

IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Awofadeju, Peter Olayinka

Mass Communication Department

Achievers University, Owo, Ondo state.

awofadejuolayinka@yahoo.com

07032078695

Philip O. Ewuola

Mass Communication Department,
Osun State Polytechnic, Iree.

E-Mail: philipewuola@yahoo.com

Telephone: 08060028200

Abstract

This study examines the impact of social media on public relations practice, using the staff members of Osun State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC), Osogbo as its population of study. Survey method of gathering data was adopted for this study by distributing well-developed questionnaire to elicit responses from the respondents, the sample size of which was 108. The findings clearly showed that social media platforms like instant messaging, social bookmarking, photo-sharing, wikis, Facebook, etc. have had a great and significant impact on how public relations practitioners communicate as it makes it possible for people and media organizations to have seamless interactions. In addition, social media has enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives by impacting on public relations knowledge, enhancing relationships with people, sharing information on the latest innovations on the tools and methods of public relations, and also helps in shaping the attitude of those in public relations practice.

Keywords: Public Relations, Social Media, Communicate, Instant Messaging, Information

Background to the Study

The use of social media globally has gained an upward trend in the world of communication, with Twitter and Facebook as the most used platforms (Dunbar, Arnaboldi, Conti, & Passarella, 2015), and organizations have gained mileage by using it to communicate in a much more effective and fast way with their customers about their businesses as well as responding to queries and questions (Coombs & Holladay, 2010: 66; Carroll & Buchholtz, 2014:23), hence it is important to examine the impact they have on the public relations practice. Research has shown that organizations have taken up the use of social media as a communication tool for marketing and public relations messages (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007). Thus, the development of social media as communication platform has drawn numerous interests from researchers in the field of public relations. For example, prior study on the utilization of social media as a tool for organization's public relations strategy has been undertaken (Briones et al., 2011).

Jefkins (1998, p.6) defines public relations as consisting of planned communication, outwards and inwards, between an organization and its publics for the purpose of achieving specific objectives concerning mutual understanding. Public relations practitioners have traditionally used "old media" to communicate to its publics but "new media", a relatively new phenomenon, has gained currency as a tool to be used for communication in many organizations as technology is rapidly changing too.

According to Paul Gillin (2008), senior fellow, Society for New Communications Research, social media are giving rise to a new style of communications that is characterized by conversation and community. It is important to understand these new channels of communication in order to effectively utilize them as a means to communicate with the public as well as to know what implications they may have for the public relations practice. In order to implement these

tactics effectively, it is equally important for journalism and public relations programs on college campuses to provide relevant curriculum for its future practitioners.

This present work attempts to increase the understanding of the impact of social media on the public relations practice through analyzing the existing body of knowledge. The study will also investigate the impact that social media has had on how public relations practitioners communicate and the modes of social media platforms that are used by public relations officers. In addition, the study will examine how the use of social media has enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives and the factors that determine the preference of social media tools employed in public relations practice, it will also determine the number of people that can be reached by public relations officers through social media. The outcome of this study is hence beneficial for future researchers in this area of research. It also benefits organizations and practitioners, because it demonstrates the importance of social media to the practice of public relations.

Statement of the Problem

The rise in the use of social media around the world has led to the introduction of social media into many public relations practices. It is unarguably true that this new form of communication is growing at an incredibly rapid pace, it is therefore important to analyze the impact that social and other new media have had on the overall public relations practice, as well as how universities are incorporating this new media into their curriculum.

This study aims to examine how public relations practitioners are using social media; the impact and implications that this new media has had on the public relations profession, and how public relations professionals value these new media as a means to communicate with the public.

Objectives of the Study

- (1) To investigate the impact that social media has had on how public relations practitioners communicate.
- (2) To examine the modes of social media platforms that are used by public relations officers.
- (3) To examine how the use of social media has enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives.
- (4) To investigate the factors that determine the preference of social media tools employed in public relations practice.
- (5) To determine the number of people that can be reached by public relations officers through social media.

Research Questions

- (1) What impact has social media had on how public relations practitioners communicate?
- (2) What are the modes of social media platforms used by public relations officers?
- (3) How has the use of social media enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives?
- (4) What factors determine the preference of social media tools employed in public relations practice?
- (5) What number of people can be reached by public relations officers through social media?

Review of Related Literature

Concept of Social Media

When many people think of social media, they think of Facebook and Twitter. However, social media do not just include social networking sites, but also blogs, forums, message boards, photo sharing, podcasts, RSS (really simple syndication), search engine marketing, video sharing, Wikis, social networks, professional networks, and micro-blogging sites (Wright and Hinson,

2009). As stated by Wright and Hinson (2009) and reported by the International Association of Business Communicators, “more than half of all Internet users have joined a social network, social networks have become the number one platform for creating and sharing content and nearly 75 percent of all Internet users have read a blog” (Young, 2009).

Although social media are impacting the way many organizations communicate and more and more people are becoming active with these new channels, the definition of what social media encapsulates is undetermined due to the rise of many different forms. No two people are defining this media the same way. A number of books have explored how blogs, social media and other new technologies are changing the way organizations communicate with strategic publics such as employees, customers, stockholders, communities, governments and other stakeholders. Weber (2007) suggests the communications world is dramatically moving in a digital direction and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not.

Scott (2008. p.8) believes, “one of the coolest things about the Web is that when an idea takes off, it can propel a brand or a company to seemingly instant fame and fortune”. Scott also points out that although communicating via the Web usually is free - as opposed to purchasing space through traditional advertising only a small number of public relations practitioners are effectively using blogs and other social media when communicating with their strategic publics.

Breakenridge (2009) believes powerful new social media tools offer unprecedented new opportunities in a day when most traditional methods of communication will not reach many audiences; much less convince them to do anything.

Types of social media

Social media is classified into these categories: Internet forums, weblogs, social blogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures and video. Since social media represent a young and emerging set of technologies there are many different thoughts and opinions when it comes to categorization. With the availability of so many social media sites, obviously some receive much more web traffic than others. For example, popular social networking sites such as Facebook (www.facebook.com), MySpace (www.myspace.com), and popular video sharing site YouTube (www.youtube.com) all are ranked by web information service on the list of the world's must accessed websites.

Wikipedia is a free, internet-based, online encyclopedia inscribed with the collective efforts of volunteers and easily accessed by anyone so long as there is internet connection. Blogs are other representations of the social network sites which allow users the chance to publish and take part in different conversations through the internet (Weber, 2009). They are essential for businesses as they help build reputation especially in the event of positive blogging and can also be destructive in the case of negative blogging. Content communities grant people the chance exchange media information between one another.

The social media sites follow content communities in the assessment of the types of social media. With the help of such types, people connect and exchange information, photos, instant messages and video clips. Also, users can send out invitations to others. Twitter and Facebook happen to be among the two common and popular social media sites in the world and as a result, they are used by many companies to reach out to clients and display their commodities or advertise (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Instant messaging that are most commonly used all over the world nowadays are WhatsApp, Snapchat and messenger. They have been categorized as social media too because of the level of interactivity. Therefore, this part informs that social media will be used in this study in the sense of networking, interactivity and information sharing like photos, videos and notes. It also shows how these media intertwine together.

Concept of Public Relations

Public relations helps to establish and maintain mutual lines of communications, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and the public; it informs the management of problems or issues, helps management to be kept informed on and responsive to public opinion, it defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve public interest, helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and uses research and sound and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools (Harlow, 1976, p.36).

Public Relations and Social Media

According to Larry Weber (2009), as stated by Wright & Hinson (2009), “The communications world is dramatically moving in a digital direction and those who understand this transformation will communicate much more effectively than those who do not.” Public relations practitioners are in the business of communicating with publics and therefore must understand this transformation in order to communicate effectively.

However, due to the fast-paced growth of social media, it is difficult for these professionals, as well as the universities training future professionals, to keep current. Blogs, for example, are increasing in popularity because they give independence from traditional editors and media gate

keeping (Pavlik, 2007). The use of blogs as a means to gather information is increasing as well as the posting of blogs to better position oneself in the eyes of the public. In the past, public relations practitioners were responsible for packaging content and then distributing it to the media in hopes of being published. Today, practitioners are still responsible for packaging the content; however, they are now able to publish the content themselves through blogs, social networks and other online media outlets. Practitioners still send information to the traditional media, but they are now also able to talk directly to the public, view the public's responses, and act accordingly. For example, when a consumer tweets about a bad experience, the company can view these comments and respond immediately to provide more direct service to its customers.

Importance of Social Media to Public Relations

The new technologies currently embraced by PR practitioners are mainly social media sites such as Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook. The application of the social media is at a very fast rate. A few years ago, blogs and podcasts were the popular means of communication by PR experts though the social networking sites were employed by nearly 24% of the practitioners (Eyrich, Padman, & Sweetser, 2008). Currently, the social media is regarded as an integral part of PR campaigns. The results of a study conducted by Mogos (2011) showed that social media humanizes a company. The author says that social media puts a face to a company because people want to interact with other people. Therefore, organizations adopt social media usage in order to humanize its interaction with stakeholders. According to the author, organizations that adopt social media usage are more likely to reduce the social gap between the business and consumers.

The potential effect of the social networking sites on PR is immense. Yin in 1994 pointed out that staff blogs have significant and unlimited capability to improve dialogue and aid in the

promotion of products and services and pave way for two-way means of communication. Oneya (2010) study on impact of social media on public relations had similar results, in addition, he established that Social media is used though with challenges like lack of internet accessibility, skills, reliability.

From the foregoing, the use of social media is on the increase among organizations in the world, causing the urge to adopt social media as a tactic to improving public relations in the public administration. Cardenas (2013) highlights that for social media to be successful in government, it should advance the department mission, social technology objectives, department goals and activities framework. This is as result of this new form of communication growing at a faster pace. It is important to fill in the gap by assessing its use in public relations practice in government, going by what various scholars refer to be the concerns/benefits in line with new trends in the Public relations practice.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of technological Determinism relates to the studies conducted by Marshall McLuhan who states that we are living in a new age of technology that has never been experienced before. Studying media and culture in England, McLuhan found himself trying to decipher the media environment that surrounded him. The people that lived through the inventions of the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph saw drastic improvements in the way people were able to communicate. Sometimes known as the "Oracle of the Electronic Age," McLuhan is telling people that the new electronic media is changing the way people think, act, and feel. McLuhan suspects that the current technological environment, when looked back upon, will be seen as a major turning point in the history of communication.

It is a theory that presumes the media is the key element in mass communication processes that evoked widespread controversy during the 1960s mostly due to the colourful writing of Marshall McLuhan. a professor of English. McLuhan declared that each medium alters our physical environment, imposing on us a particular pattern of perceiving and thinking that controls us to an extent we scarcely suspect. (Emery, et al 1991, p.56)

Research Methodology

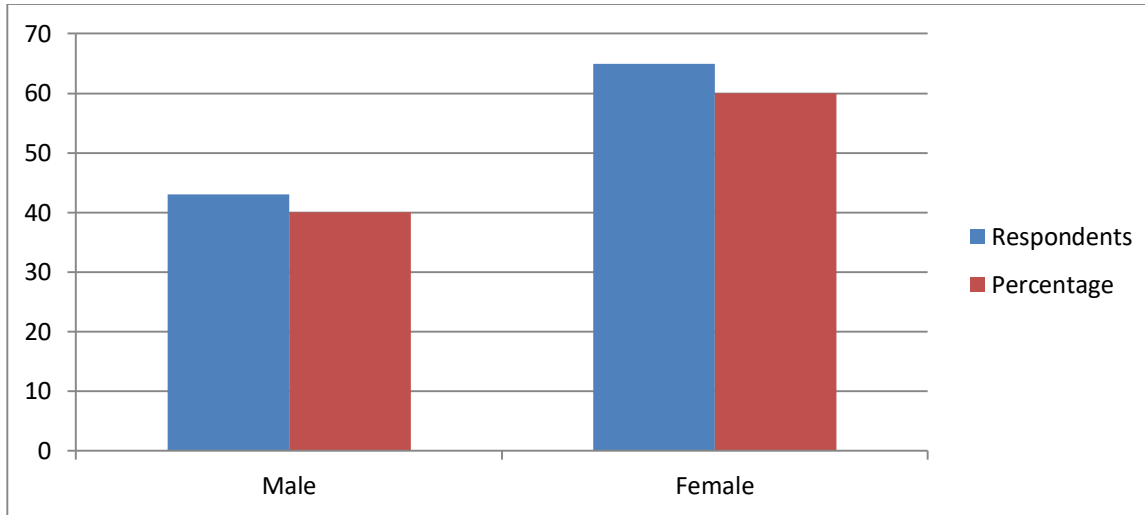
The research design adopted for this work is survey research method so as to be able to sample large number of people on the subject matter. The instrument of the study is questionnaire which will be given and retrieved as soon as the respondents are through with the questions within it.

The population for this study is the entire staff members of Osun State Broadcasting Corporation (OSBC), Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria, the total number of which is one hundred and eight (108) staff members. Due to the fewness of the population being studied, the total enumeration sampling method will be adopted for this study; total enumeration sampling allows the use of the whole population when the available population is few. Hence, the sample size used for this work is the entire one hundred and eight (108) staff members of the media organization.

The questionnaire will be administered on the respondents and retrieved within two weeks of distributing them, taking the submission deadline and exigency of the study into consideration.

PRESENTATION AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Sex distribution of respondents



The chart above shows that 43 respondents representing 40% of their total number were males, while 65 students representing 60% of them were females.

Graph 1

What impact has social media had on how public relations practitioners communicate?

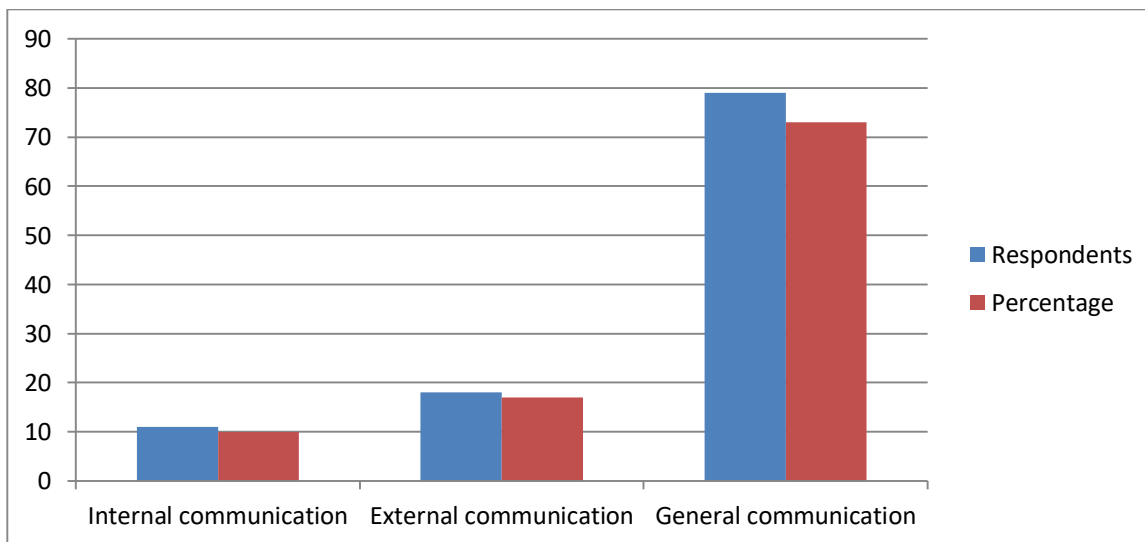


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows that 79 people representing 73% of the total respondents agreed that social media has changed the way media organizations communicate generally.

Graph 2

What are the modes of social media platforms used by public relations officers?

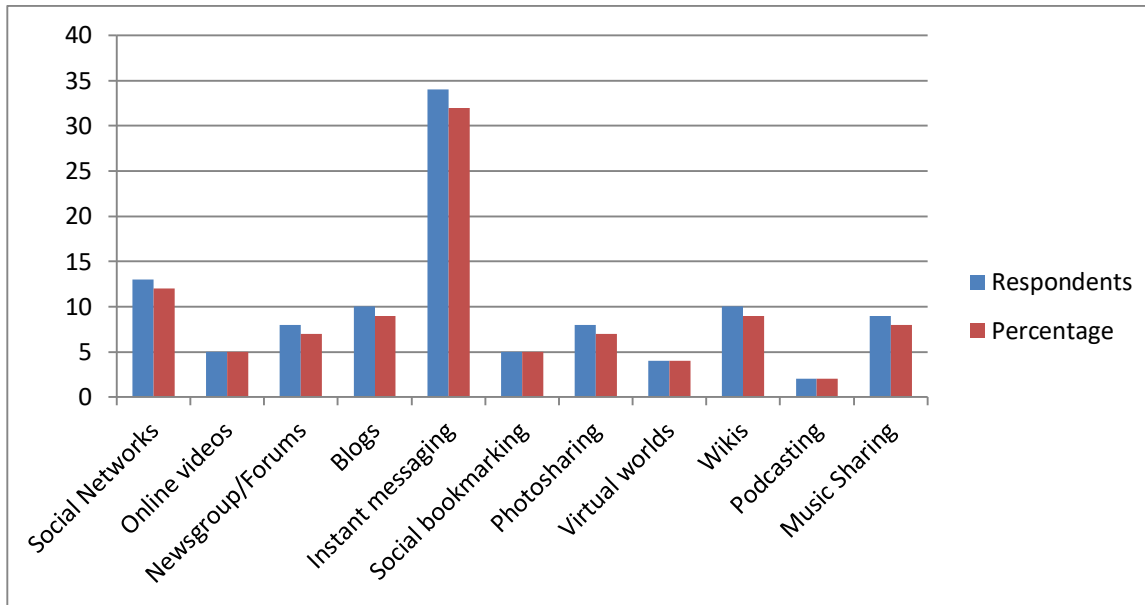


Figure 2

Figure 2 shows that the modes of social media platforms used by public relations officers encompasses Social Networks, Online videos, Newsgroup/Forums, Blogs, Instant messaging, Social bookmarking, Photo-sharing, Virtual worlds, Wikis, Podcasting, and Music Sharing. However, 34 people representing 32% of the total respondents agreed that instant messaging platform was more utilized.

Graph 3

How has the use of social media enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives?

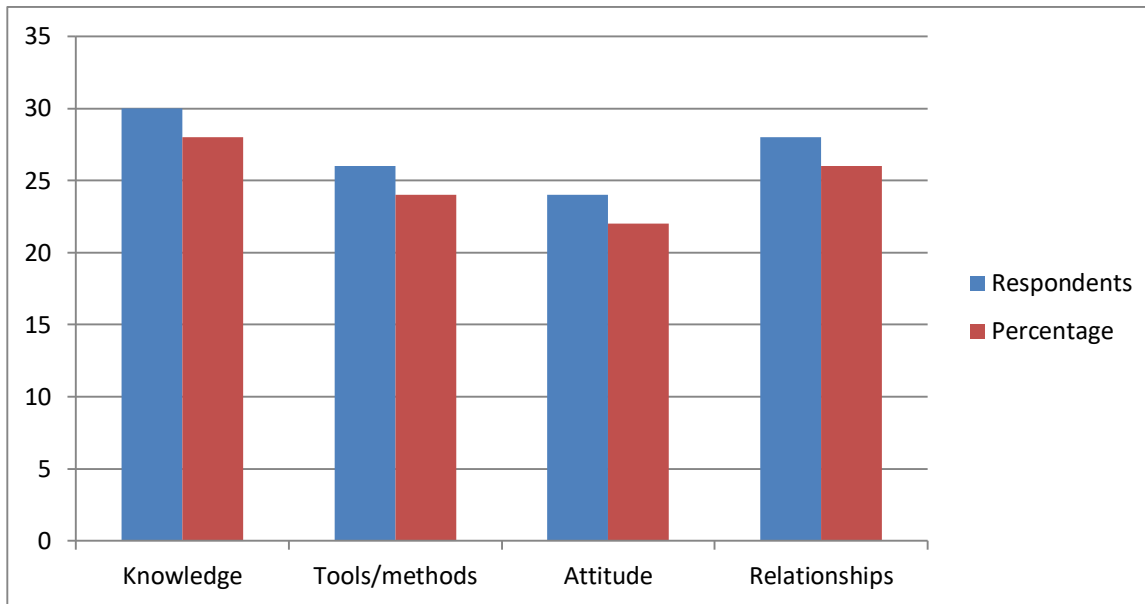


Figure 3

Figure 3 showed that the respondents generally felt that social media has impacted most on public relations knowledge (28%), followed by relationships with people (26%), the tools and methods of public relations (24%) and attitude (22%).

Graph 4

What factors determine the preference of social media tools employed in public relations practice?

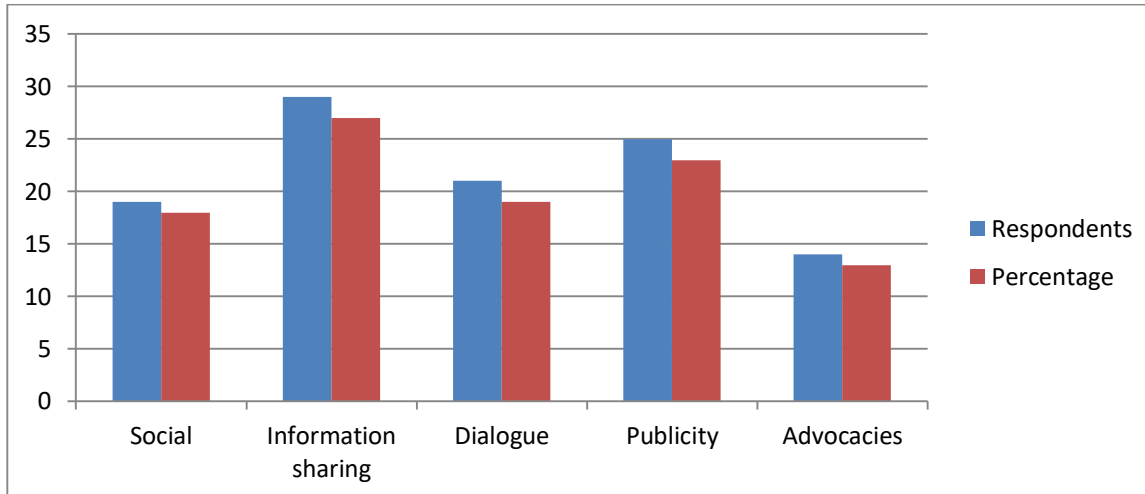


Figure 4

Figure 4 shows that the respondents indicated highest preference for information sharing, followed by publicity, dialogue, social and advocacies being the least. Many of the respondents agreed that the social media were used to pass information on services, policies, events and others that their department at work is involved with.

Graph 5

What number of people can be reached by public relations officers through social media?

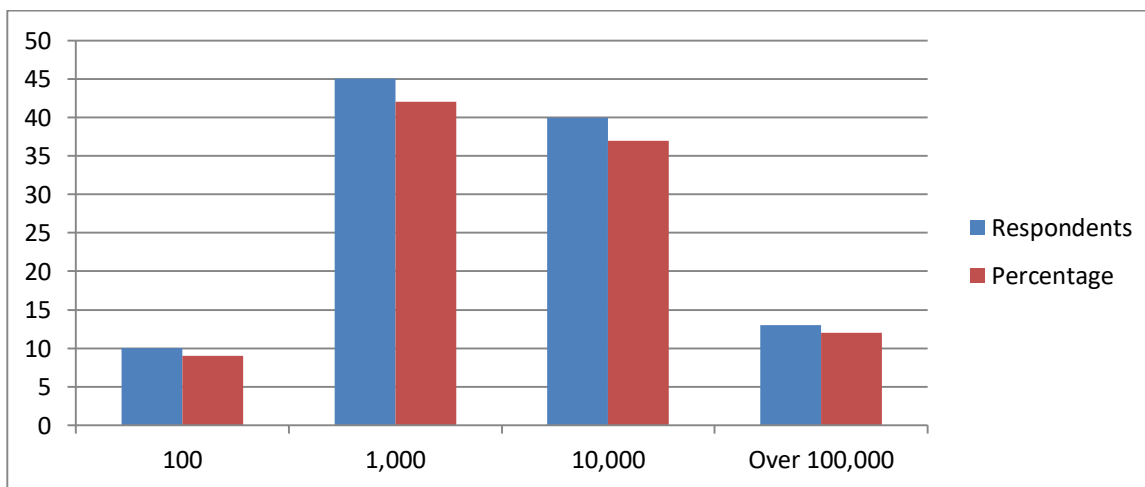


Figure 5

Figure 5 shows that the number of people who can be reached by social media as revealed by the study was ambiguous. During interviews, most of the respondents whose works were related to customer service and PRO responded that in a day they could have inquiries from about 1000 people seeking clarifications on services, procedures, and feedback. This implies that the inquiries that they receive through emails, instant messaging, Facebook, Instagram, etc. on daily basis can sometimes even go beyond 1000, which could be what the respondents based their figure on.

Discussion of Findings

Graph 1: Majority of the respondents agreed that social media has had a great and significant impact on how public relations practitioners communicate as it has changed the way media organizations communicate generally. One of such impacts of social media is that it now makes it possible for people to interact with media organizations, especially radio and television houses, to contribute to live programs and also make enquiry on anything that appears not to be clear to them.

Graph 2: The modes of social media platforms used by public relations officers encompasses Social Networks, Online videos, Newsgroup/Forums, Blogs, Instant messaging, Social bookmarking, Photo-sharing, Virtual worlds, Wikis, Podcasting, and Music Sharing. It was however observed from the responses of the respondents that majority of them still agreed that instant messaging platform was more utilized, the reason for this is not far-fetched; instant messaging has become so popular nowadays that almost everyone that has mobile devices can utilize its advantages, devices like mobile phones, tablets, laptop computers, etc. are made such that they have the facilities that make it possible to access instant messaging and media houses have now incorporated the use of instant messaging into the ways that people can interact with

them. With availability of internet access, various apps like Facebook, skype, whatsapp, snapchats, etc. provide the means to have live video and text-based chats.

Graph 3: The respondents believed that the use of social media has enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives; firstly, by impacting most on public relations knowledge, followed by relationships with people, and also the tools and methods of public relations, and lastly the attitude of those in public relations practice. Technological advancement that brought about social media has really helped a great deal in the area of acquiring public relations knowledge; internet has made it so easy to for people to tap into the advantage of online encyclopedia where several of kinds of information can be obtained, and information about public relations and its practices are not also exempted. Information about new innovations in term of public relations tools and methods which are yet be known to all and sundry can quickly and easily be obtained with the aid of social media. Social media has also enhanced the achievement of public relation objectives in terms of relationships with people and attitude of public relations practitioners; in the time past, internet was not easily accessible to people and so it was difficult to easily have interactions with people remotely, the only way this could be done was through telephone, fax or telegram which were relatively expensive and unreliable, internet and social media have removed all these hurdles nowadays because information sharing through social media is faster, cheaper, safer, and more reliable, it should however be noted that good attitude especially towards the general populace is the hallmark of a good public relations practitioner. It is against this backdrop that social media has made it easy for public relations practitioners to have good relationship with people.

Graph 4: The responses of the respondents to the question “What factors determine the preference of social media tools employed in public relations practice?” indicated highest

preference for information sharing, followed by publicity, dialogue, social and advocacies being the least. Many of the respondents agreed that the social media were used to pass information on services, policies, events and others that their department at work is involved with. Social media provide the means of passing information across from one department to another within an organization, it also allows for sharing information across various organizations and between individuals. Aside from information sharing, it is also used for publicity and advocacies which many online marketers and other stakeholders are now making use of to reach their target audience. Social media is also used for dialogue; instant messaging is the most used platform for this as it provides the means to have a live chat that allows having instant conversations; this may be in form of video chat or text-based chat.

Graph 5: The number of people who can be reached by social media as revealed by the study was ambiguous. During interviews, most of the respondents whose works were related to customer service and PRO responded that in a day they could have inquiries from about 1000 people seeking clarifications on services, procedures, and feedback. This implies that the inquiries that they receive through emails, instant messaging, Facebook, Instagram, etc. on daily basis can sometimes even go beyond 1000, which could be what the respondents based their figure on.

Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

Summary

Social media platforms like instant messaging, social bookmarking, photo-sharing, wikis, Facebook, etc. have had a great and significant impact on how public relations practitioners communicate as it makes it possible for people and media organizations to have seamless interactions. In addition, social media has enhanced the achievement of public relations objectives by impacting on public relations knowledge, enhancing relationships with people, sharing information on the latest innovations on the tools and methods of public relations, and also helps in shaping the attitude of those in public relations practice. The factors that determine the preference of social media tools employed in public relations practice include information sharing, publicity, dialogue, social and advocacies.

Conclusion

It is evident from this study that social media has indeed had great impacts on the public relations practice as it has changed the way media organizations generally communicate, be it internally or externally. Public relations practitioners have the opportunity to reach their target audience remotely through the use of social media, unlike in the olden days when the only ways they could do so were through telephone, fax, and telegram which were relatively expensive and unreliable, today instant messaging has made it possible to have live interactions thereby making it easy to receive response to one's inquiry without delays. Aside from the ability to reach and interact with a very large number of people at once, it has also had impact on how public relations practitioners acquire knowledge, enhanced good relationship with people, serves as a medium of obtaining information about latest innovations on the tools and methods of public

relations practice, and it has also helped shaped the attitude of those in public relations practice too.

Recommendations

As there are no measures to control the information available on social media, it is therefore viewed as being untrustworthy, inaccurate and not credible; it is recommended that more research should be conducted on those using these new media outlets, especially those who publish blogs. Another track would be to investigate how to raise credibility, perhaps through code or oversight.

Although, journalists, bloggers should be held to the same standards for the content they post online; however, because of the controversial nature of this topic, a recommendation would be for a credible organization to form a bloggers code of ethics. This organization would then give its seal of approval to certain blogs and these blogs would bear this symbol in order to inform the public of its attainment of high ethical standards.

The growth of social media have led to the production of numerous resources that can be used to assist in the measurement of social media campaigns. It is recommended that public relations practitioners tap into these resources and begin taking appropriate measure of their social media efforts.

Finally, higher institutions of learning in Nigeria should implement stronger curriculum that better prepares future public relations professionals to use, implement and measure social media.

References

- Breakenridge, I. (2009). *PR 2.0: New media, new tools, new audiences*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Briones, R. L., Kuch, B., Liu, B. F. & Jin, Y. (2011), "Keeping up with the Digital Age: How the American Red Cross uses Social Media to Build Relationships", *Public Relations Review*, 37(1): 37-43.
- Cardenas, K. A. (2013). *Social media use in local government agencies: An implementation guide for public officials*. Thesis: California State University. Sacramento.
- Carroll, A. & Buchholtz, A. (2014), *Business and Society: Ethics, sustainability, and stakeholder management*, Canada: Nelson Education.
- Coombs, W. T. and Holladay, S. J. (2010), *PR Strategy and Application: Managing Influence*, United States: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Dunbar, R. I., Arnaboldi, V., Conti, M. & Passarella, A. (2015), "The Structure of Online Social Networks Mirrors Those in the Offline World", *Social Networks*, 43(5): 39-47.
- Ellison, N. B., Steinfield, C. & Lampe, C. (2007), "The Benefits of Facebook "Friends:" Social Capital and College Students' Use of Online Social Network Sites", *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 12(4): 1143-1168.
- Emery L., Philip H. A. and Warren K. Agee (1991) *Introduction to Mass Communication*. 10th ed. Harper Collins Publishers. New York (p.56-57).
- Eyrich, N., Padman, M. L., & Sweetser, K. D. (2008). PR practitioners' use of social media tools and communication technology. *Public Relations Review*, 34(4), 412-414.
- Gillin, P. (2008). "New Media, New Influencers and Implications for the Public Relations Profession", Excerpted from *JOURNAL OF NEW COMMUNICATIONS RESEARCH*, Vol. II/Issue 2, retrieved from <http://palliativecare.issuelab.org/resources>
- Harlow, R. F. (1976). "Building a Public Relations Definition." *Public Relations Review*. 2. no. 49 Winter 1976: 34-41.
- Jefkins, F. (1998). *Public Relations*. 5th Edition. Great Britain: Bell and Bain Ltd. p.6-7.
- Kaplan, A. M. and Haenlein, M. (2010), "Users of the World, Unite! The Challenges and Opportunities of Social Media", *Business Horizons*, 53(1): 59-68.
- Mogos, S. (2011). The impact of social media on business performance. *Canadian journal of business and marketing*, 23(8), 127 – 145.
- Oneya, F. P. (2010). *The impact of social media on public relations practice*, MA Thesis. University of Nairobi.

- Pavlik, J. (2007). Mapping the consequences of technology on public relations. Retrieved November 30, 2009, from www.instituteofpr.org.
- Scott, D.M. (2008a). The New Rules of Viral Marketing: How Word-of-Mouse Spreads Your Ideas for Free. An e-book available at http://www.davidmeermanscott.com/products_ebooks.htm
- Weber, L. (2007). Marketing to the Social Web: How Digital Customer Communities Built Your Business. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Weber, L. (2009). Marketing to the Social Web. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey.
- Wright, D., & Hinson, M. (2009). An analysis of the increasing impact of social and other new media on public relations practice. A paper presented to 12th annual International Public Relations Research Conference.
- Wright, D., & Hinson, M. (2009). An updated look at the impact of social media on public relations practice. Public Relations Journal, III(2).
- Wright, D., & Hinson, M. (2009). Examining how public relations practitioners actually are using social media. Public Relations Journal, III(3).
- Yin, R.K. (1994): Case Study Research: Design and Methods, Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Young, R. (2009). Social media: How new forms of communications are changing job search and career management: Be Heard. Newsletter of the Toronto Chapter of the International Association of Business Communicators. January-February.