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An Investigation into the Role Played by Public Relations in Selected Public Institutions in Harare, Zimbabwe

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Abstract:

In this age of modern technologies and high-level competition in business, Public Relations (PR) should be taken as a crucial function in organisations. PR today is diachronic as it links the organization with its key constituents. PR as a profession is generally misunderstood or misinterpreted and sometimes reduced to publicity or propaganda. The rationale of the present study was to explore and explain the lived experiences of Public Relations (PR) practitioners working in public institutions in Harare. The study's main objectives were: to examine theories and practices of PR globally and to establish how PR is practiced in Zimbabwe. A qualitative paradigm was chosen because it is incisive and 'drills – deep' into issues. The research used phenomenology as the guiding research design. Purposive sampling was used to pick seven PR practitioners and the data were generated using in-depth interviews supported by observation and documentary analysis. The data were analysed through qualitative content analysis which involved verbatim transcriptions, interpretations of data narrations and reviewing of scripts while at the same time listening to audio recorded tapes. The study was driven by the role theory. The study findings revealed that PR practice in the selected organisations was synchronic and one-way although some challenges existed for some practitioners. These findings illuminated that PR is still a technical function in most public institutions and the study concluded that Zimbabwe as a developing country which relied mainly from the developed world in terms of PR material need to produce its own PR literature and train its own people. What came out from the study is that generally the PR theory and practice are almost the same in most countries although literature has shown that application can vary from one country to another. As a result, it is recommended that PR in the public sector in Zimbabwe should catch up with current trends and that the country need to develop its own PR literature and create its own body of knowledge to suit local situations as well as catching up with current global trends of taking PR as a serious management function.

Keywords: PR, communication, management, diachronic, synchronic

1. Introduction

Today Public Relations (PR) has become a field of interest to many Communications scholars. An analysis of the system theory indicates that PR is a critical subsystem of an organization which is integral in the success of any organization. Effective PR affords institutions to effectively interact and monitor its key publics within the organizational environment (Geremew, 2017). Stroh (2007) noted that to build and enhance healthy relationships between an organization and its publics, it is vital to recognise that many cross-disciplines have been integrated to build a theory of public relations in terms of relationships and relationship management. This idea strengthens the view that public relation is a communication process that maintains mutual benefit for both an organization and its public. Piperopoulos (2003: 284) argued that public relation is a distinctive management function which helps in the understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organisation and its publics.

On the other hand, public relations help management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinions as well as define and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest. PR also helps management to effectively utilise change; serves as an early warning system to help anticipate trends and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools. Muchena (2017) observed that public relations in Zimbabwe generally is less significant in the eyes of top-level managements in most organizations. As a result, the consistency of the public relations practices may not be on the right track. In spite of significant changes in the focus and practice of public relations during the last decade in Zimbabwe, the term is still misused, misunderstood and misinterpreted in many organizations. It is wrongly associated with propaganda, publicity, and manipulation. Rosenberg (2013) noted that many people wrongly assume that public relations is preoccupied with image-making in the sense of creating a false front or cover-up.

1.1. Public Relations as a Phenomenon

Although the name public relations are expanding and growing rapidly in many organisations in Zimbabwe, the profession is still suffering from many problems emanating from misunderstanding of the clear roles and functions of the

public relations, low understanding of the difference between public relations as a discipline on its own, as a management tool, as marketing expert and as a communication process in an organization (Muchena, 2017).

The issue of public relations practices in different countries including Zimbabwe has been controversial within in the field of communication. According to Piperopoulos (2013), the possible reason for this could be attributed to the lack of understanding of the role of public relations. At the same time, very few people know what public relation encompasses, what it aims to achieve and how it works. Some people see public relations as propaganda, while others understand public relations as a technique of embellishing ugly or even antisocial realities in some other parts of the world (Piperopoulos, 2013). Henslowe (1999), noted that public relations as a discipline is often either misunderstood or deliberately misinterpreted so that it is used in a pejorative way, associating it with propaganda, 'economy of the truth' or evasion. Most organizations disregard public relations as an integral part of the organization. In most instances, organizations only acknowledge the importance of public relations when things go wrong and in times of crisis. Hence, public relations practitioners rescue the situation by apologizing to the organizations' publics. PR then takes the responsibility of assuring that all will be managed and the crisis is under control. In some instances, the functions of public relations overlap with and are interrelated with that of other disciplines. It is often merged with Marketing. However, there are fundamental differences between the two that arise from establishing relationships. The primary difference, according to Sudhashan (1995) cited in Stroch (2007) is the type of stakeholders served by the two fields. Marketing management focuses on the relationships with customers, clients, and channel used to reach customers. Public Relations on the other hand, constitutes a much wider scope than ensuring the selling of products and services. As Grunig, Grunig and Dozier (2002) put it, stakeholders such as the mass media, the activist groups, employees, unions, funders, or the direct community who may not be part of the market are also important to change and influence the organisational goals intended.

According to Kotler et.al. (2005) in Muchena(2017), Public Relations and Marketing function together by building exchange relationships with consumers, customers, clients, distributors, and other marketing parties through areas such as sponsorships, corporate identity, image building and media relations. Although PR has been in existence in Zimbabwe since the 1950s, the struggle to achieve what has been accomplished by other countries is not yet very clear.

Despite the presence of public relations in most organizations little has been done in terms of investigating the role of public relations in Zimbabwe. As a result, the crux of this study is to explore the practices of public relations in Zimbabwe. The study is of the view that the practice of PR is highly challenging for the practitioners in organizations. There still exists in Zimbabwe wide gaps in understanding the roles of public relations in relation to other units within organizations. Hence, this study used the fundamental roles of public relations to identify and further explore the situation within selected organizations in Harare in relation to the global context.

2. Review of Related literature

2.1. Theoretical Models/Concepts of Public Relations

PR scholars have come up with models and concepts that look at the roles and function of public relations. Various world views and theoretical roles came up and have played an important function in assisting to describe the various roles and functions of public relations.

Public Relations models look at the purpose of PR in any given organisation. Models of PR first appeared in 1984 in a book called "Managing Public Relations" by J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) cited on www.saylor.org/books. These authors, as cited by (Agang, 2009), came up with four models, (press agentry/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical and two-way symmetrical) which were aimed at describing the development of PR in USA and show distinct ways in which it was practiced. Since then, the models have been used to show the role and function of modern-day PR.

Literature on public relations shows that the first four theoretical roles devised by Broom and Smith in 1978 and 1979 (Sung, 2004 on www.drums.lib.umd.edu) are communication technician, communication facilitator, expert prescriber and problem-solving process facilitator.

The communication technician role of public relations is mostly conceptualized as the beginning of professionalism (Grunig and Grunig, 2002). Tindall (2007) posits that the communication technicians offer services such as graphic design, writing press releases, editing house-magazines and other functions which are technical to the organisation. Grunig and Grunig (2002) further maintained that the practitioner who performs this role, is usually not involved in defining problems and developing solutions. Although they do not carry out research, they often decide on which communication mechanism best suits their purpose and are also not involved in organisational decision-making (Sung, 2004).

The communication facilitators of public relations according to Theaker (2004) are boundary spanners because they eliminate barriers and create links between organization and its key publics (Theaker, 2004). According to (Cutlip et al., 2000) cited by Geremew (2017:140, the goal of this role is "to provide both management and publics the information they need for making decisions of mutual interest." The practitioner serving as the public relations manager in any organization is expected to be knowledgeable about innovations in public relations and is expected to demonstrate leadership in new approaches to solve problems (Castelli, 2007 in Geremew, 2017).

The expert prescriber role involves the PR practitioner investigating and identifying PR challenges and decides on programmes and executes them (Theaker (2004). Under this role the practitioner is responsible for describing and solving public relations problems independently. The expert prescriber acts as the authority on both public relations problems and their solutions (Castelli, 2007 in Geremew, 2017).

The problem-solving facilitator's roles of public relations, is the role where the practitioner is a problem solver, decision-maker and planner. PR personnel performing this role in any organisation should identify and resolve problems. Kelleher (2000), notes added that, PR assists senior managers to systematically reflect through various circumstances. Kelleher, (2000) and Theaker, (2004) agreed that PR practitioners should take part in decisions that are strategic from the onset, help set objectives, define communication needs and advise on implementation Facilitators in the process of problem-solving are considered as experts as they assist other members in the organisation in analysing and finding solutions to problems and are thus part of the dominant coalition (Theaker, 2004; Keller 2001; Moss and Green 2001).

Further role studies by Meintjes (2011), Gregory (2008), Kelleher (2001), Toth, Serini, Wright and Emig, (1998) shows that these four roles can be reduced to only two. A factory analysis carried out by Meintjes (2011) showed that the four roles were difficult to support as they overlapped. It was noted that the same personnel could do the last three roles whilst another different person does the first one (technical role). In the end, only two roles came out: the technician and the manager (Gregory, 2008).

PR roles today vary and the role played depends of the organization. Some practitioners play a purely technical role while others are valued management counsellors whether it's in a very big corporation or a small non-profit making organization. Geremew (2017) noted that the roles and responsibilities of any PR practitioner depend on the professionalization of PR and the nature of the organization's environment. Where we have multiple roles, this could be as a result of the multiple functions through its association with communications, management, marketing and others. Lubbe and Puth (2002) pointed that public relations practitioners may be involved in a variety of work assignments or functions such as research, strategic planning, counseling, communication, evaluation, media relations and placement, organizing, writing, editing, media production, speaking, training, management. However, the most common prevailing perspectives that influence the function of public relations in broad concept include communication, management and marketing (Venter, 2004).

2.2. Public Relations as a Communication Perspective

One of the most important factors which contributes to the success of any PR officer is communication. Communication in public relations is the basic ingredient to make a good decision that can contribute to the goals of an organization. The author noted that PR practitioners are central in providing managers with good information which may be vital for these managers to make the right decisions. Saylor on (<http://www.saylor.org.book>) noted that the communication role of public relations succeeds and is based on looking at all the stakeholders in the organization and using a variety of tools and tactics to enhance relationships with these publics. Saylor emphasized that at "its best, the communication function uses research and monitoring methods to keep a finger on the pulse of internal and external perceptions of the organization" and use a variety of communication channels to enhance the organization's reputation, (<http://www.saylor.org.book>). The same website argued that most importantly, PR provides strategic counsel to the organization's leaders to help the team make better decisions. While Rosenberg (2013) also added that the communication perspective of public relations is critical in any organization as PR practitioners have to be interpreters and functions as communication links between an institution and all of its publics.

2.3. Public Relations as a Management Function

From a management perspective, PR must play two critical roles; (a) oversight of organizational internal communications policies and actions, (b) oversight of organizational external policies, actions and coordination of internal and external communications, (Rosenberg,2013).

A number of studies were carried out in an attempt to explain the management role of public relations (Grunig, 2013; Seitel, 2004). Such scholars emphasize that as PR manages the organization's public relations system, it must exhibit comfort with the various components of the organization. Onwunali (2006) cited by Muchena (2017) argued that public relations are an apparatus of management and their input has to be considered during the process of policy formulation in organizations. Onwunali (2006) agrees with scholars such as Grunig and Grunig, (2008) and De Santo, (2011) that PR senior executives must be members of the dominant coalition. When PR is considered as member of top management then usually the communication programmes will be managed strategically. American PR scholars Grunig and Grunig have emphasized that for PR to be effective it has to report directly to the most senior official running the organization and not to report to other departments such as Human Resources or Marketing.

2.4. Public Relations and Marketing

Kitchen (2002) and Daymon and Holloway, (2011) have argued that PR and marketing communication are closely related. The two disciplines have a lot in common but PR scholars have concluded that they are different and should not be confused (Grunig, Grunig, and Toth, (2007)). Both disciplines deal with organizational relationships and use common techniques, strategies and processes, although they are separated by the goal and mission. In his study on the Excellence theory, Grunig (2008) highlighted that PR can only be excellent when practiced strategically and separated from marketing. Grunig (2008) argued that marketing should never overshadow PR but the two must remain well coordinated and independent.

Grunig, Grunig, and Toth, (2007) emphasized that the main differences between PR and marketing is that marketing is the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, sales promotion, and distribution of ideas, goods and services to create exchanges that satisfies individuals and organizational objectives. The scholars noted that the purpose of marketing is to attract and satisfy clients on a long-term basis through maintaining and building customers for

the organizational products or services. On the other hand, PR is the management function through communication of perceptions and strategic relations between an organization and its internal and external publics (Muchena, 2017). Concluding on the differences, Gruniget.al. (2007) said the marketing function should communicate with the markets for an organization's goods and services whilst public relations should be concerned with, all the publics of the organization.

Rawjee et.al. (2012) argued that it is important to note that both PR and marketing bear a common principle of communication which is centred on maintaining and building harmonious relationships of organizations with their internal and external stakeholders. The most important purpose of marketing is to make money for the organization by increasing sales while that of public relations is to save money for the organization by building relationships with publics that constrains or enhances the ability of the organization to meet its mission (Rawjee et al., 2012). It is thus important to understand the differences of these two closely related disciplines in organizations so that their functions and contributions are not confused, misunderstood and misinterpreted.

2.5. Public Relations Education in Zimbabwe

PR education has greatly advanced in the western world as compared to most African countries except South Africa. As stated by Hornaman (2000), public relations education can greatly contribute to public relations status as a profession. In a Zimbabwean study by Muchena (2017) it was noted that where PR is studied, (whether in State or Private Universities), it is often treated as an aspect of Media Studies. As a result, PR is often appended to other disciplines and steps to study PR as a standalone discipline, if there at all, are still in their infancy as noted from two state universities which have just introduced a post graduate diploma. The fact that this is a 'post graduate' diploma implies that the mentality to attach PR to other disciplines, especially Media Studies, still dominates (Chaka and Agang, 2011).

The Zimbabwe Institute of PR (ZIPR) runs courses and examinations which are taught by practitioners who are members of the institution. What is of concern is the scope of teaching 'PR principles' and the absence of appropriate texts. As Grunig (2009) postulates, ZIPR is offering training in PR but this cannot easily be deemed tertiary training in the sense that the programme is not yet accredited by the national quality assurance body the Zimbabwe Council of Higher Education (ZIMCHE) (Fendekete, 2016 in Muchena, 2017; Steyn, 2009). The programme is not structured following such academic standards as prescribed by ZIMCHE. Besides, the teaching staff, although they have degrees (some with PhDs) the degrees are not specifically in the area of PR (Fendekete, 2016). Thus, as Ehling (cited in Grunig et.al., 2002) contends, these academics may be referred to as 're-trades from other fields' especially journalism and education. Besides, the ZIPR programme course outline shows that the majority of the courses are related to journalism (Muchena, 2017). This shows that for ZIPR, PR as a profession is looked at in terms of practice and in terms of its techniques more than its theory (Grunig, 2009). This is exactly one factor which has prompted the researcher to carry out this study which advocates for a broader understanding of PR that defines it more by its theory than by its techniques (<http://core-kmi.open.ac.uk>).

It is interesting to note that PR practitioners in Zimbabwe felt this gap as early as 2000. At most of their annual meetings since 2000, ZIPR members who have varied educational backgrounds have raised different problems they face in their duties. The members showed that they have a different understanding of what they should be doing. To resolve this rather perennial challenge, it was agreed in 2014 by the members that there is need to develop PR literature that advances local theory and practice relevant to the Zimbabwean situation and culture (Watson, 2014). So, as part of the justification of this study, one of the researcher's goals is to contribute towards building a body of knowledge on PR in a Zimbabwean context following the 2014 Zimbabwean PR practitioners' caucus.

As a result of this PR practitioners in Zimbabwe with PR qualifications are not many but according to Kruckeberg (1998) as cited by Geremew (2017) the PR profession requires specialized professional education. Hornaman (2000) quoting Grunig (1989) argued that PR education is key to developing the profession of public relations.

3. Methodology

The study adopted the qualitative research paradigm because it is people-centred and the researcher was seeking participants' perceptions regarding the practice of PR in their organisations. The participants gave meanings sought from this study's phenomenon based on their beliefs, values, opinions, thoughts and actions. Qualitative research was ideal because its primary intention is not to generalise findings, but to provide rich, credible and authentic thick descriptions of phenomena based on the PR practitioners based on their lived experiences, (Rudestam and Newton, 2007).

This study adopted an interpretivist philosophy because interpretivism is about appreciating human behaviour in a particular context (Gray, 2004). The author observed that, "interpretivism looks for culturally-derived and historically situated interpretation of the social life-world" thus social reality is viewed as being constructed, (Gray, 2004:104).

The researcher adopted the interpretivist philosophy in this study based on the following reasons. The researcher entered the 'social world' of PR practitioners seeking to interact and collect in-depth information about their practice, so as to appreciate what inspired their behaviours. Interpretations were made from the data which served the purpose of the research which was aimed at acknowledging what these practitioners do on a daily basis. The researcher was able to observe, record, hear and compare the experiences, perceptions and feelings of PR practitioners.

Phenomenology was adopted as the research design because it differs from other research methodologies because its goal is to describe a lived experience, rather than to explain or quantify it in any way (<https://cirt.gcu.edu>). Phenomenology is solely concerned with the study of the experience from the perspective of the participants. Phenomenology was also chosen because it emphasizes subjectivity and its goal is to maximize the depth of the information generated.

The target population for this study was all PR practitioners in Harare who are employed in public institutions such as Government Ministries and parastatals and who were ZIPR members. The rationale of targeting PR practitioners who were members of ZIPR was that this would make it easier to get their contact details.

3.1. Sampling and Sample Procedure

The selection was purposeful, since the researcher "selected individuals and sites for the study which purposefully informed an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study" (Creswell, 2007 in Marable, 2011:52). The researcher purposively selected participants basing on one's potential to make momentous input towards the focus of the research and that one would be able to verify what was contributed.

This sample was, therefore, based on occupation and minimum length of experience. This was appropriate given that the research's focus was narrow as well as what I intended to accomplish.

A total of seven PR practitioners were interviewed for this study. To recruit participants for this study, the researcher requested for e-mail addresses from members of ZIPR based in Harare in 2017. E-mails which outlined the aspects of the study, its background, purpose, method and procedure, protection of confidentiality and information about the researcher were sent out. Before getting the contact, details and sending out e-mails the researcher briefed the authorities at ZIPR about the research.

The researcher interviewed the first seven PR practitioners, who responded to the e-mails and met the entire criterion to be included in the research. Besides the personal interviews, some interviewees offered their views in written form after the interviews. This became very critical for the study as this combination of verbal and written submissions minimised distortions.

The semi-structured interviews and observation were used during data generation. The researcher asked the participants to freely choose places to meet for the interviews and they were assured of privacy and confidentiality of the interview material. As a result, all of them were more relaxed and motivated to share their perceptions and experiences of working as PR practitioners. Such an environment enabled the researcher to get rich data from the in-depth interviews as anonymity was also guaranteed.

The interviews lasted between fifty to ninety minutes and audio-recorded to capture (with permission from the participant) the interviews for analytic purposes.

4. Document Analysis

Documents were important in this study because they gave insight into what takes place in PR practice. Yim (2014) said documents are a vital source of information as they validate and augment evidence from other sources. In this study, documentary analysis entailed various written material on public relations and research methods.

4.1. Data Presentation

Data was transcribed verbatim and at times presented using both direct and indirect quotations. This study presented the data in a descriptive form as the PR practitioners were describing their experiences in the field.

4.2. Data Analysis

After the interviews, the researcher immersed himself in the information gathered through listening to the entire recorded interviews, then read and re-read transcriptions many times to get the essence of the conversation. This dwelling process (through empathetic immersion or interpolation and reflection) was done so as to get closeness to the data and acquire a feeling for the participants and their responses (Finlay, 2014).

As the dwelling process went on fresh perceptions emerged, data started to form meaning and the researcher began to see little lumps of data usually termed as "meaning units" or phrases supported by "non-verbal communication, which expressed a particular point or meaning that could be differentiated from preceding text" (Finlay, 2014:26). From the beginning of the analysis the researcher empathetically joined with co-researchers as both systematically dwell with the raw data and waited for implicit, layered meaning to appear at the front. Later on, the researcher started to identify parts that were relevant to the phenomenon being studied as they expressed the participants' own meaning of the experience and they only made sense as they related to all the units' structure (Makoe, 2007). These meaning units were correlated with the researcher's perspective. These were the statements the researcher saw to illuminate the research phenomenon and as a result the researcher had to pull out and safely keep them, whilst redundant units were eliminated (Groenewald, 2004).

Data analysis started during the time of carrying out interviews, when observing non-verbal communication as well as listening to descriptions by participants. The data was transcribed verbatim, the interpretation of narrations of data, script review and the listening of audio-tapes. After transcription of the interview the researcher immersed himself in the data to get finer insights into the phenomenon being studied, then came up with groups/categories or themes that could lead to theory development.

Meanings were then crystallised and condensed to form clusters of themes familiar to all participants. The researcher tried to remain very close indeed to the words spoken by the participants and, where possible, the clusters were referred to the initial transcriptions to validate them and conform consistently between the emerging conclusions and the participants' original stories (Finlay, 2015:126). The researcher later picked the meaning elements which were related to the research questions and put them together as the idea was to interrogate the meaning units for what they

reveal about the concept of PR practice as a strategic management function. Validation was done by returning to participants to verify if the essence of the interview had been well captured.

The meaning units are synthesized across all the participants' accounts to form clusters of essential meanings and eventually the researcher came up with a statement of eidetic intuition about PR practice in Zimbabwean public institutions studied.

4.3. Involvement of NVivo in Data Analysis

During the analysis the researcher used two computer software, namely Microsoft Word Office and NVivo. Microsoft Word was used to capture interviews, all translations and transcriptions which were done. These were then imported into NVivo for part of the analysis. Since I was still new to the NVivo software, for a comprehensive analysis I opted to combine both the manual and the computer-assisted method to try and achieve the best results. This was done because using the two improves trustworthiness and validity of the findings (on www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc).

The researcher chose NVivo over other packages because it was seen as relatively simple to use and that it was easy to move documents straight from word and easily code them on screen. The software was mainly used to code the data and later to develop themes. The coding involved subdividing the bulky raw information and subsequently putting it into categories. This was helpful as it yielded more reliable results compared to doing it manually as human error would creep in. This form of cross-examining the data was crucial in terms of achieving a general motion which was not affected by any particular memorable accounts.

Generally, NVivo added thoroughness to the analysis as it was quick and accurate especially for bulky data, to get valid results. It can be married with manual techniques for smaller samples so that data is thoroughly interrogated. This was the case for this study which had only seven participants. According to www.qualitative-research.net, NVivo managed to remove some of the manual activities such as marking, cutting and sorting using scissors, paper and note cards which increased effectiveness and speeded up the grouping of the data but still the researcher had to combine the data and make meanings from the data. Another advantage of using NVivo was that it made the organisation, reduction and storage of data more proficient and controllable whilst its use was mainly curtailed by the "nature of qualitative research itself in terms of the complexity of its unstructured data, the richness of the data and the way in which findings and theories emerge from the data" (Roberts and Wilson, 2002 cited on www.qualitative-research.net).

5. Results and Discussions

The findings and results of the study showed that public relations in all the selected organisations was mainly a technical role dominated by activities such as writing press releases, organizing events on anniversaries and exhibitions (Zimbabwe International Trade Fair or Harare Agricultural Show). Six out the seven agreed that these were the main activities they do. It also came out from all the public relations practitioners that they played a role of disseminating information from top management to the public and the opposite was very little. PR in these organisations concentrates on trying to get only positive coverage from the media. It was noted that the practitioners said 70% of their time is spend on publicity or playing the press agency role.

The PR practitioners were asked whether they play any management role or are involved in any top management and related activities such as discussing policies and strategic plans with other top management. Five of the seven practitioners said they were not involved in the discussions of strategic plans and policies of their organisations with top management. Only two of them are involved when looking at certain policies and programmes. This is different from the current situation in the private sector or other developed countries where PR is now a management function and concentrates on the diachronic role of linking the organization with its publics and vice versa. Cutlip et.al. (2000) cited by Geremew (2017) supports this notion by stating that in order to become involved in strategic planning, public relations practitioners should operate at the highest level of organizational management and have access to the most senior information and decision-making systems. As mentioned earlier almost seventy-five percent of the participants showed that PR in their institutions did not involve participating in top management decision making although this is very critical today. According to Mykkanen and Vos (2015), decision making is strategic and the involvement of public relations in the organizational decision making helps the practitioners to change the organizations' environment.

There is very little participation of PR in high level decisions making as five out seven participants are not even involved in the conception of the public relations plans of their institutions. These plans are initiated by people who do not have PR knowledge and experience and they are only given to implement. They noted that this has brought many challenges as at the end they did not take responsibility for the success or failure of such plans. It is clear from this that the majority of the public relations practitioners did not play a management function but were more into publicity and playing a propaganda role. As a result of this role all the public relations practitioners were former journalists in the public media in Zimbabwe. This approach (journalists-in-residence) views PR as primarily concerned with giving out information, that the organisation wants the public to know from the press with the aim of persuading the public to agree with the organization's view point (Heath,2005).

All the participants said public relations in their institutions is managed by people without training in PR and as a result it was not well recognised and influential. They noted that as a result of this PR was not handling 'real' PR issues. Six participants pointed that they were not performing complex activities carried out by other public relations practitioners such as boundary spanning, research and issues management. This showed that these practitioners knew what they were supposed to do but their working environments could not allow them. The same participants struggled to agree then that

without performing such key roles the public relations in their institutions are viewed as mainly propaganda and manipulators of people's mind.

Generally, the PR practitioners agreed that public relations are not well understood by more than half of the senior managers and staff members in their organisations. PR is not clearly understood and as a result in most of the institutions studied it is linked or not clearly identified from related disciplines such as Marketing, Advertising, Sales and Human Resources. This lack of clear distinction has led to PR not being well equipped and resourced as compared to other departments. Two participants noted that PR in the Zimbabwean public institutions were overlooked with PR practitioners reduced to personal assistants of Chief Executive Officers or simply press or information officers (Odedele, 2008). This gave rise to the term "gin and tonic" that the PR function has often come to be referred to in Africa (Van Heerden, 2004). Van Heerden (2004) points out that PR practice "emerged from the press agency model as organisations regarded media relations as the most critical" function.

The participants noted that one role they do was handling public complaints as they end up interacting with almost everyone. The participants noted that whenever an issue arose where even senior management are not clear who to assign, it is given the PR department to the extent that even receptionists, whenever they are not sure on where to direct a visitor including phones, refer or transfer them to the PR department.

It is clear from the descriptions by the public relations practitioners that the gap between them and their managers prevent them from fully and properly performing their PR roles. The general indicators are that most senior managers neither have a clear understanding of the practices, roles and functions of PR, nor do they have a clear idea about the roles and functions of public relations practitioners.

6. Conclusions

This study was aimed at investigating the roles of public relations in selected public institutions in Harare. The roles of public relations in the study area have been subjected to a wrong perception of what a public relations person actually does. The study confirmed that PR is misunderstood and misinterpreted. There is very little understanding of the major functions and roles of public relations in Harare's public institutions including managers and other employees because, public relations practitioners are rarely involved in strategic planning, in decision making and in following up the implementation of plans in their organizations. The functions of public relations at the strategic planning level rarely exist due to lack of public relations qualified persons. This resulted in the confusion of recognising public relations as communication expert, as management body and as marketing disciplines. Generally, the status of the practices of public relations in Zimbabwean public institutions is different from the private sector. The studied public institutions showed that the practice is in the early stage of its maturity and formation. The activities carried out by these practitioners fall under Grunig's first model of public relations, which focuses only on publicity or press agency. The main communication format is one-way official communication which Western PR gurus (Grunig, 2002; Lane, 2005) termed synchronic and asymmetrical.

The common roles public relations practitioners in the public sector are playing are mainly seen as a communicator, a mediator or communication link between the organization and all its publics. There is a general lack of sufficient resources given to public relations to operate effectively, and lack of a comprehension and misconception on its roles and functions. There is therefore need for education and training in PR as a standalone programme (not appended to other programmes) so as to create professionals who may transform PR in the country. PR should be a profession which is independent and not a tool for publicity, propaganda but a management function. PR practitioners must be members of the dominant coalition and be able to interpret the organization's policies, philosophies and programmes.

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