

Professional Roles of Public Relations in South Asia: A Comparative Analysis of Public and Private Sectors of Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The existing circumstances of PR field in Pakistan are examined in this qualitative study by investigating the adoption patterns of four PR roles (Manager, Technician, Media relations and Communication Liaison) proposed by Broom and Smith (1978-79). Twenty public relations practitioners heading PR departments in various public and private sector organizations were purposely online-interviewed by the researcher. The participants of this qualitative study were particularly chosen from organizations working in education, telecommunication, health, tourism, rehabilitation and reconstruction, hoteling, national security and development fields. The results of this study indicated the presence of adoption patterns of all the four roles by the Pakistani PR practitioners with varying tendencies. This study concluded that that media relations role is the most frequently performed obligation by the practitioners in Pakistan. Similarly, majority of the public-sector practitioners were mostly involved in media relations role as their first preference. But majority of the practitioners in private-sector institutions were mostly involved in technician role.

Key Word: Public Relations, Public and Private Sectors, South Asia, Online Interviews

Introduction

Little research work has been produced yet on professional roles of public relations in Pakistan (Cheema, 1996; Jeelani, 2001). Public relations roles adoption patterns among practitioners provide an in-depth understanding about how public relations activity is being conducted in different organizations. Further it explains the routine assignment structure and preferred obligations of practitioners attached and practicing public relations in different organizations (et al, 2000). Broom and Smith (1979) opined that four roles of public relations have been widely explored to comprehend the general responsibilities and duties of the practitioners while performing public relations activity in organizations (Castelli, 2007; Shin and Cameron, 2005; Ragozina, 2007; Lin, 2007; Stokes, 2005; Ross, 2006; Baah-Boakye, 2007).

This paper discovers the conditions of public relations in Pakistan in terms

of role adoption patterns and determines that whether and to what extent public relations practitioners in Pakistan adopt Broom and Smith's four roles. The paper also emphasizes on differential scales of adoption of PR roles by the practitioners in public and private sectors. This research work can be considered as pioneer of its nature in the field of public relations in Pakistan. This research work serves the scholars and professionals of the field to have an in-depth understanding about public relations obligations being performed by the practitioners.

This paper serves the following objectives;

- To explore general duties and responsibilities of the public relations practitioners in Pakistan.
- To explore that what are the roles and duties public relations practitioners in Pakistan do mostly perform in public and private sectors.

Research questions

RQ1. What roles public relations practitioners do perform most often in Pakistan?

RQ2. What are the differential adoption patterns of public relations roles by the practitioners in public and private sectors?

Literature review

The pioneer research work on public relations roles was conducted by Broom and Smith (1978-1979) and they introduced the idea of different roles as were being adopted by public relations practitioners. Broom and Dozier (1986) concluded the effects and relationships of role changes pattern on professional development of the practitioners. Broom and Dozier (1986) explained the involvement of the practitioners in four roles of public relations in unbalanced tendencies of practice. The nomenclature of these four roles was introduced as expert prescriber, communication facilitator, problem-solving process facilitator and communication technician (Broom & Smith, 1979).

Later researchers (Cutlip, Broom & Center, (2000) observed that professional necessities are major factor of changes in adoption of these roles by the practitioners. Dominance or subservience of any role is dependent on its professional requirement by the practitioners while performing their professional tasks. These four roles were reduced into only two based on resemblances of practice among them and named as manager and technician (Cutlip, Broom & Center, 2000).

The activities and assignments generated by public relations practitioners while involving in manager role are selection of balanced objectives for their PR programs, practicing public relations at a strategic level with proper planning, execution and evaluation strategies, placement of a state of the art atmospheric scanning and feedback mechanisms and management of contentious issues (Cutlip, Broom & Center, 2000).

While performing technician role, on the other hand, practitioners are

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involved in assignments like preparing, editing and sending communication materials only. Technical capabilities of the practitioners are more used while performing technician role. The main difference between manager and technician roles is determined by involvement of the practitioners in management decision making process. Practitioners performing manager role are involved in decision making process while practitioners performing technician role are never involved (Cutlip, Broom & Center, 2000).

Dozier (1984) also added category of minor roles by observing that practitioners are also involved in two minor roles of communication liaison and media relations while interacting with members of their dominant coalition and members from media publics. Communication liaison role has resemblance with that of manager role, but it does not offer the practitioners any participation in management decision making. Media relations roles involve the practitioners in media management tasks internally and externally but limits the concerns of communication management (Dozier, 1992; Grunig et al., 2002).

Methods

In-depth qualitative interviewing is the appropriate research method selected for this study. Within qualitative interviewing the researchers used online interview technique to explore different public relations activities being carried out by Pakistani public relations experts. Within on-line interview technique the researchers prefer asynchronous approach (i.e. email interviews) because this approach provides the participants time elasticity and the participants are more convenient to answer the questions in their own available time (King & Horrocks, 2010; Wimmer & Dominick, 2003).

Sampling procedure

Purposive sampling approach was adopted in this study. Purposeful selection of the participants was made based on their qualification, their position in the PR department, experience and understanding of PR field and lastly but significantly by observing the importance and clout of the organizations in which these practitioners were working. Then the structure and strength of the PR department was also remained an important concern for the researcher while selecting participants. Regarding qualification, only those practitioners were selected whom had a Bachelor's degree (or a higher) in public relations or in Social Sciences. Similarly, the practitioners heading PR departments of different public and private organizations were selected only for this study. The third important criterion was the selection of the participants from only those organizations which had importance and clout in the Pakistani society and had a full-fledged in-house PR department. For fulfilling this criterion, the researcher did not directly select the participants, but firstly selected different organizations purposefully and then

choose the participants qualifying the criteria. Initially thirty organizations were selected taking fifteen from the public sector and fifteen from the private sector. But when it came to the selection of practitioners heading PR departments of these organizations, only twenty-two practitioners meet the criteria of the researcher to having a purposive sample. Out of these twenty-two practitioners, ten were from the public sector and twelve represented the private sector. Later two practitioners from the private sector were dropped by the researcher to maintain equal number of the participants from both the sectors. Thus, a purposive sample of twenty participants was selected for this study taking ten from the public and ten from the private sector.

Another important concern in qualitative research is the enough number of the participants used in the study i.e. how many participants are enough? Two criteria are applied to decide this enough number. One criterion is sufficiency and the second is saturation of information. Sufficiency is determined by the sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants. Saturation means a point in a study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported (Seidman, 2006, p. 55). In this study twenty participants as a whole and ten representing each sector is a sufficient number to reflect the rang of PR practitioners and this number is also below saturation (Douglas, 1985; Seidman, 2006, p. 55).

Results and discussion

General duties and responsibilities

What duties and responsibilities you may perform as public relations practitioners? Please do write in detail.

This question was included to explore the PR roles adaptation patterns among Pakistani PR practitioners working in public and private sectors. Analyzing the repetition of different activities as described by practitioners, the researcher came to know about roles preferences, intensity, variation and magnitude or level of involvement of the practitioners in four distinctive roles i.e. manager, technician, media relations and communication liaison.

Five practitioners (A, I, J, P & Q) said that they were most frequently involved in production of suitable newsworthy material, bargaining and ensuring space for publicity material in the media, updating media contacts list and sending media clippings to other people within organization for making them informed about coverage impact. Their second frequent involvement was in producing house publications like newsletters and magazines and other public relations material. Sometimes they also managed data regarding public relations problems so that it should be discussed with the management. And least frequently they acted as an intermediary to assist communication process in their organizations.

Three practitioners (C, L & M) said that most commonly they tried to be arranging their in house publication materials, writing press releases, feature stories and clarifications, taking care of technical aspects of production and

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remaining busy in editing assignments. Then secondly they are concerned about their media relationship status and for establishing positive media relations they enhance their media writing skills by producing news oriented material for media consumption. And very often they help information exchange phenomenon by providing the publics such opportunities where publics can effectively highlight their concerns before their management.

Two participants (B & K) revealed that most regularly they compiled and published reports for their target public's use, produced quarterly magazine and designed and conducted media campaigns. Then they also monitor print media newspapers. They also claimed their little involvement with their publics for advocacy purposes.

The responses from two participants (N & T) confirmed that they most repeatedly generated brochures, pamphlets and other publication for internal consumption, wrote news releases, selected photographs and suitable graphics and acted as an editor. Then less repeatedly they provided decision makers with suggestions and recommendations without directly involving in making communication policy decisions. And least repeatedly they maintained media contacts for their organization.

The responses from two practitioners (E & O) show that they are much concerned with media relations and most of the time organize publicity material for issuing purposes toward media outlets, search for new relations in the media and keep old relations loyal and satisfied and tell their other colleagues about media coverage on daily basis. Secondly they produce and edit in house publications but less frequently as earlier duties. And lastly consultation with the decision makers regarding PR issues is the least practiced activity on their part.

Three practitioners (D, F & G) say that success in public relations relies on media relations and for the purpose taking it as their priority they always try to maximize their interaction with the journalists. They collect and then send well written material to the media for increasing their credibility in media circles. They also try to adjust news releases on appropriate space and time using their relations. The participants D and F further say that secondly, they do often involve in highlighting PR problems and opportunities before their top management and in consultation with the management they start proactive and reactive PR plans. Their third least prominent practice is the production of day to day PR material. In contrary to participants D and F, practitioner G says that his second most involvement is in generating channels of conversation so that my organization can cooperate with its publics in a smooth way. Then practitioner G explores his third important involvement by saying that he always works in close liaison with his top management which helps him in unearthing PR problems and opportunities.

According to practitioners 'H' the most frequently performed role on his part is to interact with top managers in order to understand and solve PR weaknesses. He says that most of the time he remains busy with his bosses to score their positive input in PR affairs. The rest of the time he uses for preparing and

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arranging different PR material and for interaction with the media for ensuring good relations.

Participant 'R' says that he performs the following roles in a frequent order;

1. Developing internal/external crisis management strategy at the time of need.
2. Developing regular news releases in assistance with the relevant departments.
3. Arranging press conferences, industrial seminars and media interviews.
4. Writing letters to editors
5. Maintaining good media relations with media and related industry people.
6. Preparation of industry development reports based on our regulation authority.
7. Managing commercial website public relations area.
8. Coordinating and drafting the contents of internal newsletter.
9. Managing nationwide company's information sharing domain through intranet employee's portal.
10. Compilation of weekly telecom industry reports and sending it to all employees groups.
11. Supporting company's international operations.

Practitioner 'S' says that he performs the following duties most often;

1. Drafting press literature including releases, talking points, anticipated questions and answers.
2. Maintaining media relations.
3. Developing PR strategy (oral and campaign specific)
4. Coordinating with agency.
5. Reporting and analysis.
6. Planning and coordinating interviews and media events.
7. Advising management on crisis communication.
8. Monitoring competition and other PR trends.

Level of interaction with the top management

To whom does your department report?

Eleven practitioners (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J & Q) reply that they directly interact with the top head of their organization. While nine respondents (K, L, M, N, O, P, R, S & T) reply that they report to a senior manager who in turns reports to the head of the organization.

Status of relationship with the top management

How do you view your relationship with the top management?

Fourteen practitioners (A, C, E, G, H, I, J, K, L, P, Q, R, S & T) are of the view that their opinion is highly respected by the top management and the top

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hierarchy considers them as PR specialists. Practitioner 'E' says, "most of times the top management gives due consideration to PR's proposals on matters regarding publicity and other promotional activities". According to practitioner 'K' "our top management is very supportive of our work and values our opinions and has given us the decision-making powers regarding our department's work". Similarly respondent 'L' said, "we have got cordial and friendly relations with the management team",

Five practitioners (B, D, F, N & O) say that it is dependent on the situation. There are situations when their opinion is taken on board but sometimes the top management does not notice their opinion. E.g. practitioner 'B' says that his opinion is taken seriously at times and at others his feel that opinion is being ignored. Called upon to give my opinion but sometimes it appears that the organization is seldom satisfied with our efforts.

One practitioner 'M' responds that the top management does not pay much attention to his opinion and he is considered as a staff member.

Responsibility regarding PR plans

Who prepares and implement PR programs/campaigns in your organization?

Who is considered responsible for the success or failure of PR programs in your organization?

Out of twenty participants six practitioners (B, C, D, F, L & R) say that preparation and implementation of PR programs is their responsibility. Out of these six two practitioners (B & L) are of the view that they prepare PR plans themselves but in close coordination with the top management.

Eleven practitioners (A, E, G, H, I, J, K, O, P, S & T) claim that PR programs are jointly prepared and implemented by a team. e.g. practitioner 'K' says that it is a team work. Some ideas come directly from the executive director which we later work on how to turn it into a successful and cost-effective campaign. Some ideas are shared by our program manager and by our PR department.

Three practitioners (M, N & Q) say that it is the top management that is involved in preparation and execution of PR campaigns. Seven practitioners (A, C, D, F, H, M & R) say that they are held responsible for the success or failure of PR efforts. Eight respondents (B, E, G, I, J, N, S & T) say that this responsibility is shared by the PR department as a whole. Four participants (K, L, P & Q) are of the view that the working team including people from management side and from PR department is considered accountable for PR programs results'. Practitioner 'K' says, "We keep a record of everything from concept development of a program to its execution and till its evaluation. So, we also write down lessons learnt from a failure of a program and keep in mind that lesson for future programs. The reasons of failures are identified and included in the planning of upcoming projects. For success it is always considered a team work".

Participant 'L' says that they work as a team so the success or the failure is not pertained to a single individual.

One respondent 'S' replies that head of marketing department is held answerable for producing good PR results.

Role in deciding communication policy

Does your organization make you involved in the decision-making process while deciding about communication policy? If not tell why?

Sixteen practitioners (A, B, C, D, E, G, H, I, J, K, L, P, Q, R, S & T) claimed that their organization did make them involved in the decision-making process while deciding about communication policy. Practitioner 'A' said that he was responsible for making, planning and executing the internal and external communication policy. Practitioner 'K' said that they were involved in the strategic planning and their submitted ideas were always welcomed. Similarly, practitioner 'L' said that PRO was involved in the formulation of communication policy in collaboration with the executive director. Two practitioners (N & O) told that they were not taken on board while deciding about communication policy. Two practitioners (F & M) opined that their management made them involved partially in the decision-making process.

Answers to research questions

RQ1: What roles public relations practitioners do perform most often in Pakistan?

In this study the focus of the researchers was to inquire about the adaptation patterns of two major (Manager and Technician) and two minor (Media relations and Communication liaison) PR roles among Pakistani practitioners working in public and private sectors. This study proves that all four roles are performed by Pakistani practitioners in varying degrees.

Responses collected from practitioners were analyzed and it was explored that media relations role was dominant in public relations practice in Pakistan. Majority of the practitioners (ten out of twenty practitioners, 50%) were involved in media relations role as their foremost preference. Twenty five percent of the practitioners were adopting this role as their second preference while twenty four percent of the practitioners were performing this task as their third preference. Only five percent of the practitioners were performing this role as their fourth priority.

The second most important role adopted by practitioners in Pakistan was technician role. This role was adopted by forty percent of the practitioners as their first preference, a similar forty percent of the practitioners as their second preference, fifteen percent of the practitioners as their third preference and only five percent of the practitioners as their fourth preference.

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Manager role involvement was explored as the third important activity performed by public relations practitioners in Pakistan. Out of twenty practitioners, 10% were frequently performing in manager role enactment as their foremost obligation and 10% were performing as their second most obligation. Forty percent of the practitioners were performing this obligation as their third most important task and a similar number of practitioners were involved as being their fourth priority.

The least performed role as practiced by practitioners in PR industry in Pakistan was communication liaison role. Communication liaison role was not taken as first preference by any of the practitioner. But 25% of the practitioners were performing this role as their second important duty and a similar number of practitioners were doing as third important function. Majority of the practitioners (50%) were taking this obligation at number four in order of priority.

RQ2. What are the differential adoption patterns of public relations roles by the practitioners in public and private sectors?

A comparative analysis of both public and private sectors explored that role preferences were differently adopted by practitioners. Majority of the public-sector practitioners were mostly involved in media relations role as their first preference. Out of ten practitioners, 70% were performing as their first preference, 20% were performing as their second preference and 10% were performing as their third preference. The second choice of majority of the public-sector practitioners was technician role. Out of ten practitioners interviewed, 20% were performing as their first preference, 50% were performing as their second preference, 20% were performing as their third preference and 10% of the practitioners were involved in technician role as being their fourth preference.

Practitioners from public sector institutions were taking manager role as their third mostly performed obligation within the hierarchy of all four roles. Out of ten practitioners interviewed, 10% were performing as their first preference, 20% were performing as their second preference, 50% were performing as their third preference and 20% of the practitioners were involved in manager role as being their fourth preference. The least performed role found among public-sector practitioners was communication liaison role as this role was not being performed by a single practitioner as his/her first choice. Ten percent of the practitioners were performing communication liaison role as their second preference, 20% were performing as their third preference and 70% of the practitioners were involved in communication liaison role as being their fourth preference.

On the other hand, majority of the practitioners in private-sector institutions were mostly involved in technician role. Out of ten practitioners interviewed, 60% were executing this role as their first preference, 30% were executing as their second preference and 10% were executing as their third preference.

Interestingly, majority of the private-sector practitioners were also involved

in media relations role as their second most preference. A slight majority (30%) of the practitioners were taking this role as their first preference, a similar number of practitioners (30%) were taking this role as their second and third priority and only 10% were adopting this role as being their fourth obligation.

Manager role was placed at third place as routinely practiced by private-sector practitioners. A slight minority (10%) of the practitioners were recognizing this role as their first preference while most of the practitioners were recognizing this role as being their third (30%) and fourth (60%) preferences respectively.

Communication liaison role was considered as least adopted within private-sector practitioners. Not a single practitioner was agreed that he/she was practicing this role as his/her first preference. But a slight majority of the practitioners were adopting this role as their second (40%), third (30%) and fourth (30%) preferences.

Manager technician dichotomy

The researchers especially asked one to five questions to explore that whether Pakistani PR practitioners are working as managers or performing their duties as technicians. In search of this dichotomy the researcher analyzed practitioners' reporting mechanism, their level of interaction with the top management their status of relationship with the top management, their responsibility regarding PR plans and their role in deciding communication policy. The results indicate that more practitioners are working as managers and less are working as technicians and staff members.

Conclusion

The results of the study disclose that media relations role is the most frequently performed obligation by the practitioners in Pakistan. Since the start of the new millennium Pakistani media scene has taken a one eighty degree turn and newly emerged cross media culture has its own ramifications on every organization. The speedy changes in media industry have resulted in increased organizational vulnerability because due to poor democratic system and inadequate organizational structure it has become difficult for institutions to respond vibrant media scrutiny. Electronic media has put institutional prestige on roads within no time. Speedy media growth in Pakistan does not match slow institutional evolution and institutions need longer time to get rid of corrupt system and to be ready for vibrant media discourse. The immediate solution as found by the organizations in present media scenario is to focus on management of sustainable media relations. The increased media scrutiny also fears the organizations to build positive media relations. Thus, this pressure is diverted to public relations practitioners that remained busy in establishing media relations most of their time.

Although the technician role is more frequently employed in Pakistan as compared to manager role if it is decided on the basis of time involvement ratio by

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the practitioners in each of the both roles. But if it is observed in terms of designated status provided by the top management to the practitioners, this is hopeful that more Pakistani practitioners are managers than technicians. This tendency shows a dichotomy in the maturity level of PR field in Pakistan. Organizations understand the importance of public relations discipline as a management function. Top hierarchy in organizations always provides a respectful place to PR practitioners in their management structure and considers his/her opinion as important on communication policy related issues. But the overall internal structure of organizations and external media pressure forces the practitioner to perform technician role most of the time than manager role.

Communication liaison role is the least performed role in Pakistan in comparison to the other three roles. Bureaucratic structure of organizations restricts the practitioners to perform this role. Other managers in organizations assume that communication liaison is more of their responsibility than the PR practitioners. This mindset affects public relations efficacy regarding the performance of communication liaison internally and externally.

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