

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN AFRICA: IMPACT ON GLOBAL TREND

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INTRODUCTION

The global public relations society is currently striving to codify a global body of knowledge. In creating this process it is important to motivate the globe to communicate in the field of public relations. An aspect that inspired conversations in this regard was an article entitled “The Definition, Dimensions and Domain of Public Relations” by Hutton (1999). This article opened a longstanding debate among practitioners and researchers in the field of PR across the world.

European educators and practitioners criticized Hutton's article for primarily following a North American approach to theory and practice of PR. These European individuals were of the opinion that PR is very different in the European context but no mention was made of this in the article. The article merely referred to PR from a North American perspective. These European critics formed a project team in the attempt to assess the similarities and differences between North American and European practice context.

Their findings made practitioners to realize that in order to develop a global body of knowledge, an understanding of the differences and similarities in PR practice across the globe is first and foremost important. Therefore, PR practitioners will only be able to draw conclusions on what the profession should entail in the 21st century when there is an understanding of the current status of thinking and practice across the globe (Vercic, Van Ruler, Butschi & Flodin 2001:373 & 374).



After reading this article and the former statement, the researcher posed the question: “can Africa be ignored in this process of establishing and codifying a global body of knowledge?” And the answer was undoubtedly no. Africa should participate in this process in order to provide insight to the field of PR from an authentic African perspective. Africa would, however, only be able to participate once the continent can articulate the practice of PR according to global terms. Therefore, in order to contribute to global discussions it is critical for Africans to describe African PR according to global theory.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem the researcher investigated concerned the lack of knowledge and understanding of the practice of PR in Africa. In the researcher's opinion this limits the continent's participation in global discussions on the fundamentals of PR and precludes African practitioners from learning more about one another's practice.

The aim of this paper is to motivate the African PR society to conduct more empirical research, share findings and publish these findings. This will contribute to a better understanding of African PR on a continental and global level. This will also contribute to a more professional approach to PR, as more literature will be available as a framework for research studies.

DEFINING PR IN THE CONTEXT OF THIS PAPER

In order to provide a framework for this paper, it is necessary to define PR for the purpose of this paper. According to Wilcox, Ault, Agee & Cameron (2000:4), the World Assembly of Public Relations held in Mexico City in August 1978 defined PR practice as “the art and social science of analyzing trends, predicting their consequences, counseling organization leaders, and implementing planned programmes which will serve both the organization and the public interest”.

This definition emphasizes the strategic perspective of PR. Seeking more than merely to maintain and build relationships, the focus, according to this definition, should be on broader



societal issues as well as organizational issues.

BACKGROUND OF THE RESEARCHER'S STUDY

In the researcher's attempt to investigate the African PR body of knowledge, it was clear that this entails three aspects, namely, the *practice, education* and *research*. This turned out to be a very broad field to investigate and the researcher decided to focus on only the practice of PR in Africa. The major concept, the practice of PR, was therefore the focus on the researcher's master's degree.

The practice of PR was defined by two other concepts, namely the models (purpose) of the practice of PR and the roles (activities) of the practice of PR. A literature review was conducted in order to record the developments of the practice of PR according to these two concepts. According to global literature, five models and three roles were identified, which were used in the empirical phase of the study. It was proved that in Africa three models and two roles of the practice of PR were identified. This illustrated that Africa can indeed be described in terms of global theory and that these theoretical concepts are present on the African practice experience.

This study was, however, only the platform for more in-depth studies in order to create a better understanding about this concept, African PR. The study noted that for Africa to understand the practice of PR from continental perspective, African PR practitioners and researchers need to share knowledge about PR and what it entails on the African continent. African PR has a responsibility towards urban and rural classes of developing countries, to empower practitioners with the necessary knowledge and skills to serve society, the PR profession, and to build public relations theory and contribute to the understanding of PR.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A BODY OF KNOWLEDGE

The North American researchers have published and documented most of the research findings in this field of PR and have emphasized the Western perspective. Verde (2000:342) explains that the differences in PR development are environmental and economic, resulting from the two World Wars. The wars influenced Europe dramatically and, therefore,



temporarily left this continent behind. Most of the literature and empirical evidence found in the field of PR originates from countries with well-structured and established systems. As PR practice faces challenges at the global and international arena, practitioners need to discover and understand macro environmental changes and the impact thereof on business and on the practice of PR (Zaharna 2001:136).

In 1998, the European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA) initiated the European Body of Knowledge (hereafter referred to as EBOK) project. Its purpose was, firstly, to compile a bibliography of European PR literature and, secondly, to understand the current practice of European PR. The findings also crystallized the realization that, in order to develop a global body of knowledge, an understanding of the differences and similarities in PR across the globe is necessary. The PR field will only be able to draw conclusions about what the profession should be in the 21st century, when there is an understanding across the globe about its current status of thinking and practice (Vercic et al, 2001:373-4).

In the global attempt to codify the PR body of knowledge it is essential for Africa to also start with a process focusing on the African body of knowledge. The researcher wanted to replicate the EBOK study as it would have added a lot of value in terms of starting a dialogue between different countries in Africa, defining the term PR in the African context, sharing knowledge relating to PR, just to name a few valuable contributions it would have made to the profession. This type of study would have also provided Africa with an indication of the current practice, education and research of PR in Africa, as these aspects define a body of knowledge.

At the initial stages of this attempt to integrate the African body of knowledge project, a few problems were identified. Firstly, the author had no knowledge of African PR practitioners and/or academics. And, secondly, the logistical problems regarding the medium used for collecting data, namely e-mail was not reliable in Africa. It was, therefore, evident that before a project on the body of knowledge on African PR could start, a network of African PR practitioners had to be established. The development of a network of African PR practitioners and academics was, therefore, another objective of the researcher's master's degree.



The aim of this network was to build a relationship with these individuals to share knowledge, experience and challenges with one another and, secondly, to ask this network for assistance in the data collection phase of my study. This network was created with a long-term vision in mind. This structure was critical in maintaining and building relationships with these various individuals. This type of network would make it much easier to develop a research team similar to that of the EBOK project, which can assist in creating an African body of knowledge. It would also be able to assist future research activities. Moreover, it would be valuable in educating researchers on the definition, dimensions and demarcation of PR, the major issues faced by PR as well as any possible PR material that has been published, including scientific journals as well as practitioners' journals.

IMPORTANCE OF AFRICAN LITERATURE AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

In order for African PR practitioners to really understand the context in which PR is practised it is critical to do research and empirically verify certain fundamental aspects of PR. Currently there is a lack of published African literature which forces academics to teach the Western approach to PR practice as well as use Western literature as a framework for studying PR. This is not necessarily negative, because practitioners are equipped with global knowledge but it does provide conflict within the individual once they are confronted with African realities. An African body of knowledge will, therefore, assist in guiding the practice, education and research for PR in Africa. In return, this will influence the professionalism in the field as well, which can only happen when proper education and training has taken place.

Therefore, for African PR practice to become more professional, a high level of education and research is necessary. The lack of published applied, descriptive or scientific PR research on Africa, therefore, poses a challenge to the professionalization of PR. This lack of literature poses a further problem for researchers as no fundamental theoretical framework exists, which can be used to base research on and to contribute to theory as well as build theory. Equally important is the growth aspect, professions can only grow when different dimensions and aspects of the field are investigated, hence research and publication in these areas are essential.



THE UNIQUE IMPACT OF THE MACRO ENVIRONMENT ON AFRICAN PR

Organizations function in an environment that is constantly changing due to the macro environmental (social, political, economic, ecological and technological) changes influencing the organization's decision-making and strategy formulation. Changes in the macro environment will therefore have an impact on businesses as this influence strategy formulation and decision-making. This, in return, will have an impact on the practice of PR. Poverty, poor governance and corruption are seen as major global challenges as well as major problems across Africa. In a continent where most of the nations suffer from military dictatorship, corruption, civil unrest and war, underdevelopment and immense poverty, Africa is often referred to as the “Dark Continent” or a lost crusade. Research on the impact of these issues on the practice of PR is essential. Therefore, when PR is studied from a strategic perspective, it means that PR needs to reflect the enterprise (societal role regardless of the size or sector of the economy, which is stakeholder orientated) as well as corporate strategies (referring to the portfolio of businesses that the organization is competing in, which is financially orientated) of the organization (Steyn 2000:41-53).

The impact of world development has a compelling impact on human beings that share one planet, but where there are two worlds: the world of the rich and the world of the poor. According to Weitz, the poor are overwhelmingly the people of the Third World countries that have slipped behind the economic levels of the West since the beginning of the modern colonial period in the sixteenth century (see Todaro 1994:3). Steiner & Steiner (2000:5) also explain that economic, political and social activities are the sub-divisions of the universe of the human endeavour. The world is a social system and its development refers to the interdependent relationships between the economic and non-economic factors. World development takes place when social, economic, political, cultural and technological changes help or hinder the basic needs of the majority of the people (de Souza 1990:3).

In the African society, 60-70 per cent of the total national population is not contributing to the wealth, goods, skills or knowledge of the national economy. This is due to the fact that the vast majority of people in Africa live in the rural areas of African countries. This group is the source of the African economic crisis. Therefore, the relationship of this sector to the national



economy was in the deficit, thus compounding the problems of the national economies. It is this sector that, to a great extent, drives the African economy and therefore should be the focus, rather than foreign investment (Vilakazi 2001:36). This is a totally different perspective to the view of the Western world and has an impact on the way business is conducted in Africa. Research on these types of issues and the impact thereof will be critical to the understanding and practice of PR more effectively in Africa.

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS HAS CHANGED

The role of society has changed as it has engaged in a fight against corruption and abuse of human rights. Many crimes are still taking place because of corrupt regimes and, therefore, the role of society should be based on individual merit. The 21st century is bound to be a period of more regulatory scenarios. Therefore, a freer society becomes, the more regulated it becomes and the more citizens are expected to act responsibly. PR practitioners, therefore, should listen to society and focus on how the reputation of the organizations can be managed effectively (Ophukah 2003:8-9).

All the nations of Africa are developing countries; it is essential to understand business operations within this context. The key to effective management in developing countries is the capacity to understand and manage the external forces influencing the organization. The business environment is shaped by external factors. These factors influence events in the international arena, shape national government's development strategies and policies, affect the structure and dynamics of the industry and directly influence specific activities of the organization.

Businesses are concerned with the triple bottom line, namely, the social, environmental and economic issues. This has shifted to encompass virtually all the issues known to society. These issues have become critical challenges to management and, therefore, businesses are confronted with the need to protect and manage their reputations. PR practitioners can contribute to this by ensuring that commercial, moral and political contributions to stability and sustainability are maintained by focusing on corporate social responsibility (Ophukah *ibid*: 4 & 5). This has been a profound realization in the Western world and, when referring to the



core of what corporate social responsibility is all about, it is about building relationships with various stakeholders and the society in which an organization operates as well as providing assistance on problems that are of national significance.

RELEVANCE OF THE AFRICAN WORLDVIEW TO CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

The psyche of the African person is based on the worldview of the sacredness of man as a social being. The collective consciousness is manifested in behavioural patterns, expressions and spiritual self-fulfilment. Because of poverty and deprivation, African communities have to survive through brotherly group care and not individual self-reliance. The sensitivity to the needs of others and the understanding of people as social beings is essential in the African society. Disadvantaged groups survive through collective consciousness and collective unity and this forms the basis of “Ubuntu” (Mbigi 1993:58). It was found that the core of the African culture has such a profound impact on the way PR is practiced that this is an area in which in-depth research and publishing opportunities are endless. My study proved that without consciously planning to practice PR in a socially responsible manner this way of practicing PR is present in the African context. Owing to the strong cultural influence of the African worldview the assumption was made that this was the reason why this aspect proved to be so strong in my study. This, however, is another aspect that should be empirically investigated and published in order to understand it and its impact more effectively.

In the search for the secondary data for this study, the researcher found no empirical evidence on the practice of PR in Africa. Most of the information obtained regarding African PR was found in papers delivered at PR practitioners' conferences in Africa and non-accredited journals focusing on practice and not theory. This type of information is based on individuals' experiences and case studies, which is critical; but the need to develop African literature based on empirical research is essential. The development of a scientific foundation for African PR as well as the development of an African body of knowledge has become critical. PR practitioners need to be professionally qualified in order to cope with all the challenges of the profession. Training and education are prerequisites for the practice of PR (Ophukah 1993:17). The type of training should however be globally competitive but locally relevant.



CONCLUSION

Currently very little scientific literature on African PR exists. Naturally, this will affect professionalism, education and research in the field. I proposed, therefore, that attention be given to this aspect for African PR to grow and prosper as a discipline. Moreover, for Africa to contribute to global discussion on the fundamentals of PR, it is necessary to identify the similarities and differences between it and the Western perspective of PR practice.

It is believed that Africa can provide a very unique contribution to the global PR society. The authentic contribution that Africa can give the globe is clearly expressed in the words of Steve Biko, an anti-Apartheids activist from South Africa: “*We believe that in the long run the special contribution to the world by Africa will be in this field of human relationships. The great powers of the world may have done wonders in giving the world an industrial and military look, but the great gifts still has to come from Africa – giving the world a more human face*”

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