

An Assessment of Kenya's Journalists Versus Public Relations Practitioners Relationship: Is It for Convenience or Old Age Rivalry Compounded by Inherited Mistrust?

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ABSTRACT

While both Journalists and Public Relations practitioners play a distinct role in the Kenyan society like is the case elsewhere, their professional relationship seem to be marred by turbulent because of perceptions brought about by inbuilt hostility, mistrust and suspicion when they carry out their work even though at the face value, everything look normal. This is because the professionals have no option but tolerate each other and work towards achieving their organization's goals. This is a purposive survey carried out amongst Journalists in Kenya's Capital, Nairobi. It involved practicing journalists working in the mainstream media between November 2016 and April 2017. The research revealed that though all looked rosy in the eyes of the public, the two had strained relationship despite their make-believe symbiotic relationship.

Key words: *Journalists, Public Relations, Relationship, Convenience, Old Age*

1. INTRODUCTION

The practice of public relations has been riddled by many challenges with various people in different practices seeing it majorly as a gate-keeping profession. This has made it win many friends and foes alike as it struggles to find its footing. And there is no doubt; it still has a long way to go. It is these perceptions, misconceptions and skepticisms associated with it that have continued to follow it despite its importance that have forced many studies be carried out to establish its relations with other professions, this study being part of it. According to Asunta (2016), PR professionalism's core values include: respect, responsibility and reflexivity. Indeed, it cannot be over-emphasized that Journalists and Public Relations (PR) practitioners play an integral role in society, the former seen as the mirror through which people appreciate daily events and happenings in the media, with the later viewed as image shapers of the establishments in which they serve. In the eyes of the general public though, the two are perceived to complement each other during the course of their duties, but do they?

In real life, the relationship between Journalists and Public Relations practitioners is both complex and ambiguous. An article published on PR daily on May 2016 concludes that the ability to combine traditional PR skills with digital know-how can unlock the media relations kingdom and solidify your rapport with journalists. The general belief is that the two play complimentary roles even though to others, the union is suspect. A segment of society knowledgeable to the working relationship between the two, see a relationship that is characterized by cooperation and conflict in equal measure, with each making claim of how important they are to the other.

Journalists believe, for instance, that PR have no option but dependent on them for positive publicity of their establishments' events for corporate image, while on the other hand, PR practitioners believe more strongly that the information they provide to the journalists enable them to perform their duties more adequately without which they could be out of business. It is this co-relation that PR practitioners draw the conclusion that what exists between them is nothing other than a symbiotic relationship. This feeling has been passed on from generation to generation and there are no signs that this will be wiped out soon from their minds

Anyone observing closely how the two relate will notice that their paths have in one way or the other often crossed, creating a love-hate relationship, at times symbiotic, with suspicion, distrust and skepticism. In fact, behind this belief is a perceived perception of a rivalry that spans decades of professional haggling. The Journalist getting the brunt of accusation for being destructive, only interested in reporting what is controversial and negative about their organizations. The public relations practitioners on the other hand gets the blame for 'hoarding' useful information - good or bad, that would be suitable for public consumption. In fact, Journalists accuse PR practitioners for withholding 'real newsworthy information', and instead providing 'sugar - coated' side of their stories to favor their establishments. This love - hate - relationship commonly experienced in Kenya, as has equally been the case in other parts of the world, has remained a persistent 'cold professional war' even though at their 'sunset days' most Journalists retreat to public relations as their most preferred retirement career.

It is a conceivable fact that the roles the two professions play are enormous, with the basic function of journalism being to inform the public with "true", factual, accurate, independently corroborated information with careful analysis of situations and events of public interest as they unfold. Likewise, PR on the other hand too, is characterized by a concern to provide publicity of a client. In fact, in the case of PR, the truth of what is said as it has been found is not as significant as the ability of the story to entertain. This is where media relations come into play. The relationship of the two practitioners is therefore critical for the practical reason that both careers have a significant influence on the modern world. However, Charron (1989) feels the independence is even more crucial for public relations practitioners whose work consists of disbursing information about the source they represent in the great game of "news" making. There is no doubt that unless they collaborate with the press there is no way they can succeed in their job. Sigal (1973), Tunstall (1970), (1971), Gans (1979), Tuchman (1978), Nimmo (1964), Gandy (1982), Grossman and Roucke (1976) collectively agree though that the interdependence of these players is based on mutual interest and collaboration.

It is evident therefore that, public relations practitioners especially now, depend less on journalists for the simple reason that there are other reliable channels of publicity like social media. Similarly, the journalists equally feel they are able to obtain the required information elsewhere. Though the two parties are seen to be complimentary, they are in fact partially so. Journalists are intermediaries between social interests and the general public, but their ties of loyalty and solidarity are always towards the general public, with their key objective being that of keeping the public informed. Their cooperation can only be seen from the interdependence, with the dimension of conflict arising from the struggle to control the distribution of the news. Despite this old age rivalry, it has remained quite common to find most journalists moving from their practice to become corporate public relations officers, corporate communications officers, public or corporate affairs of information officers, depending on the titling of the office. This can

be attested by the fact, according to DeLorme and Fedler (2003) and Valentini and Falconi (2008) that many corporate public relations practitioners have a journalism education or training.

Sinaga and Callison (2008) attribute the transition of journalists turning to public relations as having been necessitated by changes in media markets and journalism practices. Among other reasons for the move, according to Valentini and Falconi (2008), is the general higher salary of public relations practitioners, more stable contracts, and overall, a higher market demand for such profession than for journalists. Most establishments worry more about corporate image and people's general perceptions than the news churned out by journalists which in most cases is not so favourable. Similar trends have been cited in other countries by Ihlen and Pallas (2004) indicating that several organizations have in-house former journalists who exploit journalistic news conventions and are more effective in their media relations. Their understanding of what each one of them does is another difference that has been cited in explaining their relationship. Even though there is an understanding of what the other does or should do, suspicion still abound. A study carried out by Valentini Chiara (2014) for instance, claimed Journalists' social representations of what constituted public relations were a bit different from what public relations practitioners believed. According to journalists, he says, public relations is mostly about media relations and promoting the interests of their clients, sometimes not in a transparent manner. On the other hand, public relations practitioners perceive themselves as a strategic function in support of organizations' stakeholder management and reputation. His respondents, however, agree on the main roles and functions of journalists.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

There have been varied perceptions about the existing relationship between Journalists and PR practitioners globally, with many describing it from different standpoints. Some have described it as a relationship of convenience, with others terming it as an age long rivalry compounded by inherited mistrust from time immemorial, making it a constant subject of study by researchers in different parts of the world.

Based on this perception, a six months study was carried out in Kenya between November 2016 and April 2017, with the aim of ascertaining the actual position about the relationship between, especially practicing Journalists plying their trade in Kenya's mainstream media and their PR counterparts. It sought to establish whether their relationship was based on convenience, trust or possible mistrust and whether that too is anchored on a historical rivalry that existed from time immemorial.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Generally, the relationship between Journalists and PR practitioners has been quite ambivalent. There seem to be blame games between them even though in the eyes of the public the two complement each other in their roles. It was for this reason that a six months study was carried out for the purpose of ascertaining the relationship Journalists and their counterparts (PR) at work places had. The study was carried out in Nairobi the Capital City of Kenya, a Country in the East African region with a population of about 45 Million. Kenya gained her independence in 1963 from the British colonialists.

A total of 250 questionnaires were randomly sent out to practicing Journalists based in Nairobi from some of Kenya's mainstream media namely; *Daily Nation Newspaper*, *The Standard Newspaper*, *The Star Newspaper*, *People Daily Newspaper*, and the *British Broadcasting Corporation* (BBC). Out of the total, 201 were retrieved and analyzed. Survey method was used

to collect data where questionnaires were randomly sent to respondents. Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was utilized to analyze the quantitative data with descriptive statistical techniques such as frequency, percentage, valid percentage as well as cumulative percentages put into use. Further, secondary, qualitative data (literature review) was obtained from books, journals and newspapers, as well as qualitative data that was generated from narration using words from some of the respondents

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In establishing how Journalists perceived Public Relations practitioners and how they related, the following was the feedback solicited from various Journalists working in several media organizations in Kenya:

1: Journalists General Perceptions about Public Relation practice in Kenya?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Excellent	23	11.4	11.7	11.7
	Good	85	42.3	43.4	55.1
	Fair	63	31.3	32.1	87.2
	Poor	25	12.4	12.8	100.0
	Total	196	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	5	2.5		
Total		201	100.0		

A look at the general perception Journalists have about PR practitioners revealed a somewhat positive impression, even though 12.8% (25 respondents) had an outright poor perception about the practice which clearly reflected on their relationship. The study had 85 respondents (43.4%) of the Journalists stating that their perception about PR was good, 23 of them (11.7%) as excellent, and 63 of them (32.1%) claiming it was fair. It can clearly be deduced from the study that all is still not as rosy as people would think considering that they were expected to operate on a symbiotic relationship given the complimentary roles they are expected to play.

4.2: In your view, do you think PR is critical in your professional duties as a Journalist?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	166	82.6	84.7	84.7
	No	30	14.9	15.3	100.0
	Total	196	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	5	2.5		
Total		201	100.0		

There is no doubt that a large percentage totaling 84.7% appreciated the role played by the public relations practitioners. According to the study, 166 respondents (84.7%) felt PR played a pivotal role in the course of their duty, with only 30 respondents adding up to 15.3% claiming PR did not aid much in their professional duties. The small percentage of 15.3% is a confirmation of

either mistrust between them, or disregard for the PR profession due to lack of knowledge of what PR does, or total ignorance of the profession's usefulness.

Whether PR in Kenya has an enforced code of ethics or not has indeed been a contentious discussion. A code of ethic is an important part of any work or profession. It is through it that proper positive growth and development can be achieved, as it is a system that inculcates moral principles that govern the appropriate conduct of a person or profession. This is why it has often been said in business circles that maintaining good ethics is considered consistent with the principles of correct moral conduct. According to the Journalists interviewed during the study, 54.6% (107) of those interviewed believed PR in Kenya did not have any enforced code of ethic, compared to only 27.0% (53 respondents) who responded in the affirmative. There were 18.4% (36 respondents) who stated that they had no idea whether the enforced code existed or not. This has been an on-going debate in the country. Unlike in other professions like medicine, law, engineering, architecture and even journalism among others, where anyone practicing has to belong to their professional organizations, the same is not true about PR in Kenya and in most countries globally. In most countries in the developing world, Kenya included, being a member of the professional organization is optional. This has continued to raise eye-brows as to whether the practice is credible or passes the litmus test to be a profession, sending signals that it could be practiced by anyone, even those that did not undergo the requisite training.

It is this concern that necessitated the 'professional body' in the country recently to deliberate on its way-forward. While addressing delegates during an annual Summit held November 2016 in Mombasa, Kenya, the leadership said there was a plan to regulate the practice into law. According to the chairperson, Jane Gitau, the move was aimed at cleaning up the industry so that individuals could be held accountable and get certified to work as PR practitioners, thereby ensuring there is ethics and accountability in the profession (DN, Nov. 18, 2016). This though, is yet to happen two years later.

4.4: Journalists' Rating of Professional Standing of Public Relations Practice in Kenya?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Good	74	36.8	37.8	37.8
	Fair	112	55.7	57.1	94.9
	Poor	10	5.0	5.1	100.0
	Total	196	97.5	100.0	
Missing	System	5	2.5		
Total		201	100.0		

The general rating by Journalists of public relations in Kenya is overall positive, save for only 5.1% who felt the rating was poor. A total of 186 respondents making 94.9% were of the view that the practice was either good or fair. Of these, 74 respondents making 37.8% rated the profession as good, with 112 others, making 57.1% of the total respondents stating that public relations was fair.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

There is no relationship that lack hiccups, from humans to animals, name it, and the same is true about that of Journalists and their public relations counterparts, each engaging the other in silent endless blame games or wars. In the world of communication, the already existing love – hate relationship between journalists and public relations practitioners continues to be stained and experiencing difficulties, a situation that has been on-going for long. There has been suspicion between the two professions, each believing the other is out to ‘ruin’ the others’ job, but because duty calls, convenience has always taken center stage. In fact, Journalists feel their strained relationship has created a serious disconnect between what they want from PR and what they actually get, since PR practitioners are mostly concerned with protecting their organizations’ image over and above providing information.

While Journalists believe public relations practitioners ‘hoard’ useful information (news) that is of public interest and importance, public relations practitioners on their part have had a belief that Journalists do not mean well in their collection of information and dissemination (news) as they always go for what they consider negative and therefore destructive to their organizations. Though most journalists do not regard PR practitioners so highly for lacking adequate training, without a comprehensive curriculum, for lacking a body of knowledge and information, as being a profession proliferated by quacks and without any accreditation, and lacking in recognition as a career, it still remains an attraction to majority of them who during their sunset days join it as the only career of choice. Despite all these, and with all the turbulent, the two careers need to realize that they both have a crucial role to play in society, and if there is a good understanding, constructive, positive and healthy relationship, the two will make tremendous impact in society. This calls for transparency based on mutual trust and goals to benefit either side.

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