ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Managing Media Relations in Peace and Conflict Situations: Strategies and Techniques

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Abstract

The paper examines the strategies and techniques for managing media relations in peace and conflict situations. It sees media relations as one of the key functions of public relations concerned with deliberate and calculated use of the media to tell an organization's story. Given that the media consist of people who are well trained to use their skills to process information and handle technology masterfully to transmit messages to the populace, they therefore constitute a strategic platform for reaching out to diverse audiences. The study is anchored in the Transfer Process Model propounded by Frank Jefkins in 1988. Secondary data drawn from books and articles were used to critically evaluate how the media can be leveraged as the window to creating as well as revamping public perception. The paper holds that regardless of the level of game-changing benefits or value any organization offers, if the audience or customers perceive otherwise, the organization and its products are doomed. Thus, media relations programmes must be based on clear objectives, actionable milestones, timelines, definite budget, and tracking system to achieve effectiveness and efficiency. It must not be practicsed as an ad-hoc or fire brigade strategy to quench 'fire on the mountain' but must be a permanent structure in every organization handled by trained professionals to avoid 'accidental discharges.' With the prevalence of fake news in the media landscape especially with the pervasive use of social media, the paper recommends among other things that it is expedient for the military through their PR personnel to provide the media with honest, truthful and accurate information especially during conflict situations.

Key words: Media Relations, Peace and Conflict, Strategies, Techniques

Introduction

Media relations is one of the key functions of public relations concerned with deliberate and calculated use of the media to tell an organization's story. The media consist of people who are well trained to use their skills to process information and handle technology masterfully to transmit messages to the populace. The media therefore constitute a strategic platform for reaching out to diverse audiences of organizations, professionally referred to as publics. Supporting this view, Lerner (1958) in (Ugande, 2008, p.92) submits that "no modern society functions efficiently without a developed system of the mass media." This rightly points to the fact that the media has the institutional mandate, infrastructure and expertise to deliver an organization's message, to far more people than the organization can ever do. In view of the above reason, public relations practitioners have no choice than to manage media relations in order to advance their organization's objectives.

Regarding the intrinsic position of the mass media in societal development, the media is perceived as a credible channel of information. Stories that emanate from the mass media especially are perceived as truthful and credible. This attribute of the mass media is a social asset which public relations practitioners can leverage to tell the stories of their organizations. Also, the mass media consist of a complex mix of people, processes and technology. Therefore, relating with this complex mix requires strategic planning, organizing, coordinating and evaluation in order to achieve maximum results. For example, in many media organizations, the Chief Executives insist that press invitations must be addressed to them. Anything outside of this arrangement amounts to infractions which could affect coverage of your event and overall relationships with concerned parties.

Invariably, in media relations practice, the media is a critical resource alongside time, money and men etc. that must be understood and properly managed to achieve maximum results. As a matter of fact, public relations of today have graduated to perception management. Perception is what really counts. Consequently, no matter the level of game-changing benefits or value any organization offers, if the audience or customers perceive otherwise, the

organization and its products are doomed. The media is the window to creating as well as revamping public perception. It is rather careless when Chief Executives refuse to parley or do not see the need for the media. The truth remains that by utilizing the media well, Chief Executives can expose the organization's publics to empathize with them through what they see or hear. Therefore, it is expedient that organizational leaders understand how to use, engage and manage the media. This is what this paper is devoted to expound.

Conceptual Clarification

Management: The term "management" has many definitions and perspectives because of its applicability to virtually everything (Iredia, 2022). Sociologists for example see it as a function of elite class in society. While Economists consider it as a resource alongside land, labour and capital. Administrators, on the other hand, perceive it as a system of authority, designed to achieve organizational goals. Acclaimed management scholar Mary Parker Follet refers to management as the "art of getting things done through people".

Other scholars of management like Henri Fayol defined management as the art and science of forecasting, planning, organizing, commanding, coordinating and controlling to achieve set goals. Fayol in the process of defining the concept established a framework for management activities to keep an organization alive and viable. In other words, an organization must forecast, plan, organize, command, control and co-ordinate its activities to survive and prosper.

The consensus between the old and modern Management Schools of Thought represented by Frederick Taylor, Elton Malton, Akpala, etc. is that the main concern of management is how best the three Ms (i.e., men, money and materials) can be balanced into a winning combination. It involves doing things exceedingly right at the right time to get maximum results. It is the meshing of people and technology to produce profits.

Nongo (2005) believes management's effectiveness and efficiency can best be achieved by observing the following roles that managers play in organizations:

i) **Planning**: That is the formulation of future courses of action. This function provides purpose and direction to the organization, its subsets and contributing individuals.
ii) **Decision Making**: This role involves choosing among alternative courses of action deciding on a correct course of action from several alternative courses and can be very challenging for PR executives.
iii) **Organizing:** This function involves setting up of structures such as chain of command, division of labour, assignment of responsibilities etc. to drive corporate objectives.
iv) **Staffing:** This involves recruiting, training and developing people who can implement the objectives of the organization. It is generally believed that every organization is as good as the people in them.
v) **Communication:** This is another important function of management and involves delivery of information to stakeholders and receiving feedback from them in order to advance organizational objectives.
vi) **Motivating:** This involves inspiring individuals to pursue collective objectives through need satisfaction and meeting their expectations as well as value exchanges.
vii) **Leading:** Involves providing direction and influencing sub-ordinates towards set goals and objectives.
viii) **Controlling:** This role involves tracking, monitoring and comparing results with set goals and objectives and taking corrective actions where necessary.

Media Relations: Media is concerned with the technology that allows communication to reach a large audience. The most common media include print, broadcast and the internet. The public generally depend on the various media platforms such as newspapers, television, radio, Internet, etc. to obtain information on political issues, social issues, economic issues, security issues etc. While the mass media is regulated and therefore operates

within the ambit of professional ethics and laws, social media is an all-comers affair and free-for-all channel. The mass media are presumed to be credible source of information and major influencers of public opinion and perception while the social media generally suffers from negative image of integrity and credibility.

Media relations simply refer to dealings or connections of organizations with channels of delivering information to mass audience. Bhasin (2021) appropriately defines it as a tactic for building positive relationships with the media in order to communicate an organization's message and manage its reputation in a consistent, credible manner. It is one of the key aspects of public relations functions that is concerned with investing time, resources and energy of organizations to obtaining the understanding, support and co-operation of the managers and operators of media outlets in order to achieve organizational objectives. This function involves building meaningful relationship with appropriate media contacts such as journalists, writers, analysts, editors, etc. to achieve optimal representation and brand awareness.

Similarly, the position PR as summarized by Cutlip and Broom in their book *Effective Public Relations* as relationship management is still valid. In fact, it is this position that gave birth to the definition of PR as a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the publics on whom its success or failure depends. Investment strategies for media relations can be as little as exchange of gifts, services, words, time, attention, care or concern.

Peace: According to the Webster Dictionary, peace is freedom from disturbance, a state of tranquility. In other words, it is a situation of no war or law and order. Peace represents a situation of quiet and calm state of mind. Some people wrongly equate peace with security. In other words, they argue that peace means security. The truth is that sometimes wars are fought for the sake of security at the price of peace. Peace is therefore sometime an objective and at other times a means to an end. Peace is an objective that people hope to achieve but is often sacrificed for national security. This means that although peace and security are inseparable, they do not necessarily correlate at all times. Therefore, peace is just one way of resolving conflict and not necessarily the most efficient.

Peace is a basic need of people especially those in conflict situation and involves building trust, relationships, livelihood, and institutions. Peace, as righty stated by Wikipedia, is the absence of conflict (such as war) and freedom from fear of violence between individuals and groups. It is usually associated with societal friendship, harmony, absence of hostility and violence.

Conflict: Conflict is a natural tendency in human society and could arise as a result of inter-personal, racial, class, political, economic etc. differences. It is sometimes used synonymously with clash, tension, crises, struggle or friction. No organization is immune to conflict situation.

Conflict in a group often follows a particular trajectory. Routine group interaction is, first interrupted by an initial conflict within the group as a result of internal differences of opinion, scarcity of resources and disagreement between members. Conflict is usually preceded by early warning signals and if not tackled results to disunity, disintegration or splitting into coalitions. There are different types of conflict including:

i) Content conflict (i.e., when individuals disagree about how to deal with a certain issue of common interest)
ii) Relationship conflict. This occurs when individuals disagree about one another. This type of conflict emanates from interpersonal differences and negatively affects performance, loyalty, satisfaction, commitment and trust.

Other types of conflict include process conflict (i.e., disagreement arising from groups approach to task); task conflict (i.e., disagreements in view points and opinion concerning a particular task in group setting) etc. Even though some conflicts are considered healthy (e.g., competition in sports)

conflicts are generally perceived as destructive and often escalate to crises and war situations. Conflict management and peace sustenance are usually challenging PR objectives that organizations pursue.

Conflict usually has corrosive effects on the image and reputation of organizations in the circle of stakeholders including the media. Conflicts create hostilities and often result to loss of lives, equipment and money as well as goodwill etc. Conflicts are also often consequences of prejudices, apathy, ignorance, hostility etc. which are indeed PR problems and can best be tackled with systematic and coordinated PR strategies and techniques. In other words, the damage that conflicts due to the image and reputation of organizations can only be restored through the establishment of mutual understanding between an organization and its publics through carefully planned and coordinated public relations programmes.

The media, no doubt, offer bountiful opportunities and windows for organizations to connect and reach out to their numerous stakeholders with messages designed to build mutual understanding, support and co-operation. Therefore, media relations remain an indispensable tool of PR management for peace building and conflict management. The PR person uses his skills, knowledge and professionalism to win the trust, confidence and co-operation of the media operators and media content consumers to manage conflicts and also build peace.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored in the Transfer Process Model. The Transfer Process Model was propounded by Frank Jefkins in 1988. It contends that negative situations could be converted to positive achievement through appropriate communication processes that yield mutual understanding. The theory explains that appropriate communication tools and strategies could be used to convert negative situations such as hostility to sympathy, prejudice to acceptance, apathy to interest and knowledge. Many experts including Uduji (2012) successfully argued that Transfer Process Model provides appropriate platform for management conflicts. The theory is considered suitable for our discourse because the following negative variables are germane for media relations objectives of many organizations including the Armed Forces of Nigeria.

i) **Hostility**: Every organization including the Armed Forces have hostile publics who at one time or the other could be hostile towards its programme or activities. The agenda of media relations programme in such situation is to stir sympathy of such publics to the organization.

ii) **Prejudice:** In some cases, the critical stakeholders could have mindsets arising from perceptions, background, education, class influences etc. that are prejudicial to the organization. This situation is a recipe for conflict that could be tackled through media relations agenda setting namely converting the prejudice to acceptance.

iii) **Apathy:** This negative situation is based on the reality that there are some enemies of for example, the Armed Forces that do not want to have anything to do with the organization, its products, programmes, etc. Such enemies do not have empathy concerning the organization because of selfishness, shallow understanding, lack of faith, etc. It is the responsibility of media relations in such situations to arouse interest of such stakeholders in the organization.

iv) **Ignorance:** This is a manifestation of the failure of an organization to make known its activities and programmes to both the internal and external publics. It is the prerogative of media relations to create and sustain awareness and knowledge concerning an organization's activities and to wipe away ignorance.

The above constitute the major media relations agenda of organizations and drivers of mutual understanding, co-operation and goodwill of the organization with stakeholders as strategies for conflict minimization and peace sustenance.

Requirements for Effective Media Relations in Peace and Conflict Situations

It is no longer news that PR has come to stay as a crucial function of management in both commercial and non-profit organizations. Consequently, many organizations including the Armed Forces have dedicated Directorates/ Departments for handling PR activities. These Directorates/Departments have responsibility for planning, organizing, implementing and controlling activities and programmes purposed to build and sustain understanding, friendship, goodwill, support and cooperation between the organization and its numerous publics including the media. Many experts have agreed that the media is one of the most critical stakeholders of every organization. Therefore, good relations with editors, publishers, editorial writers, columnists, and news broadcasters is key to favourable publicity for organizations.

The reality, however, is that the relationship between Public Relations Practitioners and Newsmen is "not always a friendly one" essentially because of role differences. While a reporter is motivated by the public's right to know, the PR person is bond by loyalty to his organization or client to play an advocacy role (Robert, 1981). In order to bridge this gap and enhance healthy relationship with the media, it is important that PR persons have a deep understanding of the job requirements and viewpoints of newsmen. For example, the PR person must appreciate that the primary objective of a reporter is to get the facts about a news story for his/her medium at the earliest possible time preferably before it breaks in competing media. Therefore, speed in obtaining the information is critical. Also, a reporter prefers to get his/her facts from authoritative sources.

The PR person's job is to deliver information about his/her organization and ensure that the organization's side of the story is told. Accordingly, it is expedient for the PR person to co-operate with newsmen. Consequently, the PR person must not unnecessarily shield his/her Boss or client at the detriment of the search for facts about a story by the newsmen. This point is particularly important during conflict situations. This is because such un-co-operative attitude could compel the newsman to seek his facts from other sources which could be damaging to the organization's image and reputation. Therefore, refusal to talk to newsmen or refusal to disclose unpleasant facts especially during conflict situations should never be contemplated by PR persons and their bosses because of the backlash and negative consequences. Therefore, it is better to be honest, factual and co-operative with the newsmen at all times. Experts have over the years convincingly argued that successful media relations is built on reputation and that once this reputation is lost, the PR person cannot function.

It is important to emphasize that the highway to media respect, trust and friendship is honesty, accuracy and professionalism. It is not unusual to find some bosses demand that a PR person should call up a reporter or editor and blast him/her for something he/she has said or written. The PR person must politely decline the request and rather seek to reconcile or mediate in the disagreement. He/she could explain to the boss the reporter's job or even broker a meeting between the two parties. The PR person must always stand up for the truth and right things.

Therefore, where a reporter deliberately maligns or debases his organization or treats his organization unfairly, the PR person must reject the injustice. The point is that the PR person is by no means subservient to the newsmen. However, it is not in the interest of strategic media relations management to be hostile and adversarial with newsmen no matter the provocation. Robert (1981) rightly advised that the following rules should be observed by PR persons in order to win and sustain the trust, respect, friendship and co-operation of the newsmen.

- Always treat the news media as equally as possible.
- Frankness and honesty must be cardinal principles. Don't be evasive.
- Always be available to the press.
- Do not cover or colour facts.
- Always assume that you will be quoted. Therefore, be careful and accurate when making statements.

- Do not mislead a reporter. If you can't talk, say so.
- Don't condemn the editor when a story is left out of the paper or transmission
- Don't go over a reporter's head to his superior with a complaint.
- Anticipate a newsman's interest and have the facts ready in advance.
- Be helpful with bad news as well as good news.
- Get the correct name and title while addressing your press releases and invitations.
- Do not peddle weak stories or ask a reporter to kill a story.
- Every press release must be properly dated.
- Write concisely using accepted journalistic style for news stories namely "inverted pyramid"
- Number your pages and observe necessary mechanical details.

Managing Media Relations Strategies and Techniques in Peace and Conflict Situations

It is common knowledge that these days everything is in the media including the good, the bad and the ugly. As a matter of fact, everything and anything of public interest is interrogated by various layers of the media and surrounded by media responses, interpretations, reviews etc. It is for this reason that virtually every well-meaning organization has a media relations desk responsible for planning, organizing and controlling strategies and techniques aimed at building and sustaining the understanding, support and goodwill of media operators. This task begins with defining and determining the appropriate strategies and techniques for media relations and requires, first and foremost, a deep understanding of the media landscape including layers of media environment. Bhasin (2021) rightly identifies the following layers of media environment worthy of consideration in the planning and execution of media relations programmes.

- **Communication Channels:** There are established channels of communicating with media houses that a PR person must understand and respect in order to build and sustain harmonious relationship with the press whether in peace or conflict situation.
- **News Cycle:** The media are concerned majorly with news generation. The PR person must understand the various types of news cycles such as daily news (e.g., newspapers), 24hrs news like TV/Radio, blogs on internet, weekly or monthly news in magazines.
- **Popularity and Reach of Medium**: The effect of media strategy depends on the reputation of the messenger (i.e., the channel and the source). Therefore, a thorough understanding of the popularity, reach and integrity of the channel is important to drive the effectiveness of the media strategy.
- **Target Audience**: It is also very important to have a thorough understanding of the target audience in order to select a suitable media type for use as well as appropriate techniques.
- **Quality and Quantity of Media Outlets:** There are two main types of media outlets namely the mainstream/conventional media and the modern/social media outlets. The conventional media has been there for many years and includes television, radio and Print. They are regulated, have fixed audiences of loyal users and command high integrity. The Modern/ New media outlets is populated by social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, etc. It is the newest revolution in communication world and the newest media relations tool that require careful management to achieve maximum results. Its tremendous strengths include spontaneity, immediacy, low cost, group ownership, testimonials, reviews, sharing etc. which can be harvested for maximum results. However, the tool is also encumbered by challenges of integrity and absence of regulations. The point to take away from the above is that the different media types that are available for media relations assignments have their strengths and weaknesses. None is entirely perfect in terms of effectiveness and efficiency.

Consequently, media relations personnel must undertake painstaking research to ascertain the

nature of the PR problem and determine the goals to pursue as well as the strategies and techniques to use to achieve the set goals. Therefore, whether in peace or conflict situations, media relations strategy and techniques must be products of research and planning. This is necessary to determine the appropriate target audience, suitable media type or types for the PR programme and the appropriate tools or techniques to use. It is important to emphasis that the media consists of people, processes and technology. Managing media relations therefore requires full appreciation of these media resources. The people, that is the employees, must be motivated through reciprocal exchange of value, trust and respect to drive the organization's media relations programmes.

It is important that the media relations personnel build and sustain cordial relationship with desk officers of media houses handling beats relevant to their organization using relationship marketing techniques including informal marketing.

Invariably, managing media relations, require skills in the following areas:

- Planning, organizing and coordinating
- Analysis and evaluation
- Problem solving and decision making
- Creativity and innovation
- Communication
- Motivation
- Customer relationship management

There is no doubt that media relations management during peace and conflict situations is a problem-solving activity that requires planning, organizing and co-ordination to achieve results. Press conferences, media tours, press releases, social media posts etc. for e.g., are strategic tools or techniques of media relations that require careful planning, organization, coordination and evaluation to serve their purposes including peace building and crisis management. Similarly, critical and analytical skills are necessary to determine where the organization is at the moment and where it desires to be, its perception in the media space, critical stakeholders and the public. Skills in the evaluation of media relations programme are equally important to ascertain the level or extent of effectiveness of PR campaign. Managing communication requires skills in writing and public speaking to effectively serve as spokesperson of the organization, internal communication with employees as well as interface with other stakeholders such as the media.

Managing media relations also involves managing environment. As key information gatherers and disseminators, media relations personnel work with equipment and technology in order to do their jobs effectively and efficiently. They have visitors to their offices/formations from the media houses and other stakeholders. It is therefore important that media relations personnel have space that is well designed, spacious and inviting. It is also significant to emphasis that physical evidence is an important aspect of perception management and must be managed properly.

Managing Information

Everyone in an organization, including the military, manages information. However, media relations officers in particular have a professional responsibility to manage lots of information. Whether in peace or conflict situation, the task of information management for peace building and conflict management depends largely on public relations/media relations officers and must not be left in the hands of untrained personnel of the organization. This is because information is like ammunition and when placed in the wrong hands can do immeasurable damage to the image and reputation of the organization.

In time of conflict, this need becomes more compelling and imperative. It could require setting up of dedicated information desks to receive and dish out the right information to the right media at the right time. Therefore, information gathering and transmission must be selective and controlled especially during conflicts (of course even in peace situation too) to avoid escalation of crises, douse tension and to drive understanding, support and co-operation of critical stakeholders.

This is important because the local media and

other stakeholders are germane to peace building and peace sustenance and such social events create appropriate cordiality and trust that could be harvested as intelligence resource in times of conflict or crisis warning signals. It is significant to emphasize that there is an obvious trust gap between the armed forces and civil population. There is also another level of trust gap within the Military Inter-Agencies. These trust-gaps which are unhealthy and sometimes unnecessary account partly for the unending insurgency in some parts of Nigeria. The local media must be courted as an invaluable intelligence resource for peace building and conflict management. Their vantage positions and proximity to the locals and opinion leaders can be exploited as intelligence capital to avert conflicts and also maintain peace by law enforcement agencies. Therefore, everything should be done to win and retain their trust, confidence, friendship, loyalty, commitment and more.

Furthermore, in order to build trust and valuable relationship with the media, especially during peace situations, the armed forces must encourage and scale up press visits, press dinners, press tours techniques. These events which could be reciprocal can be used to generate free and favourable publicity for the military, build friendships, commitment and bonding. Another technique that the military can employ in peace situations to enhance trust and bonding with the media is community relations. It is important that the military deliberately scales up community relations activities such as medical outreaches to neighbouring communities, support to local media, and support for cultural events as well as religious festivals such as Ramadan, Easter, etc. Investments in such activities will connect with the emotions of the benefactors and attract deep and genuine affection, loyalty, commitment, support and more for the military than raw display of power in their neighbourhood.

The military can also use sports technique to build friendships with neighbouring communities and local media. Invitations not just for coverage but also participation of media executives to sports such as football, tennis, golf competitions etc. have capacities to create immensurable goodwill, friendships and bonding with the press and other stakeholders. Similarly, the technique of open communication between the military and the media must be scaled up to achieve more dividends from media relations strategies. Therefore, the media must at all times have unhindered access to truthful information that will advance the objectives of peace building. Unnecessary roadblocks on the highway of information gathering could cause friction, speculation, misunderstanding, conflicts and disservice to the military, the nation and indeed humanity and therefore must be avoided. In all, media relations practice in peace situations is usually conducted under tranquility and a state of less tension. There is therefore greater room for effective planning, organizing and evaluation.

Accordingly, Norman (2015) cited by Keghku (2018) convincingly advised that the manager should employ proactive PR management approach to achieve maximum results. This approach should entail stage by stage processes including planning ahead, anticipating conflicts (forecasting), mapping out preventive measures and tracking the strategies for remedial actions. In conflict situations, the PR manager must be more concerned and focused on restoring the favourable image of the organization than the material cost implication. Nwosu (2011) recommends that special PR events must be properly managed to achieve the desired benefits. Therefore, whether it is a news conference, national convention, golf kitty, private luncheon, etc. detailed, advance planning, careful organization and constant checking are key.

It is important to remember at all times that a special PR. event is just as much a communication tool as a news release. A town hall meeting with the locals for example is a communication avenue to convey an image or message about the institution and poor packaging of the event distorts the message and impacts negatively on the overall PR objective. The event could be the best opportunity to win support, understanding, build friendship, douse tension, avert crises etc. Therefore, invest all the time in its planning and implementation.

Conclusion

Media relations is concerned with working with the media for the purpose of delivering the organization's policies to the public in a positive, consistent and credible manner. This typically involves working directly with the people responsible for news and features in the mass media. Media relations must be properly planned, organized, coordinated and evaluated to achieve the desired results in view of the complexities of the media system. Media relations programmes must be based on clear objectives, actionable milestones, timelines, definite budget, and tracking system to achieve effectiveness and efficiency. Therefore, whether in peace or conflict situations, media relations is a process that is a never-ending phenomenon in the life of organizations. It must not be practiced as an ad-hoc or fire brigade strategy to quench 'fire on the mountain'. It must be a permanent structure in every organization handled by trained professionals to avoid 'accidental discharges.'

Recommendations

- With the prevalence of fake news in the media landscape especially with the pervasive use of social media it is expedient for the military through their PR personnel provide the media with honest, truthful and accurate information especially during conflict situations.
- Media relations personnel must also resist the temptation or pressure to embellish the truth to make news appear better than it really is. Journalists themselves must seek to authenticate information they are given. Media relations personnel must maintain composure especially in situations of conflict while dealing with multiple media houses.
- They must master the skills of their tools and techniques such as press conferences planning and organization, written and oral communication, event planning and organizations, relationship management, crises management, decision making, etc.

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