Reality Bytes!
The Technological Realities of Public Relations Practitioners in Ghana

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Abstract

In developed countries, the rate of technological development and dissemination over the past two decades has been breathtaking, to say the least. These developments have affected all facets of life and work. As a result, it is a generally accepted notion that new communication technologies have had, and will continue to have a significant impact on how organisations communicate, including the way public relations is practised. A growing body of literature on new technologies and public relations practice supports this widely held notion. However, despite this emergent body of literature, there is hardly any knowledge about what the situation is in developing countries in terms of the rate of technological adoption by public relations practitioners and the impact of these technologies on their work. This paper is an initial attempt to deal with some of what is missing from the literature in this burgeoning area – a developing world perspective. The paper is based on research carried out in Ghana during January and February 2004. The findings indicate that while Ghanaian public relations practitioners are optimistic about the impact new technologies will have on their practice, the reality of their technological situation shows that there is a wide gap between the experience of practitioners in Ghana and those in the developed world.

Introduction

The development and dissemination of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) over the last two decades of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century has radically altered the way scholars and practitioners of public relations think about the profession. Numerous assumptions, both on a theoretical and a practical level, have been advanced about what these new technologies can do and how they will impact on the profession and the practice. It has been argued for example, that the developments in technology have revitalised the relationship aspect of public relations such that practitioners can now deal directly with key publics in an open two-way symmetrical communication (Janal, 2000; Hurme, 2001; Alexander, 2002, 2004). Williams and Carpini (2004) have also pointed out that the many different avenues from which publics can source information in the new media environment of the 21st century create ‘multiple axes of power to influence public opinion’ (p1213).

While these assumptions and predictions may hold true for the developed world where the ‘communication revolution’ can be said to have had its greatest impact, the question ought to be asked: Does this hold true for the developing world? But before we seek an answer to this question, an even more important question is: What is the technological situation of public
relations practitioners in the developing world? This paper seeks to provide a hint of what the response to the second (more important) question will be, by presenting the findings of research carried out in Ghana. The value of this paper therefore, lies in the contribution it will make to cross-cultural knowledge about the technological situation of public relations practitioners in a developing world setting, and how these technologies are impacting on the profession and the practice. The focus on Ghana is informed by the fact that while the impact of new technologies on various groups and occupations in various societies is known (Obijiorfor, 2003), little is known about the technological situation of public relations practitioners in Ghana, and the impact this situation has on the profession and the practice in Ghana, and indeed in Africa as a whole.

**Literature review**

On a worldwide scale, to say that new technologies have changed communication and consequently public relations practice and practices can be deemed an understatement. A more apt statement would be that new technologies have dramatically and irrevocably altered the ways in which we communicate and consequently how public relations is thought about and practiced in the 21st century. Alexander (2004), for example, argues that these new technologies are ‘creating the need for a new grouping of public relations disciplines and skills’ (p2).

The internet, email, and online chat; mobile telephones and associated SMS (short messaging system) and graphics capacity; handheld personal digital assistants and satellite television systems that allow for interactivity between viewers – all these are fundamentally changing the means of communication (Alexander, 2004, p2).

Brown (2002) also declares boldly: ‘The Internet has changed all the rules of public relations’ (p129). It is not difficult to see the point being made by both Alexander and Brown: the ‘communication revolution’ has brought about a radical change in how people communicate – impart, receive and deal with information – and public relations educators and practitioners should take note of this to enable current and future practitioners to become effective, more productive and influential in the new communication environment.

In line with this assessment, a number of studies have been conducted on the potential and impact of new technologies on public relations practice in various countries, notably in the western developed world. This has resulted in a growing body of literature on various aspects of the technologies, including their different applications and the diverse issues that are affected or can be affected by them in public relations work.

In the area of Issues Management, Heath (1998) examined the public issues debate between Shell Oil Company, UK and Greenpeace International and concluded that the internet and web will be helpful in the democratisation of issues because of the increased interactivity that they allow in discussions. Researching in the same area of Issues Management in the USA, Ramsey (1993) surveyed 200 public affairs practitioners – 100 of them members of the Issues Management Association of America – and found that her respondents indicated a high likelihood of using advanced communication technologies to help them manage issues and tasks. The two main ways in which these technologies were likely to be used were: ‘environmental scanning for emerging issues’ and ‘developing communication plans about the issues’ (Ramsey, 1993, p261). In the context of the UK, Varey (1997) found that electronically mediated communication systems were helping in the decentralisation of the
decision making process. Varey also found that the context of communication was being changed by networked constituencies and suggested that ‘[T]he corporate communicator will have to deal with, and be part of, social systems which can balance the opposing forces of community (conformity, belonging, association, and collaboration) and individualism (freedom, co-operation, conflict, and competition)’ (p117).

With regards to the internet, Ryan (1999) reported that 99 percent of the members of the PRSA (Public Relations Society of America) he surveyed indicated that they used the internet and world wide web regularly. Of this group, 57 percent used it for surveillance of other companies, 49 percent explored databases at sites other than their own, and 39 percent used it for monitoring the activities of government. In a similar vein, Porter, Sallot, Cameron and Shamp (2001) found that online databases were having positive effects on the practice of public relations in the United States and that these databases provided empowering opportunities. Based on their findings, the authors proclaimed that: ‘[A]s greater numbers of practitioners begin cruising the information superhighway and put new technologies available to full use, public relations can experience even greater opportunities to pull up a chair at the management table’ (Porter et al, 2001, p172). Research by the Bohle Company in the United States also found that there was a widespread use of technology among public relations agencies and that companies were increasingly using the internet as an essential part of their day-to-day work. Further, in a national study of public relations practitioners in America, Porter and Sallot (2003) found that public relations practitioners had taken to new technologies in their work and concluded that ‘practitioners are no longer laggards in new technology, and that women have caught up with men in use of new technology’ (p603). Finally, in research that surveyed public relations professionals in the US and 20 other countries, Wright (2001) reported that 98 percent of respondents indicated that new technologies such as the internet and e-mail have had an impact on how they do their work, with 86 percent indicating the impact had been positive.

In addition to the empirical literature on new technologies, there exists a growing body of theoretical papers on the potential of these technologies and on what needs to be done in order to advance the profession. Some of the benefits that have been touted include, an increase in business resulting from database technology, expansion in scope and a maximisation of the efficiency and effectiveness of public relations activity (Petrison & Wang, 1993), the effective use of technology for planning, research and evaluation (Phillips, 2001; Guth & Marsh, 2003), and crisis management through the use of the Internet-Routed Information System (IRIS) (West, 2003), to mention but a few. Matera and Artigue (2000) sum up the sentiments about new technologies in public relations thus:

Throughout the public relations field, for the most part, the days of the typewriters are gone. Today, computers let public relations practitioners manipulate and store data in complex ways. Research, too, has been simplified, as online databases supply a wealth of information on almost any subject. Software is available both to manage media lists and news clippings and to analyze (sic) publicity results. All of this technology enables people to do their jobs faster and more efficiently, and it takes fewer people to produce more quality work… Almost anything can be done faster, more easily and more accurately by flicking a modem switch or pressing a fax machine button. (pp16-17)

Despite the large body of knowledge and literature in this area of academic scholarship which examines the impact of these technologies from both theoretical and implementation...
perspectives’ (Gregory, 2004), there is little knowledge of what is happening with regards to the adoption, use and possible impact of these technologies in developing world settings. Yet, as Obijiofor (2003) notes, research and anecdotal evidence suggests that acceptance and adaptation to technological change varies from culture to culture and that different societies and groups respond to new technologies in different ways. For example, in a study of the social processes surrounding the introduction of computer technologies among high school students across three countries – Malaysia, Pakistan and New Zealand – Kim (1998) found that there were differences in appropriation and use in each country. Her general conclusion was that the students’ appropriation of the computer technology was influenced by family norms and schools’ contexts that certainly differed from country to country.

In another cross-cultural study that dealt with the impact of new technologies on the educational and socio-economic development of African and Asia-Pacific countries, Obijiofor, Inayatullah and Stevenson (2000) found that there were significant impediments to the use of new technologies in educational and socio-economic development. Among the issues they highlighted were infrastructure support, access to technology, training and skills development, and hierarchical social relations. The highlighted issues, to a large extent, determined who had access to the new technologies (Obijiofor et al, 2000). In the related field of journalism, a study carried out in Singapore and Nigeria (Obijiofor, 2001) found that despite the slow uptake of new technologies by Nigerian journalists, as opposed to their Singaporean counterparts, the technologies were transforming journalism practice in both countries and that journalists were of the view that the technologies were encouraging unethcical journalism practice. This implies that despite the optimism reflected in most of the literature on new technologies, there are perceived drawbacks. As Kyrish (1994) cautions, while communication technologies provide a fertile terrain for prophecy, people should resist the temptation of proffering arguments that consider them as ‘putatively autonomous, revolutionary and utopian’ (p5). This paper extends current research in the field by describing the views of public relations practitioners in Ghana, in relation to new technologies and their jobs.

**Data gathering and analysis procedures**

The research was carried out in Ghana during January and February 2004. The main purpose of the research was to investigate the extent to which new information and communication technologies such as personal computers, the internet, fax machines and mobile phones have been disseminated and adopted by public relations practitioners in Ghana, and how these technologies were impacting upon public relations practice and practices in Ghana.

The principal method of collecting data was through in-depth personal interviews. Respondents for the in-depth personal interviews were drawn from the membership of Institute of Public Relations, Ghana (IPR). I contacted the Executive Secretary of the Institute at the Head Office in Accra, the capital city of Ghana, and requested a list, with phone numbers and work addresses of all members working in the Capital City area (Accra/Tema metropolis) where a majority of the members work and reside. From the list, I made contact with over a hundred practitioners and explained to each of them the purpose of my research. I then asked whether they would be willing to participate in the research by granting me an interview. All the practitioners I spoke to were cooperative and willing to talk to me if a time could be arranged. In all I interviewed 54 practitioners with at least 16 of them in relatively high positions in their organisations, and who can be classified as senior practitioners. The number of years that respondents had worked in public relations ranged from between four to thirty years. Most of the
Interviews were held in the offices of the practitioners and this afforded me the opportunity to make on-site personal observations of the equipment available in these offices and to study, firsthand, the dynamics of the ‘technologised’ or in some cases ‘non-technologised’ workplace. Interviews were also held with the current executives of the IPR to get the Institute’s view on the technological situation of its members. Secondary sources, particularly documents and publications from the IPR were also used to collect relevant data. Data from these two other sources have been used to supplement information gathered through the personal interviews.

Interview questions covered a wide range of issues including respondents’ view of the technological situation a decade ago; their current technological situation; practitioners’ views about new technologies in their workplace, including any relevant policies; issues that came up during the transition from old to new technologies; what practitioners think are the effects of new technologies on their job (both positive and negative); and practitioners’ views about the opportunities and challenges presented by new technologies. In this paper I delve into a few of these issues that are relevant in order to be able to present a thorough picture of the technological situation of public relations practitioners in Ghana.

Data from interviews were analysed based on what Patton (1990) calls cross-case analysis which involves ‘grouping together answers from different people to common questions or analysing different perspectives on different issues’ (p376). In coding my research data, I followed Patton’s guidelines on cross-case analysis and grouped answers from different respondents by topics from the interview guide. After that, I manually searched the responses from all interviews in order to identify recurring regularities. I then checked the regularities over and over again to enable me to ascertain that these regularities represented certain patterns. When that was done, I did a further rigorous check of the patterns and this revealed different categories within the different patterns, and these were also sorted out. The categories were determined simply from the frequency of mention. The baseline I adopted in terms of frequency of mention was that an issue should be mentioned more than once. Afterwards, I carefully examined the categories manually again, to find out the extent to which data within each category were compatible, and also the extent to which data from different categories were different. This process ensured that all aspects of the data received the same attention and treatment.

Findings

Only the issues deemed relevant to the concerns of this paper have been selected for presentation and discussion here. These are grouped under the following subheadings: availability technologies; adoption and use; opportunities, potential and impact; issues and concerns in the adoption and use of new technologies; and, the IPR position. For the sake of brevity some of the findings are presented in tabular form, using simple percentages. In some cases, sample responses from the personal interviews are cited to give an indication of the nature and depth of responses to some of the questions.

Available technologies

Many of the new technologies available to practitioners in developed countries are also available in Ghana. The dominant ones are computers, the internet, mobile phones and fax machines. While these technologies are available, not all practitioners have access to them within their work settings. As Table 1 indicates, only 25.9% of respondents had a computer
on their desk, allocated to them personally, and of these, 24% had direct connection to the internet. A further 38.8% and 18.5% respectively, had access to a computer and internet within the office environment but in a central location. This means that overall, nearly two-thirds (64.8%) had access to computers at their workplace and fewer than half (42.5%) had access to the internet at their workplaces. It needs to be pointed out though, that having access to a centrally located computer does not necessarily mean that practitioners were using them. My observation was that in such cases, the tasks that usually had to be performed on the computers were allocated to secretaries or typists who were more comfortable with the technology. This observation was supported by comments from some of the respondents, as per the following example:

Yes, we have a couple of computers here that I can use but they are in the computer room. Getting up from my office to go there and type is not appealing to me so I just write things down and then my secretary goes there to type for me. I know it’s not the best, but… Maybe, when I get my own computer one day, things will change.

Mobile phones turned out to be the most widely disseminated technology, with every respondent owning one. However, it is instructive to note that only a small number of respondents had mobile phones that had been supplied to them by their organisations. The main reason given for the prevalence of mobile phone use was that, apart from the obvious benefits, ‘it has become a status symbol’. It is worth pointing out also that while many of the respondents were happy to receive work-related phone calls on their private mobile phones, they were not too keen on using the same phones to make work-related calls. The reason was simply one of cost. Mobile telephony is still at a relatively infant stage in Ghana and so mobile phone calls are very expensive. Table 1 below provides details of the technologies and their availability to practitioners within their work settings.

### Table 1: Technologies and their availability to practitioners

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technology</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer (personal)</td>
<td>14 (25.9)</td>
<td>40 (74.0)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer (central)</td>
<td>21 (38.8)</td>
<td>33 (61.1)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet / email (personal)</td>
<td>13 (24.0)</td>
<td>41 (75.9)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet / email (central)</td>
<td>10 (18.5)</td>
<td>44 (81.4)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone (personal)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mobile phone (organisation)</td>
<td>18 (33.3)</td>
<td>36 (66.6)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fax Machine</td>
<td>45 (83.3)</td>
<td>9 (16.6)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video/ Teleconferencing</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
<td>54 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note:** Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

As can be seen from the table, the fax machine is the most widely disseminated and used technology among practitioners. The main reason for this is again one of cost. Comparatively, it is the cheapest to buy and maintain, and one does not need any serious training to be able to use it. Practitioners also mentioned that it was very cost-effective so management did not have any difficulty seeing either the short term or long term benefits. Also, in most organisations there is usually the need for only one or two fax machines, as opposed to, say, the many computers that an organisation would require.

There is one important observation that is not represented in table 1 but is worth noting and analysing. A cross-institutional comparison of the data revealed that there is a technological
divide between practitioners working for private sector organisations (including multinational companies) and those working for public sector organisations. In particular, practitioners in government departments such as the Information Services Department tend to be seriously under-equipped technologically while their counterparts working for multinational companies like Coca Cola and Unilever tend to be quite well equipped. There is also a marked difference, in terms of availability and access to technology between practitioners working for state-owned organisations with income generating capacity, and government departments that are solely dependent on government budgetary allocations. In some cases, the level of technological availability for practitioners within the state-owned organisations with income generating capacity almost matches that of the multinational companies.

**Adoption and use**

While, some practitioners have embraced the new technologies, especially computer technology and the internet, and are using them on a daily basis for their work, many more have not or are unable to as a result of the technological situation in their workplaces. The sample of responses below is illustrative:

Ideally, I suppose it will be good to be able to use the computer and the internet for all the many things that I’ve heard they can do. But, to be honest with you, I haven’t had the time or the opportunity to learn how to use the computer or the internet. As you can see, I don’t have a computer here … May be, one day I’ll get there.

I think the profession in my view is moving ahead with IT. However, not all practitioners have the benefit of IT because definitely there are some organisations that have not been able to move at the pace that IT is going. In some organisations you will be surprised to learn that the whole PR department does not even have a computer. So such a practitioner will be at a disadvantage because however hard you try, whatever the effort you make, if you don’t have access to the machine you are not encouraged to use it so as to make a full benefit of it.

A number of reasons were given for the non-pervasiveness of computer and internet use among practitioners. Some of these are:

- Lack of accessible computers in the workplace;
- Lack of training in how to use computers and the internet;
- Fear of the technology;
- Fear of damaging the computer;
- Lack of time to learn how to use the computer;
- Relapse into computer illiteracy after initial training due to lack of opportunities to practice what has been learnt.

Respondents who had access to computers and the internet were asked about the uses to which they put these technologies. Many practitioners used computers just for word processing and very sparingly for budgeting, planning or desktop publishing. The main use of the internet was for emails as indicated by the sample response below.

I use it [the internet] mainly for email – within the organisation, and also with outside orgs, including the media. For instance when I am doing a proposal for a client you know I can email it back before and forth. We go through it and we make
amendments and so on and so forth. It is easier to get in touch with the client on the email and say: hey, I need some clarification on this; what do you mean? They also get back to me with their clarification, and all that. So it makes work much easier.

However, a few practitioners were using it for research as well. The responses below are indicative.

Ten years ago access to information was much more difficult, and research was very tedious. But now I can go on the internet and do research. Like today, I was doing some work and I needed some new information on fund raising so I went on the internet and I started searching. I got the information alright, and I used it. So yeah, I use it for research as well.

Our dealing with the media, well, that has also improved because of the internet. You know now a lot of them [the media] are on the internet so I do the research and get the feel of what the media is like, for the benefit of the clients. For instance I can go on the internet and find the editorial policy of all these papers and all that. On the net when you go through and make comparisons it is much easier for you to make analysis.

Opportunities, potential and impact

One of the main aims of the research was to find out practitioners’ views about the opportunities afforded by the new technologies and the potential impact on their work. Practitioners were unanimous in their view that the technologies had great potential and offered many opportunities for improvement in their work. Among the reasons they gave for such a positive view of the technologies, the following stand out:

- Will open up new horizons – opportunity to see what is going on in other places; how other practitioners are going about their work and dealing with issues;
- Opportunities to look at case studies;
- Keep abreast with new trends in the profession worldwide;
- Help in planning and research;
- Cut down on time spent on work;
- Minimise interruptions to work.

The sample of responses cited below illustrates some of the sentiments expressed:

It is going to assist us in working faster because you could just sit here and have information from all over the world to assist you in coming up with anything you want to do in PR.

These technologies, especially the internet, will open up a whole new world. It will help us see beyond our own horizons and to see how people, I mean practitioners in different parts of the world, are dealing with issues on a daily basis.

Well the traditional way of doing PR was more press relations than anything else. But now with the exposure to what is going on out there you know, and we know that PR is not just press relations; not just an errand boy or protocol set for somebody. PR is really trying to get a share of people’s minds and it is a much more complex job. With the technology I go on the net and I look at US campaigns, I look at the issues that have come
out of some of them. Similarly, I go to a campaign in Britain and I look at what is going. So you get to know what is going on in the world.

In addition to the potential and opportunities afforded, practitioners who were using the technologies were able to cite examples of the different ways in which the new technologies have impacted on their work. Increase in the quality of work produced; better relations with the media and journalists, including accessibility of journalists; accessibility of practitioners for double-checking of stories by journalists; cost-effectiveness mainly due to the use of fax machines for sending news releases and other relevant material; speed and ease of communication; were mentioned as some of the positive impacts that the new technologies have had on public relations work. The examples below illustrate some of these points:

So things are getting done faster than it used to be. And then efficiency, I think there has been improvement in quality because, if for example, I have to send somebody, by the time the information gets to the recipient there would have been some interruptions. I am not saying that using these technologies, interruptions can be avoided completely, no. But comparatively interruptions have reduced and it has led to an increase in efficiency and then quantity wise too I think the company has gone very far. In other words production has increased.

Some years back it took me the whole day to get a piece of information to 10 shippers and now within an hour I am able to get the same information to about 50 shippers. Now, things that we used let’s say one month to do, we are now using three, four, five days to do. And that to me is increase in production; that is quantity-wise. So apart from efficiency, quality and quantity too have increased.

Despite such positive views of the potential and current impact of new technologies, practitioners were also wary of some of the negative elements of these new technologies. Among the concerns raised in this regard were: internet pornography; the setting up of rogue sites; the spreading of negative and/or false information about organisations; the need to monitor employees so that they do not spend too much time surfing the net and/or playing games; the media by-passing consultants to deal directly with their clients; junk mail; and many more. The two examples of response provided below are indicative of such concerns:

One major problem I see is pornography. Yesterday I was trying to open my mail and what came on, boom, twelve nude Italian women giving their telephone numbers. So I said to myself, oh my God, so if a visitor was with me what will the impression that this will create, if the person doesn’t know about these things. Or probably if my wife came in to my office and then I want to show off that I am modern and this happened, what would she think? So it is a serious thing.

If somebody wants to do your organisation in, the effect is phenomenal because the person will just post some bad info on the net and within seconds the whole world knows about it. And it will take a hell of time to correct it. So these are some of the negative sides of these technologies. If it is just ten or even fifty people you can probably talk to them, but with the Net, it is all over the place. At times you won’t even know where it is posted.
Issues and concerns in the adoption and use of new technologies

While all respondents were positive about the impact new technologies will have on public relations practice and practices in Ghana, they were not blind to the challenges that full-blown technological adoption by practitioners would bring. They indicated that there would be issues to deal with in order for the new technologies, particularly computer and internet technology, to be fully utilised and yield expected benefits. Among the many challenges and concerns raised by practitioners, the most prominent were the following:

- Acquisition of the technologies – financial constraints particularly in government (public service) organisations or departments;
- Disparity in availability and use among different organisations particularly between the have (multinational companies etc) and the have-nots (government departments);
- Practitioners themselves: getting them to accept that they need to adopt and use these technologies, and to take the first step of learning how to use the computer;
- Getting employers to be more cooperative and pay for training for their employees (practitioners) and also providing them with the technologies at work;
- Frequent interruptions in electricity supply;
- Lack of appropriately trained personnel for the maintenance of equipment;
- Technical problems with internet (service providers slow to respond to internet problems of organisations);
- Under-utilisation of computers (mostly used for word processing only);
- Technophobia – the fear of computers by some people, including organisational heads;
- Laziness on the part of practitioners - some practitioners think they’re too old to learn new things;
- Training employees to use the technologies;
- Goodwill and commitment from top management;
- Monitoring employees to ensure that the internet is not misused.

The sample of responses cited below, highlight some of the issues raised above:

You see if we are able to computerise all our branches we are certainly going to boost our business, and to me it is a positive sign. And that is what should happen. But the problem is that, it is a capital-intensive type of thing and so unfortunately for us we don’t have the capacity, the financial capacity to be able to do that for all our branches in this country.

The challenge I see is for us the practitioners ourselves to be up and doing. You know a lot of us are computer shy and in this age you have to get yourself going if you want to move fast… The challenge to us practitioners is to really look at how best we can use these things to assist us in our PR practice.

The IPR position

As indicated earlier, interviews were held with the current executives of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR), Ghana. The main purpose was to find out the Institute’s view about the technological situation of its members and also its position on new technologies and public relations. The IPR is of the view that the rate of technological adoption and use among its members has been very slow and that many practitioners are not even computer literate and are set in their old ways of doing things:
Even though these technologies are used widely all over the world, their use in Ghana is relatively low. Even as we speak there are some practitioners who see the computer as something not to be touched if you are not trained because you may spoil it or may damage some part of it ... So they don’t use it and you get heads that still want to write for their secretaries to type on the computer for them. This is also very true with the profession; I have a lot of peers and colleagues who do not even know how to use the computer as a typewriter let alone to move ahead and to email and to access information on the Net.

Despite the IPR trying to get its members to use email and teaching them in some cases, how to open free email accounts with Yahoo and Hotmail, more than half of its members are not online: ‘Unfortunately about 60% of our members are not online; they do not have email addresses’. The IPR therefore has difficulties communicating with members via email.

Overall, the IPR recognises the need for its members to be up to speed technologically, particularly with the use of computers and the internet, including email. This is because, as the President put it, ‘all the tools we use in public relations are modernised now’. He went on to comment: ‘I cannot imagine a public relations practitioner who doesn’t have an email address. I mean it worries me. The whole idea is disastrous’. As a result, the Institute is encouraging all its members to get email addresses, even if their organisations do not provide them with such facilities. According to the President, that a practitioner’s organisation has not supplied him/her with email and internet facilities is not an excuse. In order to encourage (or rather force) practitioners to obtain email address and keep abreast with email technology, the executive has made a decision to communicate with members and disseminate information to them via email only.

The IPR wants to encourage its members to be at the forefront of technological innovation and change within their respective organisations. As a result, the current executive has made it their aim to train members to become computer literate. They are putting in place a training program to give all members the opportunity to learn how to use computers:

Come March this year, we are going to organise the first in a series of training that the president envisions will make practitioners use new technologies to enhance their work. The President’s vision is that in two years’ time, anyone calling himself or herself a PR professional should be computer literate and should be able to access information from any source on the Net.

Ultimately, the Institute wants to get its members to be able to use computer technology for planning, communication and research. They also want practitioners to know how to use the technology for data storage. The executive however has no illusions about the difficulty of the task of getting practitioners to use the new technologies. As the President put it: ‘It is not going to be easy, we will need to pep them up. But at least if by the end of this year we’ve gotten about 80% of our members using the technology we will be satisfied’. The position of the IPR in relation to new technologies and public relations practice in Ghana is unambiguous: New technologies have a lot to offer the public relations profession and practice in Ghana and the earlier practitioners got up to speed with the technologies, the better for all concerned.
Discussion and conclusion

Some of the findings reported here are similar to those reported in developed countries. Specifically, these relate to findings that deal with practitioners’ views about the potential of new technologies to impact on public relations practice. In the developed world, practitioners ‘use new technologies to work more effectively, and in the process work faster, more efficiently, and reduce costs’ (Wright, 2001, p7). Similarly, the concerns raised by Ghanaian practitioners about new technologies have also been echoed in studies conducted in the developed world. Jackson and Stoakes (1997), for example, found that in America the internet has the ability to cause serious injury to an organisation’s reputation, products and goodwill. They called it the internet’s ‘dark side’.

In other areas however, there are major points of contrast with what pertains in the developing world. The first is in regards to the adoption and use of new technologies, particularly computers and the internet. While research findings in the developed world indicate that there is an overwhelming use of new technologies by practitioners (see, for example, Ryan, 1999; Guth & Marsh 2003; Porter et al, 2001), this study has revealed that this is not the case in Ghana. In fact, over 30% of respondents do not use computers at work, while more than 50% do not use the internet. These findings relating to the availability and use of these technologies are not entirely out of sync with the little that is known of technological adoption in the West African sub region, which includes Ghana. In the related area of journalism, Obijiorfor (2003), in his study of technological adoption and use by Ghanaian and Nigerian journalists, found a similar situation and concluded that: ‘Availability of new technologies in Nigerian and Ghanaian newsrooms remains a serious problem’ (p48).

Further to that, most of the issues raised by practitioners as main concerns about technological adoption and use are not entirely surprising in a developing world context. These issues are similar to the findings of Obijiorfor et al (2000) in relation to barriers to the use of new technologies in educational and socio-economic development in developing African and Asia-Pacific countries. What these particular findings reveal is that there is a major correlation between the socio-economic and political settings in which technological adopters reside, and what they make of these technologies eventually. In the context of this study therefore, such findings will help in our understanding of the dynamics between new communication technologies available to practitioners on the one hand, and how these technologies interact with societal and other factors to influence adoption rates and views about the technologies themselves.

There are continuing limitations to the adoption of new technologies among public relations practitioners in Ghana. These limitations and concerns are institutional, system-wide and human-related. While practitioners may have minimal input in dealing with the issues that are institution and system related, the human related ones fall squarely within their domain. Indeed, if practitioners are willing to embrace new technologies and utilise them for the benefit of their jobs, then they can find ways of being effective despite the existence of the other limitations. As Tettey (2002) notes, ‘[The] human factor is very critical in determining the direction that IT innovations take’ (p74).

The position of the IPR concerning the knowledge, ability and skill levels of its members regarding new technologies is bold, to say the least. It can be agreed that technological advancements have altered communication and communication practices in almost all parts of the world, and therefore practitioners, irrespective of where they are, need to be abreast
with such changes in order to be effective. One hopes however, that the enthusiasm of the IPR is a not a ‘reverberation of a technologically determinist perspective that is based on a positivist assumption which presents scientific knowledge and expertise as socially neutral phenomena’ (Tettey, 2000, p60). Given the vast and still growing literature on the positive impact of new technologies on public relations practice in the developed world, encouraging wholesale technological adoption by its members would seem like such an alluring proposition for the IPR. Nevertheless, one cannot support a position of wholesale adoption without paying heed to the varying socio-cultural, economic and political contexts of developing nations.

While there are similarities between the developed world and the developing world in terms of sentiments about the potential of new technologies to have a positive impact on the public relations profession and practice, the reality of the developing world (Ghanaian) situation shows that there is yet a long way to go for these benefits to be felt across the broad spectrum of practitioners. As practitioners, theorists and public relations educators continue to make predictions about the impact of new technologies on public relations, it is instructive to note that there is a technological divide between practitioners in developed countries and their counterparts in developing countries, and also, that within developing countries there is still a further chasm between the technological haves, and the have-nots. These divisions are by and large indicative, reflective, and also representative of the wider socio-cultural, economic and political settings in which practitioners operate.

References


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