

EIGHT

PUBLIC RELATIONS LITERATURE IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

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Good evening distinguished ladies and gentlemen. First let me thank the Abuja Chapter of the Association of Nigerian Authors (ANA) for giving me the opportunity to deliver this dinner lecture. Well, I am not too sure dinner and lecture go together — but then making some remarks on this rather intriguing topic could be more rewarding. Please note that these remarks have been seriously abridged because of a self-imposed time constraint.

It is a great honour for me to be back home. By home, I mean the literary arts where I began my communication career some two decades back. It was actually at a remembrance evening of poetry recitations in honour of the late Christopher Okigbo held at the University of Ibadan Arts Theatre (I was a freelance reviewer of all artistic shows there for more than two years till 1974) that I first had a never-to-be forgotten encounter with the creative arts. Renown poets and novelists such as Dapo Adelugba, Kole Omotoso, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, Bayo Oduneye and many others were among those people who put that show together. Since then, I have been into Research Communication, Agricultural Communication, Political Communication and now Corporate Communications. Indeed, ladies and gentlemen, my experience convinces me that the literary arts is a veritable place to begin a communication career.

The global village is here but in an almost invisible way; all you need do to reach out to the world now is just a computer connected to the world wide web (internet) of the Information Superhighway. Sadly though, Nigeria is only a bystander and an onlooker in the unfolding demystification of man-made barriers to the free flow of information. Let us hope it would not be long before we redeem our lost momentum for leadership.

Beginning my speech, I would like to give you a brief historical background of how public relations arrived at where it is today. What is Public Relations? Of the hundreds of definitions that public relations has, that which was adopted at the First World Forum in Public Relations, held in Mexico in 1978 would be useful for this exercise. It goes thus:

public relations practice is the art and social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders and implementing planned programmes of action which will serve both the organization's and the public interest."

Also, William Curry (1996) describes public relations as

.. a two-way communications process practiced at a very high level by companies and organisations that value the function and who expects their public relations executives to serve seriously as counselors of what to do and what to say, not just how to sell products.

America's third President, Thomas Jefferson in 1807 in his own handwriting crossed out three words "state of thought" in his Seventh Address to the Congress and substituted them with two magic words "public relations". In 1882, Norman Eaton, a prominent American Lawyer addressed the Yale Law School on "The Public Relations and Duties of the Legal Profession." As you may know, Ivy Ledbetter Lee came up with the famous "Declaration of Principles" in 1906 in which he enunciated the people's right to be fully informed, truly, honestly, and accurately. However, the credit of pioneering modern public relations goes to 'Edward L Bernays' who spent more than seven decades propagating the ideals of public relations counseling. He pioneered the study of Public Relations as an art and social science at the New York University and authored *Crystallizing Public Opinion* all in 1923. Of course, other notable pioneers in America include Arthur Page, Carl Byoir, John Hill, Robert Kendall, Pendleton Dudley and Paul Garrett to name just a few. The documentation an historian needs on most of these people are not available — maybe it is because public relations men show little interest in the history of their

profession! America was the clear leader in the evolution of public relations.

In England, the *dramatis personae* are not as clearly established as the organisations for which they worked. It is on record that in 1901, a Foreign Office News Department, an Air Ministry Press Office, and a Ministry of Health and Housing Information Department were created. By 1920, Britain had established a Library of Information in New York and Press Attaches were posted to Paris, Berlin and Rome in 1923. However, Sir Stephen Tallents was among the notable public relations practitioners in Britain with the very successful "buy British" campaign he ran at the "Empire Marketing Board" between 1926 and 1931.

Public relations in Nigeria was a colonial heritage — a propaganda outfit to counter the more vociferous propaganda machine from Hitler's Germany in 1940. Public Relations Offices were established in 1944 (Lagos), 1947 (Ibadan) and 1948 (Enugu). These offices paraded British citizens such as D.C. Fletcher, John Stocker, Harold Cooper and O.W. P. Thorn. With this initial contact with public relations, corporate bodies such as United African Company (1949), and Shell Petroleum Development Corporation (1969) set up their public relations departments. By 1960 and beyond, many Nigerians had begun manning the public relations departments of some of the multinationals and government offices. Among them were such names as Dr. Sam Epelle, Adekunle Ojora, Rufus Giwa, Ayo Lijadu, Alex Nwokedi, Aduke Alakija, Ikhaz Yakubu, Sir Alex Akinyele, Mazi Okereke and many more. Suffice to say that public relations has attained greater status with the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations "Decree No 16 of 1990" placed Nigeria among the very few countries with this licensing and registration processes.

Public relations has come a long way. From the early days of press agency, propagandists, publicists and several "accidental public relations actors", a new crop of well-heeled professionals in public relations have now come on stage. The chief executives of most leading-edge companies have come to depend on the expert counseling and management capabilities of the public relations executives. The competitive and sophisticated business environment has become a regenerating resource. Harold Burson, a public relations consultant of

international repute, has aptly captured this development thus:

When public relations was in its infancy, clients called on their public relations people and asked, "How should I say It?" As the profession became more sophisticated, the question evolved to "What should I say"? At the next level it became "How should we do it?" And at the highest level it became, "What should we do?"

The question that I would like us to ask ourselves at the end of this presentation should combine more than one of Harold Burson's — How relevant and appreciated is public relations in present day corporate Nigeria?

With these initial antecedents of public relations, may I now proceed to look at what the global literature of this profession is like. Naturally, the bulk of documentations on the literature of public relations would be found in America. Albert Walker (1988) compiled a small data on public relations books in 1988 and came up with the following data: "1900 - 1928 ; 1930s - 10; 1940s - 23; 1950s - 63; 1960s - 88; 1970s - 81; 1986 and 1987 - 156. Of course, the yearly records of public relations books in the US would have significantly improved since this data was collected a decade ago. Were I to have access to the Internet, I would have been able to tell you if any of such books were released in to the market even yesterday!

The literature could be recounted by highlighting some of the notable publications in the profession thus:

- (a) The first public relations textbook in which the term "public relations counsel" was coined and the first course in public relations was at the New York University. His evergreen perspectives on public relations earned him the acronym "Father of Public Relations". Bernays L. Edward (1923) also published *Crystallizing Public Opinion* — in print for over seventy years.
- (b) The earliest book that carried "public relations" in its title — Long C. John (1924) *Public Relations: A Handbook of Publicity*.
- (c) The concept of employees strategic role in a company's public relations was written by Newcomb Robert (1924) "Employees' Part in Public Relations Work" in *Railway Age*.
- (d) The first book on Case Studies in public relations was by Lesley Philip (1947) *Public Relations in Action*, Ziff-Davis Publishing Company.

- (e) The first attempt to tie public relations to management — Wright J. Handly and Byron H. Christian (1949), *Public Relations in Management*, McGraw-Hill Publishers.
- (f) The first reference to public relations as a profession - Kelley Stanley (1956), *Professional Public Relations and Political Power*, Hopkins University Press.
- (g) The first doctorate dissertation on Public Relations, Columbia University — O'hare J. Fredrick (1954), 'A Reference Guide to the study of Public Relations'.
- (h) In the 1940s, many journals devoted to public relations began publishing. Among the earliest ones are: *Public Relations Journal* (1944), *Public Relations Quarterly* (1954), *Public Relations Review* (1974) and the *International Public Relations Association Review* (1976).

This account would not be complete if some notable British public relations authors are not acknowledged. Chief among them are the late Dr. Sam Black and Frank Jenkins with about five books to their credit each. Others include John Crinsford and Roger Haywood.

Although colonial officers took the lead in the introduction of public relations to Nigeria, the first three documented publications are credited to the late Dr. Sam Epelle who is Nigeria's version of Edward Bernays — the Father of Nigerian Public Relations. He was also the first President of the Nigerian Institute of Public relations (then known as Public Relations Association of Nigeria). His three books are:

- (a) Epelle Sam (1968), *Essentials of Public Relations*
- (b) Epelle Sam (1968), *A Basic Course in Publicity*
- (c) Epelle Sam (1969), (ed.) *Handbook of Public Information*

Among many others, Adebayo Olusegun has authored six books, other authors include Offonry Kanu, Ajala Victoria, Osuji Chuks, Ogundipe Victor, Adekunle Salu, Duyile Dayo, Ogunsanya Adegboyega and Onodarho Akpode. (see appendix I)

An on-going research on public relations bibliography in Nigeria (Adamolekun and Ekundayo) has yielded only about forty public relations titles. Conversely, there exist hundreds and thousands of dissertations, journals and newspaper articles. It is an area that requires urgent documentation research. The public relations profession should

recognise and encourage the publication of an annual bibliography in view of the rapid turnover of corporate information and the need for the practitioners to become more intellectually inclined. There is so much material and issues that require in-depth studies and documentation. Public relations practitioners and educators would need to develop uniquely Nigerian perspectives of public relations literature in such areas as the basic principles and practice, communications technology, political public relations, employee/internal communication, crisis and issues management, environmental communication, budgeting, research and evaluation in order to cope with today's sophisticated world. In doing this, there would be no need to follow the well-worn routes of yesteryears but to quickly prioritise our needs and jump-start into the twenty-first century with the best practices and benefits of excellent corporate public relations. Interestingly, these publications are responding to the needs of the diverse audiences of the profession. The books so far published have been segmented to general interest, banking, military, business, government and others.

Given the above briefs on the literature of public relations, I would like to conclude this address by indicating the challenges before future authors of public relations books. There is need to explore how professionals can take advantage of modern communication of video conferencing, teleconferencing, satellite media tours, and corporate performance through internet rather than newspaper clippings. The workplace of today requires us to do things in radically different ways in response to the age of reengineering, restructuring, reinventing, downsizing, appropriate pricing, process improvement, outsourcing and specialisation.

The public relations literature of the future, for emphasis, should tackle substantive social and political issues that would contribute to the development of the country. It is only then that the practitioners and those hoping to become one would know that public relations is a serious affair and not just about glamour and good life.

The challenges before public relations books authors include:

Embrace Technology

Public relations is communication based. It is important that practitioners and all those who have the responsibility of counselling

chief executives and leaders at all levels of the society must be aware and be able to interact competently with most of the modern communication tools especially the computer, global e-mail, voice-mail, world-wide video conferencing, teleconferencing and the seamless web of communication networks. In doing this, attention must still be paid to our people in the villages using the traditional media they are accustomed to. That is how to adapt communication technology with common sense.

Intellectualise Public Relations

The professional public relations practitioners must be made to possess the minimal educational and training requirements prescribed for licensing and accreditation. All those that have passed this stage must go through some refresher courses and made to upgrade their knowledge where this is lacking.

Relevance to the Society

In a situation where Nigeria embarks on a white-washing exercise with foreign consultants in the tow — What would they do that could surpass Nigerian Consultants? The public relations professional of the future must be able to address issues truthfully. Public relations cannot be apolitical — it must take definite positions on all national issues based on sound judgement.

Public Relations and Culture

It must support the arts and cultural projects because it is one of the surest ways the corporate bodies and business conglomerates would be judged in future. If they do this, it can only strengthen their brand recognition and make their targets better placed to receive their products and services.

Social Responsibility

For some inexplicable reasons, all the multinationals prospecting for oil in Nigeria are becoming more and more negligent in their responsibilities to their immediate communities. We hear them engage in self-adulation while the people concerned are groaning. This means they have much more to do. Even their shareholders are

shouting foul. There is no amount of money they have spent on these communities that can compensate for the damage done to the environment. Let them apply a standard near what obtains elsewhere in the developed world.

Misconceptions

Three of such problem areas would be highlighted here. The popular statement that the chief executive officer is the chief image maker of an organisation is honorary and should not be an excuse for usurping these highly professional function. For the avoidance of doubt, public relations is not bribe giving and taking — if you must give don't call it public relations. Public relations is truth telling and not deceit. Employers requiring the services of public relations executives should not confuse them with journalists. The two professions are very distinct and should be treated as such. "Journalism relations" gives corporate employers heartache and their expectations are not attained.

Looking into the Future

The practitioners should decongest their clotted memories of archaic ideas of how things were done and those methods that have been overtaken by events. Begin a realistic journey today to the realisation that good employers in the coming years would phase out in-house professionals and use niche specialists in conjunction with the bigger consortiums since this promises to yield better dividends in terms of optimisation of their costs.

Conclusion

I, therefore, recommend the instructive statement made by Edward Bernays during his ninetieth birthday celebration (and sixty-two years in the practice of public relations) as the guiding principle for would-be public relations authors in the next millennium:

As to the future, as long as democratic society lasts, the public relations profession will grow. Mutual understanding is basic to society's well being. Advice and counsel based on the social sciences will grow. Public relations counseling should continue a great safeguard of a free democratic competitive society, in which people power remains dominant.

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