

Information Management: Distinguishing Public Relations From Propaganda

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This article attempts to distinguish public relations (PRs) from propaganda, within the context of information management. Speedy dissemination of information is an important feature of contemporary communication practice globally. In this era, the information content of communication is an important element requiring critical evaluation. This is so, because of the need to safeguard the information ecosystem, considering the thin line between public relations and propaganda. While both propaganda and public relations aim to shape perceptions, influence attitudes, and sway opinions, one key distinction lies in their ethical considerations. Public relations emphasize honesty, accuracy, accountability, and a commitment to the truth. In contrast, propaganda may involve manipulation, distortion, or even fabrication of information to advance a particular agenda, often at the expense of truth and transparency. Hinged on The Excellence Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model, the paper focuses on the meeting points and differences between public relations and propaganda, with a view to safeguarding the integrity of the information ecosystem. The study adopted the survey research method, with interview as research instrument. The study discovered that while propaganda is not entirely a bad practice, it has a heavy tilt towards bias. It therefore recommends that deliberate steps be taken by relevant professional organisations and other stakeholders towards educating the citizens on ways of distinguishing between public relations and propaganda contents.

Keywords: propaganda, public relations, information management, communication

Introduction

In an era characterised by the rapid dissemination of information, the boundaries between public relations (PRs) and propaganda have become increasingly blurred, raising critical questions about the responsible management of information in our interconnected world.

Public relations and propaganda both operate within the realm of strategic communication, aiming to shape perceptions, influence attitudes, and sway opinions. However, the subtle nuances that differentiate the two are

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essential for understanding the ethical implications and societal impact of their respective practices. As we navigate an information landscape saturated with diverse media channels, the need to discern between responsible communication and manipulative persuasion becomes paramount.

The ability to distinguish between public relations and propaganda is crucial. While both concepts involve the strategic management of information to shape public perception, they operate on different ethical principles and have distinct objectives.

In this era of information overload, it is imperative to delve into the nuances that separate them, as the lines separating them could be sometimes blurred, leading to potential misinformation and manipulation.

According to Greenwood (2023), both propaganda and PR share the common goal of conveying information and persuading audiences, yet they differ significantly in their intentions, methodologies, and ethical considerations.

For Grizzell (2023), propaganda and PR can be viewed as quite similar in a few ways: They both aim to shape perceptions and influence public opinion, both use the mass media, and both are directed at specific audiences. The result for both is to get people to take some sort of action.

Public relations and propaganda share the common goal of influencing public opinion, but their underlying intentions and methods set them apart. Public relations, at its core, seek to establish and maintain a positive image for an organisation or individual. It is built on transparency, credibility, and ethical communication. Public relations professionals engage in activities such as media relations, community outreach, and crisis management to foster mutually beneficial relationships between an entity and its stakeholders.

On the other hand, propaganda is a tool designed to manipulate perceptions and beliefs for political, ideological, religious, or social purposes.

Unlike public relations, propaganda often involves the dissemination of biased or misleading information to achieve specific objectives. While public relations aim for a symbiotic relationship between an organisation and its public, propaganda is more unilateral, seeking to impose a particular viewpoint without regards for an open exchange of ideas.

For the propagandists, mass media is a very practical means of mass manipulation because its effects can reach a wide range and large population (Baran & Davis, 2006).

Public Relations vs. Propaganda

One key distinction between public relations and propaganda lies in the ethical considerations. Public relations, when practiced ethically, emphasize honesty, accountability, and a commitment to the truth. Public relations professionals strive to provide accurate information and foster open dialogue with the public.

In contrast, propaganda may involve manipulation, distortion, or even fabrication of information to advance a particular agenda, often at the expense of truth and transparency.

Grizzell (2023) was therefore right when he opined that

the biggest difference, and most important, is the truth of the messages. Propaganda uses bias, half-truths, misinformation, and fear to influence the public's attitude toward an ideal, cause, or political agenda. Propaganda aims to create a sense of us against them—you vs. the other.

Another differentiating factor is the level of engagement with the audience. Public relations rely on building trust and fostering relationships through two-way communication. Public relations campaigns often encourage

feedback and dialogue to understand and address the concerns of the public. Propaganda, however, tends to rely on a more top-down approach, disseminating information, without inviting open discussion or criticisms. The aim is to control the narrative rather than engage in a genuine exchange of ideas.

Furthermore, the long-term implications of these practices also set them apart. Public relations aim for sustained positive relationships and a favourable public perception over time. The success of public relations is measured not only in short term gains, but also in the establishment of a positive reputation that endures through challenges. Propaganda, on the other hand, may achieve short-term goals by manipulating perceptions, but its long-time effects can be detrimental, eroding trust and credibility when the truth eventually surfaces.

The Problem, Significance and Research Objectives

In the digital age, where information travels at unprecedented speeds, the distinction between public relations and propaganda becomes increasingly critical. Social media platforms, online news outlets, blogs, and instant messaging have become battlegrounds for shaping public opinion. The ethical responsibility of communicators in these spaces cannot be overstated.

While both public relations and propaganda involve the strategic management of information to influence public perception, their ethical foundations engagement strategies, and long-term implications set them apart.

The audience, as consumers of information, need to be vigilant in discerning between transparent and ethical communication, as exemplified by public relations, and the potential pitfalls of manipulative tactics associated with propaganda.

This article discusses “Information Management: Distinguishing Public Relations From Propaganda”. It aims at creating awareness and enhancing the knowledge of the audience, with a view to safeguarding the integrity of our information ecosystem and promoting a society built on trust, honesty, and open dialogue.

Objectives of the Study

The study sought to:

1. Create awareness of the differences between propaganda and public relations.
2. Safeguard the integrity of the information ecosystem.
3. Promote a society built on honesty and open dialogue.

Research Questions

1. What are the differences between propaganda and public relations?
2. How can we safeguard the integrity of the information ecosystem?
3. How do we promote a society built on honesty and open dialogue?

Conceptual Discussion

Public Relations

Public relations involve planned and sustained efforts, aimed at ensuring cordial relationship between an organization and its publics.

In its earliest definition, the Public Relations Society of America explained that “public relations help an organization, and its publics adapt mutually to each other” (PRSA, 2016). As the practice of public relations evolved, PRSA adopted a new definition, thus: “Public relations is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics” (PRSA, 2016).

Hayes (2023) sees public relations as the set of techniques and strategies related to managing how information about an individual or company is disseminated to the public, and especially the media. Its primary goals are to disseminate important company news or events, maintain a brand image, and put a positive spin on negative events to minimize their fallout. Public relations may occur in the form of press releases, features/opinion articles, news conferences, interviews with journalists, social media posting, editorials and commentaries, among others.

Coombs and Holladay (2007, p. 26) define public relations as “the management of mutually influential relationships within a web of stakeholder and organizational relationships”. They argue that modern public relations have re-energized the term “relationship” and relationship oriented public relations reflects the corporate-centric view.

For Johnston, Zawawi, and Brand (2009, pp. 8-9),

the roles and key activities of public relations are: communication, publicity, promotions, press agency, integrated marketing, issues management, crisis management, press secretary/public information officer, public affairs/lobbyist, financial relations, community relations, internal relations, minority relations, media relations, public diplomacy, event management, sponsorship, cause/relationship marketing and fundraising.

Propaganda

Idris (2020) sees propaganda as a persuasion strategy (and tactic) to change people’s opinions, attitudes, and behaviors by using lies, deception, and hatred. Propaganda aims to get public support and acceptance while at the same time, making the public condemn the opposing party. The history of propaganda can be drawn from ancient Persian, Rome, India, and England to the birth of the Catholic Church, the discovery of the colonies, as well as the ratification of the U.S Constitution in 1788 (Cutlip & Baker, 2012, pp. 71-74).

Ciftci (2019) sees propaganda as a systematic attempt to promote themselves, and gain or influence the support of the public. According to him, it is important to understand the aims of the propagandists and the messages they want to give, as the messages they send may not be clear most of the time and as such, requiring analysis.

Empirical Studies

Rüdiger (2019) in his study on public relations and the debate about propaganda in the period between wars, outlined the features of propaganda by organizations on the Internet and reconsidered where public relations (PR) stop, and propaganda begins. The study addressed the imbalance between the growing primary research on digital propaganda, the missing definition, and the lacking systematic empirical overview of propaganda’s digital characteristics.

By means of a systematic review of primary research on organizational propaganda online, Rüdiger proposed a definition and described the “five Ws” of digital organizational propaganda, thus: who employs propaganda, to whom, on which channels, which media are used (where), the objectives of the propaganda strategy (why), and in which contexts it occurs (when).

According to him, contrary to the offline setting, organizations engaging in propaganda online do not hide their identity and primarily address (potential) followers with the goal to change attitudes. Based on the findings, the study proposed a classification of digital organizational propaganda along three dimensions: ethical versus unethical, mutual understanding versus persuasion, and direct versus indirect communication. Digital organizational propaganda is defined as the direct persuasive communicative acts by organizations with an

unethical (i.e. untruthful, inauthentic, disrespectful, or unequal) intent through digital channels.

Idris (2020) in his work on “Propaganda in Contemporary Public Relations” aimed to analyse whether any propaganda elements have survived in two contemporary theories in public relations—the excellence theory (Grunig & Hunt) and the dialogic theory (Kent & Taylor). He referenced the investigation of propaganda and public relations concepts, where propaganda theorist, Edward Bernays opined that three elements are found in public relations’ practices today: “manipulation”, “goals oriented”, and “one-way communication flow”. According to him, despite the ubiquity of interactive media in public relations practices, propaganda elements are still commonly found, and two-way dialogic communication in social media is overrated.

Theoretical Framework

The Excellence Theory: The Excellence Theory, developed by James E. Grunig and Larissa A. Grunig, emphasizes the role of public relations in building and maintaining relationships between organisations and their publics. This theory posits that for PR to be truly effective, it must be an integral part of an organisational management and decision making.

The Excellence Theory has been influential in shaping modern public relations practices, emphasizing the strategic role of PR in organisational management and its ethical responsibility to engage in two-way communication.

The theory is based on four models of public relations: Press Agency/Publicity, Public Information, Two-Way Asymmetrical, and Two-Way Symmetrical.

- **Press Agency:** In this model, communication is one-way, with the primary goal of creating attention and gaining media coverage. Accuracy and truthfulness may be sacrificed for attention-grabbing tactics.
- **Public Information Model:** This model focuses on accurate and unbiased information dissemination to inform the public. It represents a more ethical and transparent approach, compared to the Press Agency Model.
- **Two-Way Asymmetrical Model:** This model acknowledges the importance of feedback from the audience but sees it primarily as a tool for persuasion. The organisation may use research to understand public opinion but does not necessarily aim for a mutual understanding.
- **Two-Way Symmetrical Model:** Considered the ideal form of PR in the Excellence Theory, this model emphasizes the importance of open communication and mutual understanding between organisations and their publics. It seeks to achieve a balance of power and influence, allowing both parties to contribute to the decision-making process.

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model: The Two-Way Symmetrical Model, associated with James E. Grunig and Todd Hunt, underscores the importance of balanced and mutually beneficial communication between an organisation and its publics. This model views public relations as a process of negotiation and dialogue, aiming for understanding and consensus rather than persuasion.

Characteristics of the Two-Way Symmetrical Model:

- **Mutual understanding:** The primary goal is to achieve a shared understanding between the organisation and its publics. This requires active listening, feedback, and a willingness to adapt based on the concerns and perspectives of all parties involved.
- **Equitable communication:** The model emphasizes that communication should be fair, open, and transparent. It rejects manipulative or deceptive practices in favour of building trust through honest and ethical communication.

- Two-way communication: Unlike traditional one-way communication models, the Two-Way Symmetrical Model stresses the importance of ongoing dialogue. This can involve surveys, focus groups, and other forms of feedback to ensure that the organisation is responsive to the needs and expectations of its stakeholders.

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model aligns with a more ethical and socially responsible approach to public relations, recognizing the importance of building relationships based on transparency, honesty, and open communication.

Both The Excellence Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model have significantly influenced the evolution of public relations, guiding practitioners towards more strategic, ethical, and relationship-focused approaches in their communication efforts.

Methodology

The study adopted a discourse analysis as a method. Discourse analysis is a research methodology that involves studying language use within social contexts. This methodology is commonly employed in fields such as linguistics, communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and cultural studies. It is a qualitative and interpretative method of analysing texts.

Responses to Interview Questions

Responding to the question on how to safeguard the integrity of the information ecosystem, member of the Council of the Nigeria Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) and former commissioner for Information in Rivers State, Pastor Paulinus Nsirim argued that “the starting point is what we are doing in the present council of the NIPR. First, we need to ensure that only trained and qualified professionals hold public relations positions and perform such roles in various organisations. It is important to have people who have requisite qualifications and understand the ethics of the public relations profession performing public relations roles”.

Speaking on the meeting point between propaganda and public relations, Pastor Nsirim, who is also a former chairman of the Rivers State chapter of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations opined that: “I will say clearly that public relations and propaganda are clearly strange bird fellows. You know quite honestly that public relations have to do with relationship with stakeholders and in dealing with them, sometimes, especially, during crisis management, some elements of propaganda will be used to douse tension in some cases. But what is advocated is that in using propaganda, you must know that you do not embellish lies in telling your story”.

“Ensure that at all times, stakeholder publics get the right information and are always carried along in your programmes. When we get the right professionals on board, we have solved 70 percent of the problem. The other bit is that, as an institute (NIPR), we must ensure that ethical matters are given important place in the scheme of things. We must create an avenue where PR practitioners who are members of the institute are held accountable if we find them culpable in discharging their duties”.

On promoting a society built on honesty and open dialogue, Pastor Nsirim stressed that “as an individual, for the past six years, I have been advocating that as a country, we need to go back to our traditional societal values. That will enable PR practitioners embrace ethical conducts. It is possible if the society will promote and ensure that these values are there. The PR practitioner will have no option than to follow”.

“I love to take people back to the 60s and 70s, where, in my community, if one was found stealing, he or she was paraded naked round the community. That social stigma stays on that person. If you bought a car or

motorcycle, the elders would sit you down to ask how you got the money to buy it before they will felicitate with you. But now, people do not bother to ask about the sources of wealth, because the society is not accountable. We must build a just and egalitarian society by ensuring that these values are brought to the fore”.

Speaking on the relationship between public relations and propaganda, registrar, Prime University, Abuja, Dr. Abubakar Abba Tahir, argued that the “meeting point could be summarised in one word—goodwill. It could be individual and organisational or corporate goodwill”.

“The point of departure is that propaganda escalates bias, though it is difficult to draw a thin line between public relations and propaganda”.

Speaking on how citizens can distinguish between propaganda and public relations, Abba Tahir, an ace broadcaster and former vice president, Public Relations at the American University of Nigeria, Yola, opined that contents should be placed on a scale for easy assessment and understanding.

“For instance, before 1992, there was monopoly in the broadcast industry, and it was easy to swallow broadcast contents hook, line, and sinker. After 1992, when the broadcast industry was liberalized, it became a lot easier for citizens to ascertain the veracity of information, as the monopoly had been broken”.

“More and more radio and television stations are springing up. Even the public broadcast stations are beginning to sit up. That is not to say that there is no propaganda in/from the private broadcast stations. Ownership always has a role to play in determining control”.

On how propaganda could be used for the realisation of public relations objectives, Dr. Abba Tahir explained that “you must first set the agenda by trying to showcase and behave as though what you are saying is truthful. Your target audience, when carried along will follow. If you are professional, you will achieve your communication objectives”.

Commenting on how to sanitize the information ecosystem, Dr. Tahir lamented the involvement of unqualified persons in communication roles in the country.

“We need to do more of regulation and enlightenment. It is difficult to see a non-lawyer occupy the position of minister of justice, or a non-medical practitioner heading the ministry of health. Sadly, every tom, dick and harry has headed the country’s communication and information ministry. This happens both at the federal, state, and local government levels”.

“Many that are non-professionals are sometimes appointed to head media organisations. Sometimes you see engineers, accountants, etc. heading media organisations, becoming director general of radio Nigeria, etc. I had reasons to quarrel with my commissioner (for information) when I was head of one of the parastatals under the ministry of information in Adamawa State (1999-2003). In four years, I served under four commissioners. The first commissioner I met on ground was a lawyer and had no business with information management. The next was a chemist. Next was my English teacher in the university, who taught me English 101. The fourth person was a political scientist and had no communication/media background”.

“The take-off point is the point of engagement. How do we hire people managing communication and information for us? What is the role of the media and communication industry? There is need for a lot of regulation, enlightenment, education, and advocacy to sanitize the system”.

Adding his voice, professor of Mass Communication at Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Anambra State, Emmanuel Owums-Owuamalam identified communication as the meeting point between public relations and propaganda.

“The meeting point between public relations and propaganda can be summarised in one word—communication. Both involve individuals as parties, person to group or group to group. It must use a language understood by participants in the communication process”.

Speaking on the difference between public relations and propaganda, Professor Owuamalam, a former commissioner for Information in Imo State explained that “the essence of public relations is to create a rapport or social harmony between parties that can lead to goodwill and acceptability among the parties. It means that communications must have contents; the contents must be focused on something that will be beneficial to all parties concerned; otherwise, interest will be personal and at that point, achievement of success will be questionable”.

Continuing, he stressed that “propaganda is not bad. Propaganda is very good for public relations. Propaganda can equally be very bad for public relations. If you check the meaning of propaganda, you will find out that it is designed to achieve a specific objective. The objective can be positive; it can also be negative. That is why propaganda is used as a tool for public relations”.

“It takes us back to the issue of content. If you want to create an understanding, it means you should use the words that are appealing to the group you want to lure. If you use abusive words, and trying to justify it, you will never get them to any consensus”.

“Propaganda means to propagate. Views are propagated either for or against social harmony”.

Conclusion

In a world where misinformation can spread rapidly, understanding the distinctions between public relations and propaganda is essential for individuals to navigate the complex landscape of information and make informed judgements.

As consumers of information, we must be vigilant in discerning between transparent and ethical communication, as exemplified by public relations, and the potential pitfalls of manipulative tactics associated with propaganda.

Only through this awareness can we safeguard the integrity of our information ecosystem and promote a society built on trust, honesty, and open dialogue.

Recommendations

The ongoing campaign against quackery by the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations should be intensified and sustained.

Communication-related professional organisations at all levels must speak in unison against the appointment of a non-professional to handle communication-related positions.

Mass media organisations should embrace the advocacy towards educating the citizens on how to distinguish between ethical public relations contents and propaganda.

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