

# NOVENA

JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION

VOL. 6, 2018

ISSN: 2616 - 101X

A BLIND PEER-REVIEWED JOURNAL

PUBLICATION OF THE  
DEPARTMENT OF MASS COMMUNICATION  
NOVENA UNIVERSITY  
OGUME, DELTA STATE, NIGERIA



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## **Use of New Media for Public Relations Practice in Century Energy Resources Limited, Port Harcourt, Nigeria**

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### **Abstract**

This study was designed to examine the use of new media for the practice of public relations in Century Energy Resources Limited, Port Harcourt. Theory of organisational information provided the theoretical base for the study. Survey research design was adopted, while questionnaire was used as the instrument to obtain data from a population of Ninety respondents. Findings showed that the company used new media for communicating with its publics, especially the surveillance team. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that Century Energy Resources Limited uses new media for its public relations activities. It was recommended, among others, that the company should consider the characteristics of its publics and segment it so as to identify the specific information and communication needs and then use the appropriate and relevant new medium to deliver public relations messages, programmes or activities to its publics.

**Keywords:** New Media, Public Relations, Communication, Century Energy Resources, Surveillance Team

### **Introduction**

Communication is transmitting information, feelings, thoughts, views, opinions and ideas from one source through a channel to a receiver, in order to share meaning. Thus, communication can be said to be the heart of human existence as well as the centre of social intercourse. In other words, it is a basic human activity which enables people to connect with one another and a key variable in organisational life. Communication channels have undergone tremendous changes. In the prehistoric era when man used to live in the cave, man communicated via signs and symbols such as engraving, drawing or paintings on walls, among others. Human beings developed a whole range of non-verbal



means for conveying messages; music and dance, drum messages, signal fires, and other forms of graphic symbols including the pictogram and ideogram (UNESCO, 1981). However, due to the advent of modernity, communication channels gradually metamorphosed from the archaic cave painting to the Gutenberg galaxy age and the rapid new age of communication technologies. With the aid of these communication technologies, today the world is transforming into one society (which Marshal McLuhan called global village) with an increase in the volume of information shared between individuals, regions and countries. Whatever development the world has witnessed in recent times, in the area of politics, religion, social and economics, is mainly due to communication. Perhaps, this accounts for Clegg's (2005, p. 315) assertion that "communication is not just the flow of information between people, but also a process of creating, shaping and maintaining relationships and acting shared values, common culture, agreed goals and a means for achievement." The interesting thing in this contemporary time is that the means through which people communicate have not only changed in volume but also in speed, made possible by the presence of the new media.

Although, the term 'new media' may immediately elicit the idea of digital technology, in fact, the new media were first seen in the 1800s. According to Czitron (1982), cited by Stafford & Faber (2005), until the first telegraph line opened in 1844, introducing the world to modern media, communication and transportation were inseparable; information could be delivered only as fast as transportation allowed. From their earliest introduction, the new media have continued to evolve. In 1920, radio was introduced. In the 1940s, television appeared on the scene; each of these new media was clearly an improvement over the previous version, with enhanced technologies accompanying each new entrant into the field. But even with the doors of modern communications opening, no doubt the people of the mid 1800s would be surprised by the communications improvements we have witnessed in recent years (Stafford & Faber, 2005). Today, we are witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video and electronic text communication that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication (Neuman, cited in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). The new media are those which offer new services or enhancement to old services and include such applications, as micro-electronics, computers and telecommunications. They consist of the internet, website blogs (web logs), V logs (Video logs), visual and audio newscasts, Really Simple Syndication Web Updates (RSS news feeds) and social networks-Facebook, Twitter, You tube, 2go, E-bay, WhatsApp, etc. All these choices are available to anyone with an Internet connection and a way to gain global audience (Williams, Strover & Grant, 1994, Oke 2013). Suffice it to say that the world is going through an information technology revolution that has drastically changed many facets of human life. There is an unprecedented



capability of new media technologies in processing, storing, retrieving and disseminating data or information and knowledge in various ways across geographical boundaries.

Public relations involves building rapport with people using various communication platforms amongst which are the new media; internet, websites, social networks; Facebook, Youtube, twitter, Myspace, etc. The Internet and other social networks are used by an organisation to reach the organisation's goal either to sell their products, provide services or merely to inform the organisation's publics about an important issue aimed to create mutual understanding. It is also an opportunity for the employees to communicate with the organisation's publics conveniently. Other factors that account for the use of new media are ease of access and interactive ability which provide platforms for interaction across the globe. Today, many companies are turning to new media instead of the traditional media of print and broadcast. The impact and implication of new media in public relations practice are examined in four areas: how public relations practitioners do their work, the implication of technology on the contents or messages developed and delivered in public relations, the implication for organisational structure, culture and management and the implication of technology on the relationships between or among organisations and their publics (Pavlik, 2008). Along with the growth of the new media channels comes the need to understand their use for public relations practice in Century Energy Service Limited, Port Harcourt.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The survival and development of any organisation depends largely on effective communication between the organisation and its publics. To achieve this, organisations employ various approaches to obtain, process and disseminate information to their publics, in order to manage and overcome the storms of business operations and ultimately achieve their set goals and objectives. One major approach to create a sustainable mutually beneficial relationship between an organisation and its publics is through public relations. Public relations employs many communication tools to reach out to organisation's internal and external publics. Among such tools are the new media of communication.

Between January and April, 2016 Century Energy Resources Limited had issue of invasion of its Eastern Obolo operational area by some militants. The issue was blamed on the surveillance team while the team made complaints ranging from delay in information dissemination, ineffective communication due to wrong use of appropriate communication channels, to lack of feedback mechanism between the surveillance team and the company's office in Port Harcourt. Situations like these usually affect the corporate image of an organisation, which could lead to poor perception and also affect operation. One of the complaints was that if the appropriate media were applied by the company, the surveillance team would have taken position in time. Thus, the problem of the



study is: in what way does Century Energy Resources Limited make use of new media in its public relations messages or activities?

### **Research Questions:**

The following research questions were formulated to guide the study:

1. What are the new media channels commonly used by Century Energy Resources Limited in its public relations messages?
2. How relevant are the new media used by the company to the communication need of the surveillance team?
3. What public relations activities does Century Energy Resources Limited use new media channels for?
4. What are the problems associated with the use of new media to communicate with the company's publics?

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study rests upon organisational information theory. This theory was propounded by Karl, E. Weick in 1969. The theory explains the process that organisations need to undergo to receive input from others and make sense of the information that is essential for their existence. Karl emphasises the importance of communication for organisations and their members to monitor and control performance, structure, activities, design organisational process and achieve organisational goals. The theory explains that the way information flows through an organisation affects work processes and outcomes. It helps the organisation to identify and understand its information needs as they design and promote the use of their information systems. In effects, the organisational information theory emphasises the need to utilise appropriate communication tools for effective communication between organisation and its publics.

In relations to this study, it is the responsibility of every organisation to communicate and relate effectively with its public, using the appropriate and relevant communication channels. However, while there are multiple media channels (both traditional and new), the onus lies on the utilisation of the most relevant channel for effective communication between an organisation and its publics. Century Energy Resources Limited must understand the information and communication need of its public—the surveillance team and the relevant new media platform to be used to meet such need. Herein lies the relevance of this theory to this study.

### **Conceptual Clarification and Review of Related Literature**

Stafford & Faber (2005) describe the new media as media that are interactive and integrate computers with multimedia; they seem to greet us wherever we turn. Manovich (2012, p. 2) defines the new media as “the mix between older cultural



conventions for data representation, access and manipulation and newer conventions of data representation, access and manipulation.” Manovich’s description of the new media provides an excellent overview of a media structure that imbibes old orientations as regards giving information, educating and moulding opinion and also extensively utilises advances in information and communication technology (Manovich, 2012).

Scitel (2011) argues that while it is irrefutable that the Internet and social media have changed communications forever with new found immediacy and pervasiveness, it is not the case that the Internet has replaced human relationships, as the essence of societal communications; nor have the new techniques replaced human relationships as the essence of the practice of public relations. The Internet and other new media comprise important tools in the public relations arsenal. Many people today, including public relations professionals are excited about the internet and the reason might be the unique characteristics of the Internet as an interactive medium compared with the mass media (Oke, 2013). These interactive features as Miller (1996) notes provide people with vast opportunities to communicate with each other beyond time and spatial restrictions.

Seitel (2011) emphasises that the Internet and the world wide web have transformed the way we work, the way we buy things, the way we entertain ourselves, the way business is conducted, and most importantly to public relations professionals, the way we communicate with each other; the internet phenomenon, pure and simple, has been a revolution. Nwajinka, Ibenta & Emenari (2003) identify the platforms the internet provides to include: E-mail, the World Wide Web (www), Usenet (newsgroups) Bulletin Board System, the Telnet and the Gopher. Fost (2006) adds that the new internet explosion has taken the new forms: blogs, social networks, podcasts, wikis, RSS feeds, among others. E-mail, technically, allows users connected to a network to exchange memoranda and file without having to be logged in at the same time. Users can compose, send, receive, forward, attach documents or store messages in plain text or hypertext mail language (HTML). The most obvious advantages of e-mail are speed, cost effectiveness and convenience which by and large, improve organisational communications (Peal, 2001)

The Internet and World Wide Web (www) and a wide spectrum of other digital technologies like cell phones, satellite, video conferencing, social networks, among others, have transformed the way people communicate and make contact with each other. The practice of public relations like any other discipline has benefited immensely from these new media. As Pavlik (2008, p. 62) observes:

The implications of new media in public relations practice are evident in these areas: how public relations practitioners do their work, the implication of technology on the content or messages developed and delivered in public relations, the implication for



organisational structure, culture and management and the implication of technology on the relationships between or among organisations and their publics.

Public relations departments in many organisations now have interactive specialists and group responsible for communicating through the internet and other social networking sites. To reach out to the public using new media, Edwards (2006) suggests that audience (publics) characteristic should be considered and public relations practitioners must recognise and address them in ways that meet the needs and concerns of each of the publics. He categorises the publics into: individuals; organisations, government or legislative bodies. Edwards (2006) lists the pitfalls associated with the use of new media to the practice of public relations to include *inter alia*: relevance, data security, digital divide, etc.

- i. **Relevance:** Public relations practitioners must demonstrate how the new media employed in carrying out public relations programmes are more beneficial, make life and work easier, more enjoyable and relevant to the intended audience.
- ii. **Data Security:** The Internet is free, wide open, international and anonymous; the perfect place to start a movement and ruin an organisation's reputation (Seitel, 2011). Discussion groups and chat rooms are hotbeds for discontented shareholders, aggrieved employees, stock manipulators and disgruntled consumers (Pizzo, 2003).
- iii. **Digital Divide:** The use of technology is now a route to accessing information, social networks and social provision. However, not everyone has equal access to technology. Financial resources, time and skill levels all affect the ability of individuals to use and benefit from new developments in ICT (Edwards, 2006). According to Norris (2000), older people find it harder to learn new skills, poorer families find it difficult to finance a computer at home, and single mothers in a full-time job may not have time to use the internet to find out about new benefit entitlements. Generally, people who are already financially and socially disadvantaged are unlikely to have the same access to technology in the home or at school as more privileged individuals. This not only affects their ability to engage with each other effectively in a technology - driven world, but also has the potential to affect their ability to engage in society and social networks (Warschauer, 2003).

In order to forestall some of these pitfalls or online efforts to derail the organisation, Seitel (2011) advocates the adoption of inoculation strategies, which implies that an organisation must establish clear communication channels on the web, through which customers, shareholders and stakeholders, journalists and



employees can relay concerns to management, sometimes privately before frustrations mount (Martin & Bennett, 2008). This preemptive public relations approach makes solid business sense. It is of necessity that public relations professionals must constantly monitor the web and other new media.

### **Methodology**

The data for this study were derived from a survey of staff members of Century Energy Public Relations Department and Surveillance Team Members. There are forty (40) staff members of Century Energy Services Public Relations Department spread across the five (5) units in the department: government relations, community relations, employees' relations, corporate relations and media relations and fifty (50) members of the surveillance team according to the nominal roll of the public relations department and that of the surveillance team. Since this number was relatively small, it was adopted as the population of the study. Rather than draw a sample from this population it was studied entirely. As advocated by Wimmer & Dominick (2011), where the population is small, it can be studied entirely.

To administer the questionnaire to the respondents, the 40 copies for the staff members were divided proportionately among the five units in the department, which resulted in each having 8 copies. Accordingly, copies of the questionnaire were administered to the respondents drawn from the units in the department. The 50 copies of the questionnaire were also served on the surveillance team members. Out of the 90 respondents, 85 completed and returned the questionnaire, which were used for analysis. Five members of the surveillance team did not return their questionnaire.

### **Data Presentation and Analysis**

This study focused on the use of appropriate new media platform by Century Energy Resources Limited to communicate with its specific public, the surveillance team. The following tables present the basic data that emerged from the study.

**Table 1: New Media Channels use in Communication**

Options	Century Energy		Surveillance Team	
	X	%	X	%
Email	15	37	6	13
GSM	9	23	15	33
Video Conferencing	1	2	6	13
WhatsApp	2	5	10	22
Facebook	5	13	8	18
Website	8	20	-	-
No Comment	-	-	-	-
Total	40	100	45	100

The question in table 1 was designed to determine the new media channel used for communication. The data in the table show that email and GSM were the new media channels mostly used for communication. This is based on the fact that more respondents ticked email and GSM.

**Table 2: Responses on the Extent to which New Media are used for Public Relations Practice**

Options	Century Energy		Surveillance Team	
	X	%	X	%
Very Great Extent	13	33	11	24
Great Extent	18	45	17	38
Some Extent	6	15	13	29
A Little Extent	1	3	2	4
Very Little Extent	1	2	1	2
Can't Sav	1	2	1	2
Total	40	100	45	100

Table 2 reveals the extent to which new media are used for public relations practice in Century Energy Resources Limited, Port Harcourt. From the data on the table, the company to a great extent used new media for public relations practice.

**Table 3: Responses on the Extent of Relevance of the New Media Channels used by the Company to the Communication Need of the Surveillance Team**

Options	Century Energy		Surveillance Team	
	X	%	X	%
Very Relevant	13	33	8	18
Relevant	17	42	10	22
Undecided	6	15	5	11
Less Relevant	2	5	10	22
Not Relevant	2	5	12	27
Can't Sav	-	-	-	-
Total	40	100	45	100

From the data in the table, the staff respondents believed that the new media channels used by the company were relevant to the communication need of the surveillance team; while the surveillance team members said the new media channels used by the company to communicate with them were not relevant to their communication need.

**Table 4: Responses on the Public Relations Activities Century Energy Resources Limited uses New Media Channels for**

Options	Century Energy		Surveillance Team	
	X	%	X	%
Crisis Management	8	20	6	13
Customer	8	20	7	16



Reputation	10	25	9	20
Media Relationship	4	10	5	11
Image Laundering	2	5	7	16
External Relationship	8	20	11	24
Total	40	100	45	100

As shown in table 4, the staff members were of the opinion that the company used new media for all the activities listed, especially reputation management. On the other hand, the surveillance team members claimed that the company used the new media for all the activities but basically external relationship.

**Table 5: Responses on the Image of the Company**

Options	Century Energy		Surveillance Team	
	X	%	X	%
Positive	30	75	14	31
Negative	6	15	22	49
Undecided	4	10	9	20
Total	40	100	45	100

Table 5 shows that the image of the company according to the staff of the public relations department is positive. The majority of the surveillance team members opined that the image of the company is negative.

**Table 6: Responses on the Problems associated with the use of New Media for Public Relations Practice in Century Energy Resources Limited Port Harcourt**

Options	Company		Surveillance Team	
	X	%	X	%
Operational Difficulties	6	15	6	15
Busy/ Lack of Signals	6	15	9	20
Distortion of Website	4	10	1	2
Low Penetration/Poor Internet Facility	3	8	8	17
Monitoring	1	2	-	-
Hacking	8	20	3	7
Financial Resources	-	-	6	13
All of the Above	12	30	10	22
No Comment	-	-	2	4
Total	40	100	45	100

Thirty percent of the staff respondents and 22% of the surveillance team members agreed that all the problems listed on the table were associated with the use of new media.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The first research question was aimed at determining the new media types commonly used by Century Energy Resources Limited. The data gathered showed



that 37%, 23%, 20% and 13% of the company's respondents were of the opinion that email, phone/GSM, website and Facebook, respectively, were the new media, social network and web based communication vehicles commonly used by the company to communicate with the public particularly the surveillance team. However, 33%, 22% and 18% of the surveillance team members remarked that the new media frequently used by them to communicate with the company had been telephone/GSM, WhatsApp and Facebook respectively.

On the extent to which new media were used for public relations practice, majority of staff respondents (45%) and that of the surveillance team members (38%) said the extent the company used the new media for public relations practice was great. Majority of the respondents (surveillance team) also stated that they rarely visited the company's website or used other Internet facility for any information. Perhaps, the reason may be that internet facility is not within their reach. For the company to use email most frequently to communicate with this public that is basically rural with no regular access to internet facility is a misnomer. Any message through email or the company's website would either be received late or not accessed at all. This is because the intended receivers do not only lack access to the facility, but could also be faced with operational difficulty.

Again, most of the team members are people with low level of education and poor financial status. Therefore, using irrelevant new media in communicating with such disadvantaged publics is a wrong application. This result underscores Norris (2000) observation that poorer families find it difficult to finance a computer at home; people who are already financially and socially disadvantaged are unlikely to have the same access to technology in the home or at school as more privileged individuals. This not only affects their ability to engage with each other effectively in a technology-driven world, but also has the potential to affect their ability to engage in society and social networks. This result also contrasts organisational information theory's emphasis on the importance of communication for organisations and their members to monitor and control performance, structure, activities, design organisational process and achieve organisational goals.

The findings further showed that majority (42%) of the members of staff of the public relations department of Century Energy Resources Limited, Port Harcourt claimed that the new media used by the company to communicate with the surveillance team were to a great extent relevant to the communication need of the team members. On the other hand, 27% of the surveillance team members disagreed with the claim of the staff members. They opined that the new media used by the company to communicate with them were not relevant to their communication need. From the assessment of the new media channel used by the company to communicate with its public (the surveillance team) it was revealed that among the various new media, email was overwhelmingly used to communicate with the team. The use of email frequently to communicate with the



team against the use of telephone/GSM, which is commonly accessible and preferred by the team suggests that the new media channel used by the company to communicate with this special public who are largely rural people with no access to internet facility was not relevant to their communication need. This is contrary to Edward's (2006) suggestion that public relations practitioners must demonstrate how the new media employed in carrying out public relations programmes and messages are more beneficial, make life and work easier, more enjoyable and relevant to the need of the intended audience. It is a general assertion in communication that the medium is the message. When the medium is not appropriate for the intended audience, the message may either, not be clear, understood or not at all received and effective.

Many of the surveillance team members owned phones that have no internet facilities making it impossible to access their mail boxes (for those that have mail addresses), while some others do not have email addresses at all. In line with this finding, Edward (2006) notes that audience (publics) characteristics should be considered and public relations practitioners must recognise and address them in ways that meet the needs and concerns of each audience. The organisational information theory stresses the need to utilise appropriate communication tools for effective communication between organisation and its publics.

The use of new media in the practice of public relations is generally to convey the public relations activities and programmes to the target public. Results from this study show some public relations activities which Century Energy Resources Limited, Port Harcourt, used the new media for. These activities are crisis management, customer relations, reputation management, media relations, image laundering and external relationship management. Majority (25%) of the staff respondents said the company used the new media to manage its reputation. Twenty percent (20%) each of the staff members were of the opinion that the company used the new media for crisis management, customer relationship and external relationship respectively. Media relationship and image laundering received little attention as regards the use of new media as indicated in table 4.

From the perspective of the surveillance team, the new media were basically used for external relationship. Twenty four percent (24%) of the team respondents agreed to this. However, 20% and 16% of these respondents said the company used the new media for reputation management, customer relationship and image laundering. Quite strikingly, the data from this study reveal that while the staff members held the view that the company has a positive public image; the surveillance team said the company has a negative public image. Besides the use of inappropriate new media channel to communicate with the surveillance team, some other factors (not considered in this study) could account for this opinion on the image of the company. The findings further show that operational difficulties, busy signals, distortion of company's websites, low penetration, monitoring,



hacking by individuals or other organisations, erratic power supply, poor internet facilities, among others were the problems associated with the use of new media to foster communication between the company and its publics. Out of 40 staff respondents and 45 surveillance team respondents 30% and 22% respectively attested to the fact all the problems listed were associated with the use of new media to communicate.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

The study concludes that Century Energy Resources Limited uses new media to a great extent in its public relations practice; new media used are not relevant from the perspective of the surveillance team members, the new media are used for the company's public relations activities, the company's public image is viewed as negative by the surveillance team members and there are many challenges faced both by the company and surveillance team in the course of using the new media for their relationships. Based on the findings, it is recommended that:

1. Century Energy Resources Limited and other related organisations should consider the characteristics of its publics, segment it to identify the specific information and communication needs and then use the appropriate and relevant new medium or media to deliver their public relations messages, programmes or activities to their publics.
2. The company must work consciously to repackage its public image and also ensure that whatever challenges associated with the use of new media to communicate with its public, especially the surveillance team members are brought to the barest minimum.

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