

STRATEGIC PUBLIC RELATIONS AND THE POLIO ERADICATION PROGRAMME IN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT

Wild Polio Virus (WPV) is one of those severe health challenges confronting developing nations. Nigeria is labelled a reservoirs of wild polio virus (WPV) in the world; a disturbing status that has encumbered the country economically and otherwise. This polio infection has also claimed the lives of several promising Nigerian children and has limited the future of many, who are today permanently paralysed. Despite government and international agencies' effort, the country in 2016 lost a chance to be declared 'a polio free nation' by the World Health Organisation (WHO). This paper explores the communication challenges of polio immunisation programme in Nigeria. Excellence Theory was adopted to drive its theoretical framework. The paper argues that the achievement of a polio free status and the sustenance of same in developing countries. As such, public relations play vital roles in increasing public trust, participation, mobilisation and motivation towards the polio eradication programme.

KEYWORDS: Public Relations, Public Trust, Polio, Eradication, Campaigns, Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

It is argued that nothing can succeed without the strategic involvement of public relations. Be it a product, object, service, personality, place, organization or idea. Without public relations, none of them can enjoy acceptability among the intended publics. This is because public relations provide an articulate, credible and effective voice in pleading an idea on behalf of an individual or organization before the projected idea can become acceptable among the people (Okudero, 2009 cited in Ngwoke, 2010). Public Relations (PR) is a planned

communication that can be used by both government and nongovernmental organisations to build and maintain mutual understanding with their publics. It is a tool which can be used to facilitate development in any country that is desperate for social, economic, political and technological development (Asemah, 2011). It is simply accurate, consistent and timely communications that convey the right message to the right audience and at the right time (Njiru, 2010).

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According to DPR Group (2017), the healthcare industry is in a state of flux. This means that new ideas, products and methods of treatment are being discovered on daily basis for managing complex health conditions. As such, public relations has crucial role to play in making sure that the general public come in terms with the realities, understand and utilise these modern ways of handling their health issues.

Healthcare delivery agencies and companies rely on effective public relations to keep their customers up-to-date on their products, services and procedures. Patients look up to the media (newspapers, magazines, television, radio and the Internet) for unbiased, educated and detailed reporting that will help them make informed decisions about their health. Public relations here offers the most cost-effective and powerful method of disseminating company and product information to the media, thereby influencing the customer/patient decision making process (Dean, 2000).

Regidor, et al. (2007) cited in Hilmi and Emenyeonu (2014) contended that the role of public relations in healthcare delivery can never be overemphasised. As public healthcare systems rely greatly on public relations to communicate or disseminate health information in a way that can be easily interpreted and understood by individuals and society at large. PR is responsible for establishing and maintaining the relationship between the internal and external publics of the hospitals. This is done by identifying the audience and taking advantage of all the channels of communication to ensure that health information are not merely disseminated, but communicated and marketed to the target social system.

Poliomyelitis (polio) is a contagious viral disease spread largely through faecal contamination of food or water. Most often this health challenge

comes as a result of poor sanitary conditions and untidy environments. The disease mostly attacks its victims' intestinal tract, enters the bloodstream and the nervous system, causing permanent paralysis or eventual death. The vast majority of cases (up to 95 percent) are asymptomatic, making polio difficult to detect but easy to spread (Cooke & Tahir, 2012). A study by Jedge (2007) revealed that Polio viruses had paralysed and claimed the lives of many promising Nigerian children with prevalent cases found in northern Nigeria due to communication problems.

The idea of public relations has been to establish and maintain mutual understanding between an organisation or individual and the relevant publics so as to create goodwill for the organisation. A study by UNICEF (2009) indicated that effective Public Relations Campaigns played pivotal role in the fight against polio eradication in the world.

However, despite the proven efficacy of public relations in relationship building and speedy behavioural changes in the society, it has been observed that several government agencies even while maintaining a public relations units including those in charge of healthcare delivery seems to be in obvious lack of touch and mutual understanding with the people (Obiweluzor, 2002).

This has so far contributed adversely to the failure and non-acceptance of several government policies and health reforms targeted at improving the quality of life of the people. Baba and Ayivor (2012) lamented that despite the major progress since the launch of the Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) in 1988, circulation of indigenous wild poliovirus (WPV) continues in three countries (Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Pakistan). This particularly worrisome disposition of polio infection in Nigeria poses a threat to our collective wellbeing as the giant of Africa.

Jedega (2007) identified lack of public trust as the major setbacks to effective immunisations of polio vaccines. The author maintained that where public trust is eroded, rumours can spread and this can lead to the rejection of government interventions in public healthcare. This necessitates the use of public relation techniques to establish, build, maintain and sustain public trust needed to drive health interventions and garner the acceptance of the initiative by the target social system.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper adopted the Excellence Theory to drive its theoretical framework. The Excellence theory of public relations was propounded by Grunig (1992) as a normative model for public relations. This theory emphasises the need to carry out public relations programmes in an excellent manner to achieve desired results. Grunig (1992, p.12), insisted that “excellent public relations departments will practice public relations in a way that is similar to our normative model, in contrast to the way that public relations is practiced in the typical, less excellent department”.

The excellence theory first explained the value of public relations to organizations and society based on the social responsibility of managerial decisions and the quality of relationships with stakeholder publics. For an organization to be effective, according to the theory, it must behave in ways that solve the problems and satisfy the goals of stakeholders as well as of management.

If it does not, stakeholders will either pressure the organization to change or oppose it in ways that add cost and risk to organizational policies and decisions. Based on this theoretical premise about the value of public relations, the excellence theory derived principles of how the function should be organized to maximize this value (Grunig, 2008).

THE CONCEPT OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The concept has been subjected to several scholarly definitions. Though there seem to be no generally acceptable definition to it, however there exist some similarity in several definitions. Health and Vasquez (2001) attributed the proliferation in the definition of public relations to the fact that no one perspective or description is identical to another. They contended that the possibility of misunderstanding the concept is even worse than the lack of a universally acceptable definition. Broom (2007) cited in Valjak and Draskovic (2011) sees it as a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the public on whom its success or failure depends. Shultz and Barnes (1995) observed that public relation is one of the most diverse areas in marketing communications which when being broadly defined as to with organisation's communication with various publics. These publics consist of companies suppliers, its employees, its stakeholders, its products consumers and the community at large.

Sambe (2005) had defined public relations in its narrow sense to mean “the planned and organised effort of a company or institution to establish mutually beneficial relationships with its various publics” (p. 240). Also, Dominick (2009, p. 318) considered the complexity involved in providing a clear cut definition to the concept of public relations as such, attempted to offer a definition by first of all identifying what Public Relations professionals do namely:

1. Public relations professional attempts to positively influence and shape public opinion
2. Public relations professional communicates core organisational goals and objectives as well as explain their

actions to the public. This communication is however a two-way communication between the organisation and its public (internal and external).

3. Public relations practitioners regularly counsels organisational top management. Hence making PR a management function.

After pointing out the three basic roles of PR professionals, Dominick (2009) aligned self with the definition offered by the World Assembly of Public Relations that: "public relations is the art or social science of analysing trends, predicting their consequences, counselling organisation leaders, and implementing planned programmes of action that serve both the organisation's and the public's interest (p. 319).

Harlow (1976) provided a more elaborate definition to the concept of public relations after compiling over 500 PR definitions from different scholars and practitioners in the field. According to him:

Public Relations is distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools (p. 36).

From the foregoing definitions, one could attempt to define public relation as a strategic and well-planned communication effort that helps an individual or organisation to build, maintain and encourage a positive mutual relationship with targeted audiences or public.

Such a relationship is targeted towards actualising and affecting a desired response and a positive change in behaviours.

BRIEF HISTORY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS

The practice of public relations had been traced to the ancient and medieval periods. Julius Caesar's military reports and commentaries are viewed as a triumph in what is today known as public relations. Also, the church and the guilds had practised rudimentary forms of public relations in these eras (Dominick, 2009). Adamolekun and Ekundayo (2007) linked the evolution of public relations to the Greco-Roman slogan *vox populi, vox dei*, meaning 'the voice of the people is the voice of God', this emphasises the importance of public opinion in all forms of governance and public affairs. While Sambe (2005), asserted that what is today the modern public relations started when Ivy Ledbetter Lee, a newspaperman conceived the idea of establishing a business news bureau to pass information to the media on behalf of his business corporation.

According to Palaniappan and Ramachandraiah (n.d), former United State President, Thomas Jefferson was the first to use the phrase "Public relations" in 1807 during his seventh address to the US Congress. Also the early works of Edward L. Bernays (1892-1995), often called the father of modern public relations, who after the First World War made landmark contributions in the field of public relations. He successfully pioneered the establishment of the theory, practice, principles, method and ethics of professional public relations. The United state of America is still leading in the field of public relations in terms of numbers of practitioners, user organisations, and the impressive quality of their literatures and research in this area. After the second war world (1939-1945), PR practise spread very fast in several parts of Europe, this led to the formation of Public Relations in London in 1948. Other nations of

the world had followed suit, including Africa with the formation of Federation of African Public Relation Association (FAPRA) in 1975 with a Nigerian, Bob Ogbuagu as the Pioneer President (Adamolekun and Ekundayo, 2007).

DESIGNING A PUBLIC RELATIONS CAMPAIGN

According to Lister (2017), public relations campaign is a series of activities that are planned in advance and relate to a specific goal. This contrasts with other areas of PR, such as general ongoing publicity tactics, paid advertising, and reacting to events. Ultimately a public relations campaign has three characteristics: identifying an objective, finding the message that will help achieve that objective and communicating that message to the appropriate audience. Harrison (2011, p. 324) noted that a public relations campaign is “a planned set of communication activities, each with a specific defined purpose, continued over a set period of time and intended to meet communication goals and objectives relating to a nominated issue: for example, a campaign to increase industrial safety”.

The successful design and implementation of a public relations campaign require effective creativity, flexibility and strong organisational skills. The public relations practitioners here must be keen in active decision making that will positively influence or affect the target publics for the organisation’s betterment (Sheehan, 2014).

A public relations campaign requires a well defined objective and a clear message for the organization to communicate to the public. In theory this could simply be to raise awareness of a product, service or brand, but ideally it will be more specific. This could include a company increasing sales of a product or a pressure group changing public or government behavior. A specific objective not only makes it easier to

focus the planning and execution of a campaign, but also to quantify its success (Lister, 2017).

THE CONCEPT OF POLIO

Etymologically, the word *Poliomyelitis* can be traced to two Greek words polio (meaning grey) and myelon (meaning marrow, indicating the spinal cord). It is usually as a result of the effect of poliomyelitis virus on the spinal cord that often leads to the classic manifestation of paralysis in children. Poliovirus is a member of the enterovirus subgroup and within the Picornaviridae family. There are three poliovirus serotypes (P1, P2, and P3). There is minimal heterotypic immunity between the three serotypes (Paho.org, 2017).

Polio is a highly infectious disease caused by a virus that attacks mostly children under the age of five. It invades the nervous system, and can cause total paralysis in a matter of hours. The virus is transmitted by person-to-person spread mainly through the faecal-oral route or, less frequently, by a common vehicle (for example, contaminated water or food) and multiplies in the intestine (WHO, 2017). Polioviruses can also be transmitted from person to person through pharyngeal secretions, mainly via the hand-to-hand-to-mouth route (Nathanson & Kew, 2010)

Polio disease is very difficult to detect. Surprisingly, 95% of all individuals infected with polio have no apparent symptoms (Immunisation Action Coalition, 2015). Some initial symptoms may appear in form of fever, fatigue, headache, vomiting, stiffness of the neck and pain in the limbs. 1 in 200 infections leads to irreversible paralysis (usually in the legs). Among those paralysed, 5% to 10% die when their breathing muscles become immobilized (WHO, 2017).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WILD POLIO VIRUS

Poliomyelitis disease appeared, later into an epidemic form, become endemic on a global

scale, and had in recent times been reduced to a near-elimination in the world, all within the span of documented medical history (Nathanson & Kew, 2010).

Poliomyelitis as an epidemic disease was first described by Michael Underwood, a British physician who had described a debility of the lower extremities in children that was recognizable as poliomyelitis in England in 1789 (Smithsonian, 2017).

Polio epidemic reached its ever-increasing magnitude in the US with more than 21,000 cases with permanent paralysis reported in 1952. Following the introduction of effective vaccines, first inactivated poliovirus vaccine (IPV) in 1955, and oral poliovirus vaccine (OPV) starting in 1961, the reported incidence of poliomyelitis in the U.S. declined dramatically and by 1979 till date there have been no single case of polio in the United States (Paho.org, 2017; Wallace & Oberste, 2012).

CHALLENGES OF POLIO INTERVENTIONS IN NIGERIA

The efforts to eradicate polio in Nigeria have been marred by several challenges. These range from communication issues (lack of trust and superstitions) to security challenges in prone polio infected areas. A study by Toole (2016) attributed the inability to eradicate polio in Nigeria through effective polio vaccination to armed conflict and insecurity. Polio is still of challenge in Northeast Nigeria, where the Boko Haram militant often disrupted vaccination campaigns.

Despite successes in recent times that one could say polio is nearly been eradicated, Renwick (2015) had observed that the virus is on the increase due to upsurge of violence against vaccine workers in conflict zones. Another disturbing challenge to eradicating polio is mistrust of the West and vaccine programs. As there still persists a powerful opposition to vaccines in some afflicted.

Oku, et al. (2017) identified poor communication as one of the major problems affecting immunisation exercises generally in Nigeria, which if not quickly addressed can undermine several components of vaccination delivery, including vaccine acceptance. Effective communication could help improve the uptake of childhood vaccination, address incomplete vaccination or missed vaccination of children which is necessary to further strengthen routine immunization programme and encourage the use of new and underused vaccines.

According to Warigon, et al. (2016), the polio eradication initiative had witnessed major setbacks between 2003 and 2007 due to negative media campaigns which led to scholars and Islamic clerics berating the polio vaccines in Nigeria. These negative media campaigns against polio vaccine contributed adversely to the high level of refusals by caregivers to take children for immunisation, hence, resulting in high numbers of unimmunized children. Some unscrupulous fellows and religious extremists were responsible for these negative campaigns in various media platforms to persuade the large non-literate against the vaccines making them to believe that polio vaccines were contaminated.

Nasiru (2012) also attributed the increased negative rumours about polio vaccine at the time to lack of adequate communication strategies to connect with the people at the grassroots level. It was rumoured that there was an inclusion into the vaccine of an anti-fertility agent or HIV virus as an indirect method of checking population growth in the Northern Nigeria predominantly surrounded by Muslims. Mischief makers, religious and political leaders capitalised on it to mar the polio eradication process as some state governments suspended vaccinations in some

key northern states till after a thorough investigations.

These rumour and concern raised by the political and religious leaders affect public trust on these vaccines. Public trust according to Jegede (2007) is essential in promoting public health, as it plays an important role in bringing about public's compliance with public health interventions, especially compliance with vaccination programs like polio eradication. Where public trust is eroded, rumours can spread and this can lead to rejection of health interventions.

This unnecessary rumour and apprehension however necessitated the World Health Organization (WHO) in partnership with Nigerian journalists in 2007 to form the Journalists Initiatives on Immunisation against Polio (JAP) aimed at developing communication initiatives that can help combat polio resistance and highlight the importance of immunization in northern Nigeria (Warigon et al., 2016).

PUBLIC RELATIONS TECHNIQUES AND POLIO ERADICATION CAMPAIGNS

Since World Health Organisation launched the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, along with great economic and intellectual efforts, the ultimate goal of halting poliovirus transmission as a means of eradicating poliomyelitis has proven rather elusive. In light of this realization and considering the possibility that a virus that can be synthesized may never truly be considered eradicated, it is imperative that new strategies to combat poliovirus be considered (Jesus, 2007). This reveals the fact that medical intervention alone cannot successfully contain or manage the spread of polio virus in the world, and also justify the use of communication efforts (particularly public relations campaigns) in addition with medical intervention to achieve positive result. Goldstein, MacDonald and Guirguis (2015) cited in Oku, et al. (2017) had observed that,

although communication is an invaluable tool in routine and campaign childhood vaccination activities, adequate attention and funding is not usually budgeted to it as such, it is rarely addressed in a systematic way as can be compared with other aspects of the vaccination processes.

Communication here, as posited by Waisbord, Shimp, Ogden and Morry (2010) should be seen as an essential part of the vaccination processes. It helps in assuring that children are fully immunized and that simultaneous immunity is attained and maintained across large geographic areas for disease eradication and control initiatives. Communication efforts in form of adequate outreach to the population are use side by side vaccines for effective service delivery. Effective communication helps in raising awareness, creating and sustaining demand, preventing or dispelling misinformation and doubts, encouraging acceptance of and participation in vaccination services, more rapid reporting of disease cases and outbreaks, and mobilizing financial resources to support immunization efforts.

According to Toole (2016), innovative communication efforts served as a panacea for solving the inability to vaccinate children in disaster prone areas like the North-East due to activities of the Boko Haram terrorists. As such, public relations strategy through the employment of local respected intermediaries to negotiate with anti-government elements and establishment of temporary 'health camps' were established for polio vaccination and other health issues.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

It is worthy of note that medical intervention alone cannot contain polio epidemic in developing countries. Hence, communication interventions by way of public relations are necessary to address and create a mutual relationship, build public trust and encourage

the use of available medical interventions to manage the spread of polio. Effective public relations will play a vital role in addressing the misunderstanding and rumours associated with polio interventions and causing vaccine resistance and increasing the spread of the disease among target population.

One thing must be made clear here that public relations alone cannot cure polio, but effective use of it can help a nation to manage and control its spread, which is more dangerous. This paper emphasises the need to integrate and intensify public relations campaigns for effective healthcare delivery, containment and eradication of wild polio virus in Nigeria.

Adequate public relations strategies and tools should be employed to tackle communication challenges militating against polio eradication programme in Nigeria.

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