visibility on the superhighway, it now includes social media marketing and access to building a brand that will stand out among competitors. Matias Rodsevich (2024), an online PR consultant, approached the concept from a strictly marketing perspective. According to him, digital PR is a promotional tactic implemented by marketers and PR specialists to increase the online presence of brands or individuals. He writes, “This assists with driving brand awareness, prompting website traffic, creating links to boost organize rankings and increasing online (as well as offline) sales, social following, and engagement, all in a measurable way.” However, Rodsevich clarified that digital PR as a means of applying PR principles to the digital context must not be confused with SE optimization. Digital PR supports both the overall marketing and communication goals/objectives.

While digital PR practices mostly target journalists with the aim of using conventional mass media to reach their target public, digital PR practices cut the “middle men” to reach the target public directly. This means that it is faster in engaging in real-time interactions with the public and in gathering immediate feedback (Rodsevich, 2023). Wilkinson (2024) takes a core professional approach to defining public relations. He compares digital public relations to traditional public relations and explains that digital public relations is a marketing practice intended to raise brand awareness and increase credibility by leveraging online channels. This includes social media engagement through online content creation, such as influencers, bloggers, and online publishers. Brown (2024) believes that digital PR is a strategic way to control how the public perceives an organizational brand. While PR executives still engage journalists and use conventional mass media to reach their target audience, they are directly interacting with the public through social media platforms. This is of high risk when PR managers relate directly with the target audience online, the superhighway with its affiliated social media give practitioners the rare privilege of creating organic fellowship through their use of sophisticated technologies like ‘cookies.’ The digital PR activities encompass traditional functions plus promoting online content that serves a human purpose and thus naturally attracts backlinks. When done well, digital PR enhances an organization’s reputation and creates instant ripple effects. Digital PR activities and campaign plans now combine traditional PR, content marketing, SSEO, and audience analysis (Lang, 2023; Carrie, 2023). This concept is with innovators, marketers, entrepreneurs, and PR executives in this digital interaction age. Global and local businesses have largely migrated to the Internet as almost every activity is processed online. All conventional media houses have an online presence, and some only maintain digital publication/broadcasting, as the case may be. With the rise of active company websites, blogs, social media handles, and cookies, digital PR is a must for all organizations, journalists, individuals, and brands. Activities such as product launches, goods orders, recruitment, presentations, meetings, advertising, movie premieres, ticket sales, customer complaints, and passport applications are mostly done through digital platforms. However, the drawbacks of traditional PR include a lower reach, a problem with measuring the extent of messages, and less instructiveness with the public. Kernez (2020) clarified that traditional PR still works in many ways, so long as there are audiences who still consume/patronize traditional mass media such as TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Plus, face-to-face meetings, visits, exhibitions, and media events, such as facility tours and press conferences, are effective ways to build a positive public image.

Despite their distinctive features, both traditional and digital PR are now using similar tools and techniques to handle the objectives of their principals. Rodsevich (2023b) believes that digital PR has an edge due to its ability to analyze readers’ data. Through advanced software, digital platforms can track shares, views, and engagement across various online platforms and provide broader data on the public. With advanced technology like Google Analytics, PR materials are easily shared for free across multiple digital platforms. PR managers can track online visitors’ behavior, such as how much time they spend on their organization’s sites, their location, and the number of times they visit the site/webpage. These give users/PR managers the opportunity to accurately measure the effectiveness of their campaign and get instant feedback from the audience/public. Kroliczak (2023) is of the

opinion that digital platforms offer PR managers great opportunities, as they give them the rare privilege of sharing their campaign messages with the target public by bypassing the editors' gatekeeping of the media houses. This enables PR managers to reach their public with messages anytime, any day, and at almost free of charge. She explains that while traditional PR managers follow media reach estimates as given by other agencies, digital platforms can accurately measure the public and their online activities.

Online public opinion and opinion poll

Mueller (2009) defined public opinion as a population's attitudes, perspectives, and preferences toward events, circumstances, and issues of mutual interest. He added that public opinion is characteristically measured by a sample survey or public opinion poll. Opinion polls are generally accepted as useful tools by business, political organizations, the mass media, and government as well as in academic research. Mueller wrote that in business, polls are used to test consumers' preferences and discover what it is about a product that gives it appeal. Response to commercial polls aids in planning marketing and advertising strategies and in making changes to a product to increase its sales. In politics, polls are used to obtain information about voters' attitudes toward issues and candidates, to put forward candidates with winning actantial, and to plan campaigns. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and television are heavy users of public opinion polling information, especially political information that helps to predict elections or gauge the popularity of government officials and candidates. Polls are designed to represent the voice of consumers, citizens, employees, businesses, elites, stakeholders, and other defined groups on a local, national, or international basis. In the field of PR, opinion pool is used to obtain the public's view about an organization's affairs. It helps the management hear from the public and include their preference in the company's policy (Engle, 2024). They can also be a useful way for companies to assess the probable public reaction to a planned action or product.

However, online and the traditional quick survey on people's preferences over a public debate are sometimes grossly inappropriate. For example, the opinion polls conducted during the Dewey-Truman, Hilary-Trump, Jonathan-Buhari, and Obaseki-Iyamu elections all turned out negative, as the predicted winners lost and vice-versa. It shows how difficult the job of a PR executive is when trying to measure public opinion, but the job has to be done because the party/organization/group/individual needs facts to work with. According to Netigate (2020), an opinion poll is a flawed prediction method because it only represents a sample of the total population. They wrote that experience has shown that people may act differently in real life compared to how they respond to an opinion poll. This brings us to conducting an online opinion poll. While it is necessary to conduct an online opinion poll on behalf of your principal, it is necessary to know how to use the results obtained from the online poll while making a decision. Why is it easy to conduct an online opinion poll and allows many audiences to participate? Their responses do not translate to their physical involvement. In a political poll, for instance, many people may prefer a candidate, but in the actual election, such a candidate may still lose. This is often because most people who participate in online polls do so at the convenience of their room, office, or shop, but they find it difficult to participate in person. In marketing, online audience will like a product, yet most of them will not buy the product. It's either they cannot afford the money or they just cannot go through the physical stress of going for the product. Sometimes, people may not want to be seen around a group/organization/candidate but would show their support online where their identity is relatively safe. The PR executive will save his organization from making wrong plans by scrutinizing the results obtained from the opinion poll. Online positive results do not always translate to good yield in practice. A close assessment of recent elections is a good example. The September 19, 2020, Edo State governorship election surprised many after an online opinion poll showed that the APC was going to win the election, while the PDP won after the actual election was conducted (Monday, September 22, 2020, punchng.com, 2020).

Theoretical Underpinning: Public Relations Systems Theory

Before establishing the links between systems theory and PR, we provide a general overview of the systems paradigm as propounded by biologist Ludwig Betterlanffy. This will shed light on some complexities of the theory in relation to corporate communication. Littlejohn (1999) wrote that the one propounded the systems theory describes it as a set of interacting units that survives by responding and adjusting to the environment to achieve and maintain equilibrium. In a more relaxed way of putting it, a system is a set of things that affect one another within its environment and form a larger pattern that is different from any of the parts. According to Ludwig Betterlanffy, a system comprises four components: objects, attributes, internal relationships, and the environment. He explained that an object is any part/element or variable within a system. An attribute is a quality or property of a system and its objects; a system must also have internal relationships with its objects. All systems must exist in an environment and anything that generates pressures such as information, energy, and matter. From a sociological perspective, systems theory is the study of society as a complex arrangement of elements, including individuals and their beliefs, as they relate to a whole (Gibson, 2024). An applicable analysis of the system theory given by Chia and Synott (2012) explains that a system could be either open or closed.

A closed system has impermeable boundaries; therefore, it cannot exchange information with its environment. Hence, a closed system does not adapt to external change or feedback. Therefore, a closed system is static and reacts only to outside events when the impact is sufficiently strong to penetrate the system boundaries. Conversely, an open system allows the exchange of permeable inputs and through boundaries. An open system is a dynamic process that responds to feedback and change. In a social context, the theory posits that an organism (organization) is a member of a system and must adapt to its environment to survive. The system paradigm was easily applied to the practice of PR due to its role in controlling the internal and external flow of information in an organization. Roach (2016) posits that every organization is part of a system, and the organization's goal is survival. From this analysis, it is important to remember that the essential role of PR is to act as an open system by helping the organization to adjust and adapt to change in their environments. To achieve these objectives, the PR manager must identify the problem, analyze the situation, and assess how environmental and social factors, such as public opinion, social change, cultural shifts, technological advancement, and effects, will affect the management. A closed system organization does not interact with its audiences/public for feedback and lookout for social change and public opinions and, as such, does not evolve. An organization that practices an open system of gathering feedback from competitors and making necessary adjustments to their communication plans does not only evolve but also survives competition. For a contemporary PR manager to enhance productivity, he/she has to embrace digital platforms as an essential means of reaching the public and measuring the level of success through advanced online digital technologies.

Discursive Analysis: Landmines of Digital Public to Watch Out for in Nigerian Media Space

Some professional landmines to watch out for when engaging in online PR activities might seem negligible, but they can ruin a communication campaign. The communication expert will commit a terrible blunder by overlooking these salient facts.

Cyber-activism: Online activism could ruin an organization's reputation and plans. In this age of diverse debate over social, political, environmental, theistic, cultural, and gender engagement moving on to the internet and on social media/blogs, an organization/individual/party/association reputation could be smeared with negative and outright rejection by the masses (Ferdianto, 2023). Only one or a few cyber-activists can kindle the fire. Watters (2014) states that unlike traditional activists, who face a cumbersome process of mobilizing dissenters over a public issue, cyber-activists enjoy the speed and ease of sending their messages to millions of people within a day. The recent massive protest by people during the Nigeria Bar Association (NBA) national conference in September

2020 was a good example. Nigerians saw the influence of online activists as they compelled the NBA to bow to pressure by withdrawing the invitation of Kaduna State Governor Nasir El-Rufai from speaking at the event. An organization's event or product/service could be boycotted by people when an influential cyber-activist sows unfavorable vibe against it. Regardless of their background, activists on the superhighway could cause a group to lose and experience a serious setback. Another recent occurrence was the petition signed by the social media activist Reno Omokri urging the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States to place a visa ban on Governor El-Rufai. Less than 24 hours after he opened the letter, over one thousand Nigerians signed the petition online. On the governor's side, his PR team, notably the chief of the department, will be sweating hard to spin the crises fomented against their principal, the governor. There are any kinds of activists who are monitoring some special interests. For example, there are young, sensitive ladies like @Naijagirl who question advertisements, movies, and events they perceive as offensive to the feminine gender. Although some of them are heavily sentimental and radical in their views, they often gain supporters and raise dust, which often affects a product/service/reputation for some time. Some of their activities could even disrupt business activities. Recently, we have seen some highly educated social activists whose claims are backed up with academic premises and are credible sources of verifying public issues. A good example is the media scholar Farouq Kperogi, who monitors presidential events from the United States. Many Nigerians see him as a credible source, and refuting any claim he made will be difficult. Every PR executive and team must take precautions when planning online communication programs. Sensitive things or words could be blown out of proportion by online activists when it is least expected. Part of the job for the digital PR executive is also to identify likely online activities that might have something to do with their organization's product/service/events/candidate. When such activists are identified, it is advisable to look up their personal profile on social media accounts to gain insight into their ideological leanings, preferences, level of education, and reasoning.

Interactive and co-creators of content. Interactivity of customer and organizations on the web has changed the relationship between two entities. Management and the public are brought on equal pedestal by digital platforms (Kati, 2022). Now, no one is more important than the other, as they both have equal platforms to do what they want. The online public now participates in a company's policy and decision-making process through their comments, and others even make direct suggestions. A good example is the proposed logo for Innoson Vehicles, which was created by a Nigerian student who felt the automaker needed a befitting logo. Clients' online opinion shapes the organization's process as many voices make suggestions about products and services. This development could be leveraged when important and useful suggestions from the virtual public are acknowledged and possibly incorporated. The public will feel important and will see the organization as their own. However, when such co-creative audiences are ignored, it could result in major challenges for the organization as the public would turn their attention to where they will be regarded.

Everyone has something to say. The painful fact about online audiences is that they all have something to say, and it does not matter whether they are right or wrong (Kernez, 2020). Before the advent of organization's online portal, customers often felt intimidated whenever they walked into an office. Customers would conduct themselves nobly because of the serene lavishly built space and impressive staff look. Sometimes, most of them refrain from displaying their anger so that they would not look miserable amidst the regimented staff. Unlike the traditional setting where many are afraid to speak up when they perceive something is not right about an information, the internet provides an easy cover for the members of the public to say what's on their mind. An internal public like staff who may be scared in the office could hide under a false virtual personality to speak frankly. The medium makes it easier for an organization's public to say something back because it is virtually free (Rodsevich, 2023).

It is free and fast to express one's views, and by implication, more comments, complaints, criticism, and commendations are often recorded online than in the office.

Social media and online influencers. The PR executive may be familiar with real-time opinion leaders, but they might not be aware of what their virtual opinion leaders are capable of doing to the reputation of their organization. On the Internet, opinion leaders are mostly regarded as 'influencers.' These virtual opinion leaders could be one of the following: bloggers, entertainers, actors, singers, fashionistas, public figures, academics, professors, and others (politicians do not fit into this category because their personalities and actions are highly controversial in the public domain). Online influencers influence what their virtual followers think about a product, service, candidate, organization, or cause (Brown, 2024). This happens especially among young audience, many people end up seeing a product from their idols online. A PR executive who wants to promote their principal's product online must take cognizance of the influencers' presence. This means that the PR executive must conduct research on the personalities of the individuals by knowing their psychographics, political leanings, social views, and other personal information. This task may be time consuming, but it is relatively easy to identify and conduct a quick search on online influencers. The first step is to view online comments on related issued or product, then identify the most liked commenter. When such people are identified, the next step will be to better understand them. For example, on Facebook, there are posts from influencers, and it is easy to view their profile for clues into their kind of person (same can happen on LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, etc.)

Conclusions and Recommendations

One of the reasons why web public relations is a more difficult task is that humans react differently when they are online. PR executives will focus on learning human behavior on the web. People's buying patterns and voting patterns on the web cannot be equated to the same as they happen in real life. Perhaps this is because our contemporary society is still on the threshold of moving to the futuristic digital life as seen and read in sci-fi. At this point in human history, the process of adapting to digital platforms is still in its early stages, and it is difficult to predict online human behavior. At the moment, some of the vital messages we are learning from research on digital PR is that we must tread carefully when engaging our principal's public online. Like the advertising pyramid, not everyone who responds to public relation messages online will do the same in real life. We are also aware of the lethal impact of online activists and the damage they are capable of doing to an organization, individual or a group. Understanding the various potholes surrounding the web atmosphere is a first step in launching an online campaign or program. On the other hand, there are also legal issues of copyrights, trademarks, privacy invasion, and cyber theft. While grappling with behavioral matters, legal issues are also of major concern to the PR executive. Creating and sharing online contents and managing issues arising from them are another source of headache for PR practitioners. In view of all these issues, we recommend that contemporary PR executives study the online atmosphere in detail to help them avoid disastrous landmines.

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