Enhancing the Public Relations Function of the Information Department

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Abstract

This study is designed to find out the challenges and opportunities in enhancing the public relations (PR) function of the Information and Public Relations Department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. The scholar explores the department's role in promoting government initiatives, fostering media relations, and building public trust through effective communication strategies. The researcher used a qualitative method for data collection. The data was collected through an online questionnaire with open-ended questions from Public Relations Officers (PROs) and Regional Information Officers (RIOs). The data was collected from (n=16) out of 39 participants in the study. The study concluded that many barriers delay the efficiency of PR practices, including limited access to resources such as modern IT equipment, insufficient training in digital tools, and inadequate funding. Furthermore, the weak coordination between the Information Department and other government departments, coupled with a lack of standardized communication protocols, undermines its ability to deliver timely and effective messaging. The study further highlighted logistical challenges, such as inadequate mobility support for fieldwork, and the evolving digital landscape, which demands greater expertise in tools like social media, video editing, and artificial intelligence.

Keywords: *Public relations, government, crisis communication, capacity building, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa*

Introduction:

Enhancing the public relations (PR) function, is involves strategic integration of communication efforts, crisis management and stakeholder engagement. By focusing on these areas, PR organizations can improve their public image and foster better relationships with their

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media and the general public. PR plays a crucial role in establishing mutual relationships with stakeholders, which is vital in the technology information era. (Ullah et al., 2022).

The Information & Public Relations Department serves as the principal organ of the Provincial Government for publicity and public relations (Under the Rules of Business, 1985). The Department has a dedicated Directorate General of Information & PRs and field formations. There are eight Regional Information Offices, one located at each divisional headquarters and another in Islamabad, which serves as the Provincial Regional Information Office. Furthermore, there are ten FM Radio Stations in both settled and merged districts (DGIPR, 2023).

The Information and Public Relations (PR) Department plays an important role in shaping and creating the public image of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa government. The Department has appointed Public Relations Officers (PROs) to work closely with all provincial ministers, advisors, special assistants to the Chief Minister of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Chief Secretary, and the Provincial Police Officer. (Ullah et al., 2021).

The PROs serve as liaisons with the media, ensuring timely information sharing regarding the activities and initiatives of their respective ministers, advisors, and special assistants. They are essential for issuing press releases, handouts, press notes and covering events and visits of their assigned ministers, including the inaugurations of new projects. Moreover, they are responsible for countering negative propaganda by providing factual information and counter-arguments (Mukhtar & Shahzad, 2018). Most Public Relations Officers (PROs) are Grade-17 officers who have been recruited through the Public Service Commission of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. However, due to a shortage of the necessary number of officers, the department has temporarily assigned Grade-16 officials and even staff from other cadres as a stop-gap measure (Mukhtar & Ishaque, 2021).

Effective communication and public relations are important for building trust and credibility with the stakeholders, particularly with the general public and media. However, there are several challenges that PR professionals face in projecting the key initiatives of the provincial government by maintaining positive relations with the mainstream media. This research study aims to explore the challenges and opportunities faced by the Information & PRs Department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and to identify ways to enhance its public relations function.

Literature review

Public relations (PR) plays a pivotal role in shaping the public perception of government institutions and fostering transparency, accountability, and trust between the government and its citizens. (Graham, 2014). Effective PR practices are essential for promoting good governance, enhancing public participation, and ensuring the efficient delivery of public services (Mosotho, 2013). This Paper investigates the significance of public relations in promoting good governance and highlights the strategies for improving PR practices in government institutions.

Public relations serves as a bridge between government institutions and the public, facilitating the sharing of information, building relationships, and creating positive perceptions (GEZGİN, 2019). In the context of governance, PR plays a crucial role in promoting transparency by providing timely and accurate information to the public about government policies, decisions, and actions (Wamprechtsamer, 2024). Transparency is a fundamental principle of good governance, as it enables citizens to hold government officials accountable and make informed decisions about public affairs (Wood & Aronczyk, 2020).

Effective PR practices help in fostering accountability within government institutions. By communicating openly and honestly with the public, government agencies can demonstrate their commitment to accountability and responsiveness (Yang, 2009). PR professionals play a key role in ensuring that government actions are communicated clearly and understandably, thereby building trust and credibility with the public (Avery & Graham, 2013).

Public relations can be enhanced through transparency and accountability. By engaging with citizens through various communication channels, such as social media, public forums, and community outreach programs, government institutions can solicit feedback, address concerns, and involve the public in decision-making processes (Mukhtar & Ishaque, 2021). Public participation is essential for ensuring that government policies and programs reflect the needs and preferences of the people they serve. Effective PR practices are crucial for ensuring the efficient delivery of public services. By proactively communicating with the public about service offerings, changes, and improvements, government agencies can enhance service delivery and customer satisfaction. PR professionals can also play a role in managing public expectations, addressing complaints, and resolving issues in a timely and effective manner (Luci-Atienza, 2024).

Research Objectives:

- To investigate the challenges faced by the PR professionals in promoting the key initiatives of the provincial government.
- To identify gaps in communication and coordination between the Information Department and other Government departments.
- To examine the relationship between the Information Department and mainstream media outlets.

Research Questions:

1. What are the main challenges faced by the PR professionals in promoting the key initiatives of the provincial government?
2. What are the gaps in communication and coordination between the Information Department and other departments?
3. How do the Information Department and mainstream media outlets interact and collaborate in promoting government initiatives?

Significance of the Study:

This study provides valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by the Information Department in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in projecting a positive image of the provincial government. The study helps in identifying areas for improvement in the PR function of the Information Department and in enhancing communication and coordination with other government departments and mainstream media outlets. Ultimately, this study aims to contribute to the development of effective public relations strategies for the government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Methodology

The scholars have used quantitative methods, gathering detailed opinions from participants at the Directorate General Information and Public Relations Officers (PROs) of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), regarding key challenges faced by the Information Department of KP in the public relations process. The study utilized Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of all collected data to identify patterns and critical issues in public relations practices (Ullah & Jan, 2021).

Data collection tool

The scholars used an online questionnaire for data collection. The designed questionnaire was shared with all the Public Relations Officers and Regional Information Officers of the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Government and we assembled the statistics with the help of the Press Information Department, Peshawar. Currently, there are eight regional information officers (RIOs) and thirty-one public relations officers (PROs) working in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The data was collected from 16 out of 39 participants in the study.

Time zone

The data was collected in the two months from May to June in the year 2024.

Data Analyses

A total of 39 PROs and RIOs were contacted for the study, and only 16 participants agreed and filled out the online questionnaire. Data has been gathered through a designed online questionnaire (included Open ended and Close End Questions). The closed-ended questions were analysed to it has subjected to frequency counts. In other words, the subjects' responses for each question were added together to find the highest frequency of occurrence i.e., the number of times that particular response occurs. The open-ended questions were analysed based on the major themes of the discussion in the answers of the respondents.

During the data analysis, it was concluded that the respondents' ages ranged from 30 to 45 years, with working experience as a PRO, varying between 5 to 18 years, in the information department, KP. The majority (Eight respondents) have a Master's degree (16 Years of Education) in Journalism and Mass Communication, while seven respondents have an MS/MPhil (18 Years of Education) and One respondent holds a PhD in the Field of Journalism and Mass Communication.

The analysis pointed out that seven respondents had not received any training regarding Public Relations, while eight respondents got many training, organized by national and international organizations regarding public relations, and one respondent did not answer the question. Based on data analysis, the following key themes were identified.

Lack of basic equipment

In General, the laptop, Camera, Cell Phone and internet are the basic equipment used during the Public Relations process. The majority (11) of the respondents agreed that they did

not have the necessary equipment and resources to perform their job effectively, while five of the respondents had an opinion that they had basic equipment to perform the duty. Participant 3 Added more than

> *"As per requirements of the digital age, the dynamics of Govt. Communication*
> *and PR have also changed from traditional patterns' run with the new era and*
> *digital media landscape, computer-mediated equipment and internet facilities*
> *are essential for the smooth running of PR work".*

Due to developments in technology, cellular phones with high-resolution cameras and the internet are enough for taking, pictures, recording Audio/ Video and sharing with Journalists. Participant 9 further supported and stated.

> *"Mobile set having good camera and Enough storage (iPhone seems the*
> *perfect one) a laptop for extended hours and handy use especially for visits*
> *and data backup/archiving. Wireless Mics for SOT and any other video*
> *message recording. Officials Sims of Same network having pre/postpaid data*
> *bundles for extended data use and interpersonal communication".*

Besides the cell phone and internet "logistics Support" is also an important requirement for PRO, to effectively perform the duty. The majority of the respondents mentioned that they need proper logistics support because their responsibilities often need to attend and cover different events outside the office.

To efficiently manage fieldwork, PROs require essential logistical support, including transportation, technical equipment, and administrative support to ensure seamless event coverage, timely communication, and efficient information dissemination. The lack of adequate logistics can hinder their ability to perform duties effectively, affecting the overall efficiency of public relations efforts within the Information Department of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).

Internal challenges

Access to required information and less cooperation from the concerned Department are also challenges in the PR process. During the data analysis, it was found that the majority of the participants agreed that "lack of equipment, logistics, Coordination, and PR Budget (Funding)" are the major challenges in the PR process. Participant 03 has an opinion that.

> *"The main challenges in promoting key initiatives of the provincial govt is lack*

of proper coordination between govt and information dept., proper facilitation services, emerging digital era and lack of expertise, proper training, undermining the role of PR dept./staff."

During the public relations process, the trust of the media and the public is very important. The PRO deals with both simultaneously. Participant 08, who has more than 10 years of experience working as a PRO in the information department, stated, "The main challenges include building public trust, simplifying complex issues, dealing with a diverse media landscape, managing limited resources, and combating misinformation." Participant 2 agreed with Participant 08 and added.

"Weak coordination and liaison with officials of the concerned department, which are due to their passive interest or mistrust in the PRO, as there is a perception that the PRO is a private media person. This perception stems from the lack of placement policies and regulations regarding the services of PROs in the concerned department. It has also been noted that some officials share information and details directly with media persons, bypassing the PRO to cultivate their own media contacts. In short, there is a lack of policies or regulations that need to be framed for this purpose".

It was found that Lack of trust, Recognition of the Information Department, no regular meetings, no common agenda, lack of coordination and communication, lack of coordination, Participant 09 recommended.

"The lack of staff, No understanding of the importance of proper communication with information by other stakeholders ".

Participant 1, shared his experience that there are no regular meetings to share the problems and other issues to discuss. The meeting will be helpful to reduce jealousy and increase the trust level among the PROs. Participant 03 agreed and stated.

"Monthly meeting of all the departments. with information is required in which they pledge the desired support and in return we ensure them the desired digital and conventional media coverage".

Participant 9 shared his opinion that "Minister to Minister, Secretary to Secretary and even DG to DG coordination is all missing. To address this issue, there is a need for a command-

and-control centre at the provincial level, where all forms of media can be closely monitored and responded to. Each department should assign a representative to this centre, similar to how the Home Department operates its command and control or security secretariat.

Effective communication is crucial for the Information Department, making its officers more communicative than those in other departments. However, significant obstacles remain, including bureaucratic reluctance to share information, conflicting priorities, lack of standardized communication protocols, insufficient information sharing, and limited resources. Participant 07 further added that there are multiple contributing factors: the absence of clear policies or regulations, a lack of awareness among other departments regarding their mandates, and general differences from government departments until issues become critical.

Relationship with Media

For the public relations process, a good relationship between the information department and media is important, all the participants of the study agreed, and Participant 3 further supported it.

> *"The information department must be empowered to have a proper meeting with media outlets and correspondence regarding professional workout and the gap needs to overcome to collaborate fast track communication between two".*

Exposure visits and recreational activities are important for PRO, to get more energy to perform the duty, Participant 10 has the opinion that *"Exposure visits of PROs/information officers and Media persons to different places"* Participant 7 added more *"Involving information department in different recreational activities with journalists like sports gala and other competitive activities".* Arrangement of joint tours and joint workshops on capacity building and collaborative working. Participant 6 further suggested

> *"Join meeting and strategy to improve the relationship between the Information Department and mainstream media outlets, focus on transparent communication, regular updates, and fostering mutual trust".*

Frequent interactions, such as organizing joint tours and training sessions for public relations officers and journalists, can foster better relationships. Additionally, establishing joint ventures between the Public Relations Committee (PPC) and the Directorate General of Inter-Services Public Relations (DGIPR) can enhance cooperative initiatives.

A dedicated International Media Facility Center should be created to manage and assist with stories from international journalists, while recreational activities for public relations officers and journalists can further strengthen their connections. Providing exposure visits to mainstream media channels will also be beneficial, alongside hosting media conferences that address pressing issues.

Creating a directory of YouTubers and digital content creators through registration with a social media authority will help support diverse voices in the media landscape. Unearthing research-based stories can capture media attention while implementing a fact-checking system will aid in countering misinformation. Furthermore, taking formal legal action against media channels or journalists for publishing false or misleading news can help uphold journalistic integrity.

Shifting from one-way communication to a more engaged approach will enhance relationships, build trust, and ensure effective collaboration between the Information Department and media outlets. This comprehensive strategy will ultimately strengthen communication and collaboration in the public relations arena.

Enhancing the public relations function

Training and use of new technology in the PR Process is very important, The Majority of the Participants agreed that they need training, about the new developments in the field of PR and Good governance. Participant 2 shared that

> *"Capacity Building of the Information officers/PROs at different training centres like Center for Excellence in Journalism IBA Karachi etc.".*

Participant 09 further added that Capacity Building Training are must to equip the PROs with the latest technologies falling in the domain of communication like AI, Infographics, Digital Media, social media, Video Editing, and Podcasting. Participant 11 has an opinion that the PRO should be equipped with modern IT equipment's proper protocol within the minister's offices and transporting problems facing PROs should be addressed. Equipping the department and its employees with highly recommended gadgets like mobile phones, laptops, vehicles, cameras, glides etc. Participants further suggested details research regarding the PR in KP. Participant 13 stated

> *"I would suggest conducting a focus group discussion of PROs/producers and journalists on the same subject ".*

Some of the participants have the opinion that the Department need to support the high study of the PRO and other staff of the information department, Participant 5 added that

> *"Provision of high qualification or relevant research opportunities to him during the service as the PID officers get relevant degrees from the reputable universities abroad or inside the country during service".*

The Majority of the participants believed that the information department was doing a great job. To further improve the public relations efforts, participant 9 added that.

> *The Department should establish proper office spaces for each Public Relations Officer (PRO) and create a special fund for refreshments. Implementing an allowance similar to that provided by the Information Department of Punjab for PROs would also be beneficial.*

It's essential to ensure strong monitoring and evaluation of PR activities while employing professional staff to enhance our operations. Improving workplace facilities and addressing the need for effective organizational communication will also make a difference. It is essential to allocate an adequate budget for PR activities, provide special packages for DGIPRs officers posted to challenging areas, and ensure that PROs are assigned to liaise with all departments.

Discussion

Public relations utilize different equipment to improve communication and interaction with the public. These include information and communication technologies (ICT) facilitating information transfer and communication (Yaxley, 2016), mobile terminals for effective PR message transmission and coupon dissemination (Feroz Khan et al., 2014), and commercial-off-the-shelf robot platforms designed for public relations tasks like information, communication, and way-finding in public areas (Hansen & Hansen, 2020). Digital tools such as smartphones and social networks are widely employed by public relations practitioners in Jordanian telecommunications and smartphone companies for internal and external communication, measuring public satisfaction, building customer relationships, and gathering feedback (Al-Mazahra, 2023). This diverse equipment plays a crucial role in modern public relations strategies. All the participants of the Study agreed that the laptop, Camera, Cell Phone and internet are the basic equipment used during the Public Relations process. Due to the digital age, the dynamics of Public Relations changed from traditional patterns to the Digital world, and Computer-

mediated equipment and internet facilities are essential for the smooth running of PR work. Besides the Laptop, the cellular phone with a high-resolution camera is enough for taking, pictures, recording Audio/ Video and sharing with Journalists. The Cellular Phone is easy handy use, especially for visits and data backup/archiving. While Wireless Mics for Sound on Tap (**SOT**) and any other video message recording. It is also suggested that the "logistics Support" is also important during the performing of the duty of the PRO. The majority of the respondents mentioned that they need logistics support because there are many events outside the office. To cover those events the PRO needs logistics support.

Public Relations faces several challenges in the modern era. These challenges include the need for professionals to adapt to the communication age by integrating relationships with stakeholders and society at macro and micro levels (Anani-Bossman & Bruce, 2021), improving coordination patterns, HR competencies, and top leadership commitment (Mulyono, 2023), committing to continuous training for specialization, strategic vision, quality, ethics, transparency, and inclusion (Almansa-Martínez & Fernández-Souto, 2020), and addressing factors like globalization dynamics, technological disruptions, ESG requirements, AI impacts, and the evolution of communicative functions within organizations (Gregory, 2022). To navigate these challenges successfully, Public Relations professionals must enhance their strategic capabilities, embrace new media environments, and lead organizations in inclusive and transparent communication strategies to meet the demands of a rapidly changing society.

This study concluded that lack of equipment, logistics, Coordination and PR Budget (Funding) are the major challenges in the PR process. They further added that lack of proper coordination between govt and the information department, proper facilitation services, the emerging digital era, lack of expertise, and proper training, undermine the role of the PR dept./staff. Weak coordination and liaison with officials of the concerned department, which is due to their passive interest or mistrust in the PRO, as there is a perception that the PRO is a private media person. This perception stems from the lack of placement policies and regulations regarding the services of PROs in the concerned department. It has also been noted that some officials share information and details directly with media persons, bypassing the PRO to cultivate their own media contacts. In short, there is a lack of policies or regulations that need to be framed for this purpose".

This study concluded there are no regular meetings to share the problems and other issues to

discuss. The meeting will be helpful to reduce jealousy and increase the trust level among the PROs. The second most important to highlight is that there are Lack of trust and recognition of Information Department among the other stakeholders.

It is proposed that Exposure visits and recreational activities are important for PRO, to get more energy to perform the duty. The different recreational activities with journalists like sports gala and other competitive activities. It is also suggested that meetings and strategies to improve the relationship between the Information Department and mainstream media outlets focus on transparent communication, regular updates, and fostering mutual trust.

Training and use of new technology in the PR Process is very important. The Capacity Building of the Information Officers/PROs at different training centres like Center for Excellence in Journalism IBA Karachi etc. The training should be latest technologies falling in the domain of communication like AI, Infographics, Digital Media, social media, Video Editing, and Podcasting.

The study recommends that the Government invest in modern ICT infrastructure to increase efficiency, implement standard communication protocols to ensure consistency across public relations processes and offer training in emerging digital tools to equip professionals with the latest skills needed for effective communication and media management.

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