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# The Making of Public Relations in Nigeria: An Overview

Public relations is as dynamic as the environment in which it is practised. Although often a misunderstood profession, it has nonetheless established itself as a very strategic management function in all facets of human endeavours. Though to some people, public relations is an optional factor towards the achievement of organisational objectives, yet others see it as an integral part of a formidable management system that ensures the attainment of corporate goals. Thus, the attention paid to the profession worldwide varies, and is a direct reflection of what public relations has been able to do in the various industries and organisations that have used it to further the "relations of the subject and the publics on which it depends, for its social goals".

However, the situation is not the same in most developing nations where democracy and free market economies are gradually overtaking erstwhile middle-of-the-road political systems. Public relations has become prominent in the new wave of 'commoditisation' of land, labour and entrepreneurship which were in the past subsumed under a largely pre-capitalist social system. With competition, technology, market-oriented economy and democracy, public relations becomes a strategic resource for their actualisation. It is not uncommon to find several organisations that are yet to embrace public relations as a

management function. Sadly, many of them neither have public relations departments nor do they engage public relations consultants for specific campaigns. They simply tag along and hope for the best. In view of this, the awareness of the dynamics of public relations in modern day business still requires a lot of understanding and studies.

The presence of unqualified practitioners and the lack of quantifiable and visible results of what public relations can do encourage this complacency. The belief in quarters such as these is that public relations, if needed at all, does not require any special skills and that any member of staff could handle the job whenever the need arises. Indeed, employers, in exasperation, fire at their public relations executives inquiring why they should pay the department's bills. They would like to see, touch and feel the effects of public relations in their establishments. Much as this unwholesome atmosphere persists, public relations in Nigeria is coming up to be counted as a strategic and essential management function in private and public institutions. Only in 1992 did government rationalise the departments within its ministries, and public relations is among the eight mandatory departments that are retained. From its informal status of an association of like-minded careerists formed in 1963, a legal entity known as the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) came into being through the promulgation of Decree 16 of 1990, making it the third of its kind in the world, after Brazil and Spain. With this decree, the practice of public relations has gained the needed recognition and influence, coupled with the responsibility

## The Beginnings of Public Relations

As with most modern technologies, concepts and socio-political initiatives, public relations idea evolved from the United States of America (USA). At one level, the evolution of public relations idea was credited to an American President, Thomas Jefferson, when, as far back as 1807, he, in long hand, crossed out three words *state of thoughts* in his *Seventh Address to Congress* and substituted them with the two magic words *public relations*. It is therefore not surprising that America is the leader in public relations especially in terms of the number of practitioners, user-organisations, and the quality and content of their work. The Public Relations Society of America began accreditation of members with the first examinations in 1965. In spite of this leadership position, it is amazing that the practice of public relations is yet to have any legal backing of the United States of America!

At another level, the ancient finding on the evolution of public relations is Greco-Roman slogan *vox populi, vox dei* – “the voice of the people is the voice of God” to underscore the importance of public opinion in governance and affairs of men. Other early indications of the power of public opinion/public relations are traceable to the works of such great men as Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, Jonathan Swift and Daniel Defoe as they chronicled in critical essays, pamphlets and popular literature the happenings of the society they then lived in. Their works have proved very insightful and revolutionary in the way they carried the peoples of their time to the *new world* we now experience. Of course, Edward L. Bernays (1892-1995) is considered one of the fathers of modern public relations. He pioneered the establishment of the theory, practice, principles, methods and ethics of professional public relations immediately following the First World War.

Historically, American public relations literature recorded some firsts many decades ago. Some of the highlights are as follows:

- Thomas Eaton in 1882 addressed the Yale Law School on “**The Public Relations and Duties of the Legal Profession.**”
- Ivy Lebetter Lee in 1906 came up with the famous **Declaration of Principles** which affirmed the right of the public to “prompt and accurate information concerning subjects which are of interest and value...”
- Edward L. Bernays (the father of modern public relations) in 1924 pioneered public relations textbook for the first university course when he wrote *Crystallizing Public Opinion* which has remained in print for over 70 unprecedented years. In the book, he placed unmistakable emphasis on public relations role in decision-making from which he coined the term “Public Relations Counsel”. The New York University in 1923 became the first to offer public relations courses (principles, practice and ethics of public relations) with Bernays as the pioneer teacher.
- John C. Long in 1924 was the first author to write a book with “public relations” in the title: *Public Relations: A Handbook of Publicity*.
- Robert Newcomb in 1924 was the first to relate the role of employees to public relations in companies in an article entitled: “Employees’ Part in Public Relations Work “in Railway Age. J. Hardley Wright and Byron H. Christian jointly in 1949 wrote *Public Relations in Management* to be the first to introduce “management” into the subject.
- Stanley, Kelly in 1956 first referred to public relations as a profession in his book, *Professional Public Relations and Political Power*.

Public relations, being a nascent profession in Nigeria, may not boast of such firsts but has shown great potential for taking

the profession to greater heights. Like a mustard seed, modern public relations practice in the years after the Second World War (1939 – 1945), spread very fast to several parts of Europe. The rapid growth of public relations in the United Kingdom led to the formation of the Institute of Public Relations in London in 1948. Other European nations followed in their stride such as the Centre Belge des Relations Publiques formed in Brussels in 1952, L'Association Francaise des Relations Publiques (AFREP) in France in 1951, and the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) formed in 1948. Other notable nations that embraced public relations as a vocation include Germany where German Public Relations Association (DPRG) was formed in 1958, the Netherlands Society of Public Relations came into being in 1950, and Italy's Public Relations Association, was formed in 1954. The collective result of the various efforts of the countries trying to institute public relations as a regular and strategic vocation culminated in the formation of the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) in 1955. Since that time, several fora have been created for in-depth discussions on the future of public relations. The first forum was the first World Public Relations Congress which was held in Brussels in June, 1958. The second IPRA conference followed in May 1961, in Venice, Italy. Among other regional public relations groupings is the Federation of African Public Relations Association (FAPRA) which was formed in 1975 with a Nigerian, Bob Ogbuagu, as its first President. Altogether, Nigeria hosted FAPRA five times in 1980, 1984, 1990, 1999 and 2004 in Lagos, Owerri, and Abuja (thrice). The first Commonwealth Public Relations Conference was held in Abuja, Nigeria, in September, 1990.

## **Public Relations in Nigeria**

The intense activities of the militant nationalists during the colonial era transcended the political agenda of freedom and self-governance. Total emancipation and attainment of social, political and economic independence from the British overlords were the

goals. Attacked from all fronts on several of its policies, the colonial masters recalled the effective use to which it had put public information and public relations campaign in solving homegrown problems such as the "Buy British" campaign successfully carried out in 1931. Public relations had also been put to good use by the Empire Marketing Board (1926-1931) with the late Sir Stephen Tallents, foundation President of the Institute of Public Relations, London, at the helm of affairs. Thus, the establishment of an information/public relations office was a recall of an experiment that had worked in the past to bolster the cause of the war and facilitate two-way communication between the colonialists and their subjects. Public relations became an obvious choice as most nationalist groups had established formidable newspapers through which anti-colonial campaigns were carried out. The colonial administration in 1944 set up a public relations department in Lagos with units in the Northern, Eastern and Western provinces for effective coverage of the entire country. The department was to

- tell the people what government is doing and what it (the public) is supposed to do;
- publicise Nigeria to Nigerians and the world; and
- provide the people with cultural values and education, "especially in the field which the ordinary newspapers have not the facilities."

These functions were performed through the use of such channels as mobile cinema vans, newspapers, face-to-face communication and feedback through the same process, as best as possible.

The earliest public relations practitioners in Nigeria were British citizens, among whom were Mr D.C. Fletcher (the pioneer and chief motivator), Mr John Stocker and Mr Harold Cooper. The field office at Ibadan was manned by Lt-Col. O.W.P. Thorn while Mr I.I. Howard and Mr Stocker were at Enugu and Kaduna respectively. Notable among Nigerians who worked with the

colonial public relations personnel were Ben Enwonwu, Ayo Lijadu and Mobolaji Odunewu.

By the time the colonialists left, the message of what public relations can do at war and in peace time was clear. Subsequently, public relations was put to good use in the task of consolidating the socio-economic and political gains of independence.

The United African Company (now UAC, Nigeria) in 1949 was the first corporate body to establish a public relations department as an effective tool for organisational and management support system under the leadership of Charles Newman. Among other early 'converts' were Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (1969) and Nigeria Railway Corporation which had public relations units manned by Dennis Buckle and Ernest Ikoli, respectively. The multinational corporations as exemplified by Shell Petroleum Development Corporation naturally had to make use of public relations in order to maintain good relations with the various communities within their operational environment. This is because the operations of these organisations have debilitating occupational impact on the people. In the case of oil exploration, the effects are mostly negative resulting in environmental degradation, pollution and loss of agricultural land. It is therefore necessary to use public relations strategies to cultivate the understanding and cooperation of the people. The experience of the London Post Office in the feature film *Night Mail* is very instructive as to the power of effective communication which it adopted to solicit public support in resolving the operational problems it faced shortly after Second World War. The United African Company (UAC), a one-time pseudo-government, is the forerunner of modern business in Nigeria. Having so many subsidiaries and field offices scattered within and even outside the country made its investment in public relations worthwhile.

Till today, UAC remains a leader in the use of public relations as a strategic management tool in the organisation. From the 1960s, late Sam Epelle, author of *Handbook of Public Information*

(1969), Ikhaz Yakubu, Mazi Mike Okereke and Duro Onabolu manned the UAC public relations department at different times and nurtured it to what we now have as an example in excellent corporate public relations.

Conversely, government agencies took some time to embrace public relations as an essential part of management. What existed for long was more of information service to handle sundry duties that are not necessarily related to core public relations activities. In spite of the slow start, government agencies still lead in the recruitment of public relations officers at the federal, state and local government levels. Public relations has attained professional status and recognition in virtually all the organisations that require its services. Through strategic and effective programme formulation, the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations has been able to put its stamp of authority on public relations just as the medical, legal, pharmaceutical, accounting professions. It has basic educational requirements, training, experiences, high ethical standard and above all, a law recognising it as a profession.

Today, public relations as a strategic management function has received a boost as some practitioners rose to become chief executive officers of their organisations. Examples are Chief Adekunle Ojora, Chairman, Mobil Oil, late Chief Rufus Giwa, former Chairman and Chief Executive, Lever Brothers and Dr Pat Utomi, former Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Volkswagen of Nigeria. Organisations such as United African Company, John Holt, Guinness Nigeria, Nigerian Telecommunications Limited, Nigerian National Petroleum Company, among others, have public relations executives as top management officers. The unique prominence given to public relations in these organisations has contributed tremendously to its visibility, good public perception, and continuous growth.