

PUBLIC RELATIONS: A FORCE FOR THE FUTURE

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INTRODUCTION

Public relations, as a communicative practice, dates from the establishment and the emergence of publics; and it is defined by cultural affiliations and the desire to build progressive identities. With its development, several definitions were pegged on the practice, including one that outlined it as a changing force, capable of instigating the process of power accumulation.

It follows then that various publics have never really understood what the term “public relations” means. Nevertheless, some, like the French political philosopher Rousseau, did write in the nineteenth century that “*whoever makes it his business to make laws must know how to control options and through them govern the passions of man*”.

Only in the modern era, however, can we say that there has been a need for individuals and organizations working in various spheres of business or politics to influence mass public opinion. This impact is felt beyond our national boundaries, and has sort of harmonized our cultural divisions due to the transitions of the new world order.

It is encouraging, therefore, to see our supranational institutions of governance, among them, the World Trade Organization; the European Union, and our own African Union, modelled to suit the challenges of the future. This, fortunately, has been made possible by the experiences of the 20th century, for example, when ordinary publics of even the most advanced capitalist societies started winning full rights to vote in free elections, regardless of property and educational qualifications, sex, or ethnic background.



Their opinions began to matter politically in so far as they could, for the first time, be translated into votes for or against this or that party. You all remember the early days before the universal suffrage when the opinions of the public were of no consequence politically, as opposed to the views of the male bourgeoisie who alone influenced political, socio-economic decisions. At around the same time, ordinary people were becoming enfranchised citizens; communication was evolving into new patterns as the level of literacy increased.

For instance, popular newspapers became established and news became a key element of an expanded public sphere. It was at this point that public relations emerged as a distinctive specialist sphere of communicative work aimed at facilitating information flow in the social process. As the size and representatives of the public sphere increased under popular pressure and the influence of key events, such as the World Wars, so did the need for public relations – which we can also think of as the management of relations between the rulers and the public.

Public relations is thus a creation of the 20th century man, born of the need to link political actors' hunger for publicity. Perhaps, you might all remember that Calvin Coolidge was the first American president to employ a full time press officer. From the early years of the 20th century, press counsellors, as they were popularly called, were being employed to influence public opinion on behalf of American business and political organizations. Thereafter, public relations practice spread to the rest of the capitalist world, with immense consequences for the way public affairs and politics, in particular, were organized and practised.

The truth of these events in the United States of America also became true of Africa, a little later perhaps. In fact, whenever democratic principles of government have been embraced, the necessity for systematic management of public opinion has followed as a necessary correlate. Corporate actors too are faced with governments that must be seen to be responsive to public opinion behind their campaigns, or at least neutralizing any hostility that might exist, for example, in environmental and regulatory issues.

That the communicative dimension of political action has expanded in this way is not just the consequence of democracy, but is just as much the increasingly technology driven product of



public relations development, and the ever increasing opportunities which this provides for political and social actors to use the public relations tool. Thus, while history tells us that the gradual changes in development; the industrial revolution, the technological revolution, and today's information age were carried through an unconscious communication process; there are indications that there is a conscious process of public relations slowly rising above other disciplines as a force for the future.

The expansion of establishments that inform the democratic process like the East African Community Parliament and its prospective rotating Presidency, and the International Court of Justice, will need to apply the public relations tool broadly in order to build consensus. Public relations as a powerful networking tool will be useful in exploiting emerging opportunities. I have in mind, the increasing desire and ability by multinationals to invest abroad owing to the now economically liberalized world.

The whiff of confidence engulfing the modern enlightened and savvy people will need to be supported through conviction that the publics' interests are well protected, while at the same time easily accessible. Finally, as custodians of public opinion and perception, public relations practitioners deserve support from the relevant diplomatic organs to successfully carry out this role.

