

**Public Relations practice in the new age:
Its challenges and successes
The Case of Tanzania**

By

SABATH OSCAR K

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BA in Public Relations and Advertising

University of Dar –Es-Salaam

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Introduction

This paper brings together key findings from across the recent literature and the practice of Public Relations in Tanzania to enhance overall understanding of current and future challenges posed by new media or digital age to public relations. It is still a challenge to the way PR is practiced in Tanzania as no clear line distinguishes the old practice and the contemporary or new age.

Many public relations practitioners in different firms or organizations in Tanzania are struggling with the impact of new media, and especially the Internet, on their practice. Despite the challenge that there are inadequate and insufficient infrastructures to support the use of new media artifacts and its technology, Tanzanian PR industry is struggling to make its activities and practices related to the contemporary practice of the new age or digitalized world.

In this paper possible threats and opportunities presented by new media for public relations are explored and shared to inform and even give directions for further research in this area.

An overview of Public Relations in Tanzania and the new media

Since the new forms of communication grew in Tanzania in the late 1980's different organizations being public or private have been applying several communication techniques in ensuring their practices and day to day activities. The need to effective communication within and outside the institutions has been of great value where institutions and organizations dream all the time of the practice of their lives whether for business (profit) or charity (non-profit).

The need for professionalized communication flow and reciprocated, mutual understanding by both the publics and the firms or institutions has lead to the demand for PR learning institutions

and hence establishment of several colleges and degree universities by the end of 1990's. These institutions aim at giving skills and knowledge about the effective and useful Public Relations practices for the success of the organizations.

The coming of digitalized forms of communication also has paved the way to have the profession among the society and hence qualify it to the extent that most of the institutions and organizations value its contribution despite the challenges accompanying the field.

Several forms of new age technologies or new media as the vehicle to carry elements of relations to the audiences or publics are applied in Tanzania like email, text messaging through SMS, multimedia messaging through MMS, instant messaging and chat online, online forums and blogging also the corporate websites to mention some.

Several organizations in Tanzania and even the government have shifted from using traditional media to enhance and facilitate information flow among the organization itself and its publics. Some example can be drawn from the big telephone companies like Tigo, Airtel and Vodacom who use their homepage websites and other blogs to advertise or inform their customers and the prospects about the organization's products or services. The process of reaching the publics is now simplified with much effectiveness and impacts as compared to the old or traditional media as it was in the ages of independence till 1990's.

The use of social media with the support of the Internet has also been to its acceleration as much companies and institutions are going into these social networking groups like *Facebook* and *Twitter*. Also there are other forms of new media in the new age like the use of blogs and forums including *Jamii* Forums, blogs like *Michuzi*, *TeenTZ*, *Fashion 8020* and other entertainment

blogs. Several companies are now having their blogs and interaction sites where it simplifies the whole process of communicating to the publics.

This study therefore explains the challenges and the successes of practicing Public Relations in this contemporary development in science and technology with simplified means of communications globally.

New media and PR in Tanzania companies' operations: The way to the publics or the vice versa

Several questions have been asked about the contemporary practice of PR in the current world with its features of global network and the rapid growth of internet with the features of interconnectedness, individual accessibility, interactivity, multiplicity of use ubiquity and delocatedness.

PR practitioners are faced with the challenges of using or utilizing the opportunities through the expression of their skills, the decline of trust, the customers' need for message warrior to move their brains, minds and perception towards a product or service(s). All these are cheered by the technological break through well versed by the new media. Charity organizations and religious groups are highly expanding their reach to different groups in the society for the just purpose of establishing and creating mutual relationships with their key and prosperous publics.

Giving a comment on the contemporary practice of Public Relations in Tanzania, Airtel Telecommunications Company located in Dar Es Salaam, the Public Relations Manager says that;

“The practice in this field is simplified and of higher levels of accepting and facilitating feedback hence reciprocal communication which is one of the effective ways to deal with your publics. On the other hand it’s a challenge as some of us are challenged by inadequate skills and the low pace to cope up with the new move of the PR practice. Some companies PR managers are conservative and use traditional PR techniques.... That’s why some of the companies can not make through”

Public relations practitioners need more technical skills in areas such as web publishing, new software operation, online security, search engine optimization, web analytics and web trend analysis software operation. They will need enhanced online information architecture skills and skills related to managing an increasing amount of complex information digitally.

With the new information technologies and the new ways of carrying the messages to and from the publics, careful practice and application of the techniques and ways are needed to ensure that the company or organization is out of the risks of damaging its reputation though the PR tools used or channels that are involved in the cultivation of favorable relations for an organization and products or services with its keen publics.

Ways of measuring the PR practices and effectiveness of the plans and programs have also been advanced in a kind that keen observations and close actions are taken to monitor their exposure, engagement, influence and the actions. Most of the companies in Tanzania now days are found in social media and other forums or blogs in different styles and ways that they can still reach the audiences wherever and whenever possible, the PR offices try to research for effective and trustworthy blogs, forums and sites that they sponsor or put the adverts, online banners in lineages at the top or bottom of the sites preferred. TIGO Company has a *facebook, twitter*

accounts, company's website and also some adverts in different blogs like *Michuzi.blogspot.com* and others. This helps a lot in marketing the company brand and fosters acceptance to the publics.

Media relations as one of the most known external public of any organization, which also constitutes the practice of PR in most of the institutions or organizations has contemporarily pushed the paraphernalia and the means to reach the publics and customers in a way that if used creatively and strategically can ensure the organizations' achievement of the prosperous goals. Several PR firms and the departments are heavily investing in the media research to determine the effectiveness of the media that can be used to publicize and promote the products, and or services of the given organizations. Media strategies are developed by the organizations through their departments for PR or hired PR firms like Integrated Marketing, Keys Marketing, Executive Solutions and others. Big telecommunication companies like Vodacom, Tigo, Airtel, and Zantel competes in the same market and hence employ other marketing and PR firms to facilitate them to reach their goals and hence win more customers.

A PR manager for Tanzania Electrical Supply Company (TANESCO) explains that it is worth having good relations with media and the media people now days as they are carrying and making the values of the organization available to its key publics. Every PR manager is argued to be a friend of journalist not by bribing them but by telling them what they should tell their audiences and the companies' stakeholders in truth and ethical manner. Media is as valued as the key public of an organization.

The major challenge with the practice of PR in Tanzania is on the way that practitioners or PR

personnel are trying to make lies for the purposes of making the audiences think of the positive side of the organization, this in one way or another might endanger the reputation of an organization and against the conducts and practices of Public Relations which stresses on truthful and objectivity as pillars of Public Relations.

Conclusion: New media and public relations practice in Tanzania

With the contemporary practice of PR consideration is given to both the impact on skills, knowledge and work practices of current and future practitioners and the way new media is consumed and used, including the impact that related expectations and behavior of consumers is having on public relations practice. New technologies are being developed and updated continuously and in themselves pose challenges for public relations professionals in terms of keeping abreast of not only what is available but also of what is being planned for release in the future.

Many large scale public relations projects by public and private companies or institutions such as national public information campaigns or major international and national events have long lead times, and plans made a couple of years out from an event may need to be revisited several times to accommodate trends in usage of new technologies among key publics.

Tanzanian PR practice is on its race and hence need of professionalism and skills as shown in this paper are to be enforced and highly encouraged by the institutions and organizations to make it successful.

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