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CHAPTER 4

Digital Public Relations and Governance in Nigeria: Prospects and Challenges

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Although the idea of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is not new and has inspired several technologies used today, discussions about AI's application has become more prominent in recent times. The reasons for the recent interest in Artificial Intelligence range from advancement in machine learning, abundance of dataset and extensive industry application (Kouassi, 2024). Among the industries in which Artificial Intelligence is been applied is Public Relations. According to the Public Relations Society of America, fundamentally, Public

Relations aim to frame and mold the public's opinion of an organization by interacting with, influencing and developing relationships with key stakeholders across various platforms. Public relations is a practice which many organisations globally involve in to maintain mutual beneficial relationship between them and their publics, creating trust, enhancing a positive reputation which in turn influences business growth and patronage. Consequently, public relations is also a tool used by governments to maintain mutual relationship between them and their publics, both internal and external

The government of any nation is in the business of governance which involves the procedures by which public institutions oversee the realisation of human rights, administer public resources and conduct public affairs (United Nations, 2024). Asemah (2019) noted that effective PR is built on communication and with Nigeria's current democratic regime, the demand for government PR is growing. Inadequate communication creates disconnect between the government and the governed, which affects democratic governance negatively. Examples of government public relations includes reporting to the public on agency activities as a way of contributing to an informed public, disseminating information as prelude to citizen participation in agency decision making and listening to public opinion (Lee, 2019).

Advancement in technology over the years has transformed public relations practice. Previous studies such as Graham (2013), Garba, Yakubu, Maryclet & Williams (2022) showed that in the digital age, social media has been a tool used in Public Relations function in promoting democratic and participatory models in government. Furthermore, Artificial Intelligence is now being used by PR professionals to help with a variety of repetitive chores that they perform on a daily basis, including sending emails, transcribing speeches, compiling media lists, and creating

reports (Fifi, 2021). As Artificial Intelligence has been the talk of the town in recent times, it is imperative to examine what implications it has or could have as a tool in promoting government relations with its publics.

Overview of Government Public Relations in Nigeria

Nwosu in Asemah (2019, p.24) observed that in theory and in practice, every government derives its legitimacy or the right to govern from the people or citizens. As such, no government will be able to achieve its aims and objectives without relating with its publics effectively. Nigeria transitioned from military rule to civilian rule in 1999 when Olusegun Obasanjo was elected as the President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the third head of government elected by the citizens of the country. Since then, democracy has continued to thrive in Nigeria. Democracy is the system of governance that gives people the power to exercise political control, restricts the authority of the head of state, allows separation of power between entities of government and ensures the preservation of civil freedom and fundamental rights (Longley, 2024). Asemah (2019) noted that in every nation, PR plays a significant role in the political process. Its functions encompasses promotion of political candidates and their parties for elective positions, marketing government initiatives, disseminating information about government policies and programmes and facilitating public participation in governance.

Within this context, Nigeria's democracy has been questioned by analysts and commentators home and abroad because of corruption among its political class, declining voter and electoral participation, public mistrust of the ruling class, eroding civil liberties and weak democratic institutions (Hoffman & Wallace, 2022). This has affected the image and reputation of the country both locally and internationally. Therefore, efforts have been made by the government, especially at the federal level to redeem the image of the country. Also, government and its institutions

(ministries, departments and agencies) have been known to use PR tools and strategies to communicate their constitutional and legal mandates to the general public (Turney in Garba et al, 2022). With advancement in technology, PR evolved from traditional methods to digital channels, which government has also harnessed. Garba et al (2022) noted that traditional PR involved the use of billboards, press releases through mainstream media, in-house journals, whereas, digital PR presents all forms of information in digital formats, in text, audio and videos, allowing e-versions of PR materials to be distributed in the cyberspace.

Kang and Norton in Garba et al (2022) assert that in the present day, governments use web 2.0 tools majorly for e-governance and digital public relations. In Nigeria, the governments at federal and state levels have adopted websites and social media as digital PR tools for promoting their activities to the general public: news and articles written to inform the general public about government to citizens and government to business services are viewed in online newspapers, government and agency websites serve as platforms for government to disseminate information to its publics including citizens, businesses, other government entities and its employees. Social media also serves as a platform for government to reach its publics and is more advantageous because of its wider reach, multimedia format, and interactive features, which allows for feedback (Garba et al, 2022).

Garba et al (2022) investigated social media as a tool in government to establish how many national and sub-national governments in Nigeria use social media as a digital PR tool, the level of social media usage as a digital PR tool and the level of e-participation with the use of social media as a digital PR tool in Nigeria. Using a descriptive research method, the paper found that all national and subnational governments in Nigeria use a minimum of two and a maximum of six social media accounts, although some of the social media accounts have not been used

for over four to six years. The findings show that the level of social media use as a digital PR tool by the national and subnational governments in Nigeria was averagely low. Government social media accounts were abandoned for political personalities. The level of e-participation with social media was averagely low. The paper recommended that efforts should be made by governments adopt at least 4 top social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram) as digital PR tools.

Artificial Intelligence in the present day has advanced and is a digital technology that has widespread application in various fields and professions. Artificial Intelligence technologies are technologies that imitate human intelligence to solve problems and carry out tasks. According to Santiso (2024), what makes AI different from other digital technology government has deployed in recent years is that AI has disruptive tendency and the potential to impact the public sector. Also, it is evolving with speed regularly because the technology augments itself. Furthermore, it is a general purpose technology whose scope of application is limitless. The technology has implications in government PR. In this contestation, this paper examines overview of government public relations in Nigeria, opportunities of AI in government public relations and threats AI poses to government public relations.

In this chapter, government public relations is defined as effective application of public relations principles, techniques and strategies by government to facilitate process of governance and keep the public informed of its policies, issues, events and problems so that mutual understanding and trust can exist between government and its citizenry, as well as its various external and international publics (Achor & Okoye, 2015 p.1644). Ingrams (2022) investigated how citizens evaluate the impact of AI decision making in government in terms of both impact on red tape an impact on citizen trust Trust of citizens is

an important ingredient in building strong institutions of government and public service delivery. An experimental survey was used in gathering data and the paper was implemented with qualtrics survey software. The paper revealed that trust was negatively impacted when participants perceived the decision maker was AI. This showed that a human decision maker is perceived as more trustworthy in terms of honesty, benevolence and competence. However, perception of red tape was lower when the decision maker was an AI because AI is perceived as a neutral tool that can carry out tasks effectively, with minimal errors.

Achor and Okoye (2015) examined the status of government public relations in Nigeria and its institutionalisation in governance in Nigeria. The objectives of the paper were to determine if the GPR practices reflect the PR approaches- policy approach, PR consciousness approach and PR practice approach, and if the practice of three PR approaches ensures PR institutionalisation in governance. The paper made use of a survey research design by purposively selecting a sample of PR practitioners that work in government ministries, parastatals and agencies that are familiar with various aspects of governance. The paper showed that GPR practices in Nigeria do not reflect the three PR approaches which are the key index in determining the status of GPR. Also, GPR in Nigeria is yet to become a top management function. The factors militating against the institutionalisation of PR in governance includes poor understanding of PR role, lack of transparency and non recognition of PR as a management function.

Fifi (2021) investigated the disruption of AI in Public Relations. Based on interviews with PR practitioners, findings of the paper showed that the practitioners believe that AI cannot take over their jobs because PR involves trust and emotional intelligence and thus, human input is likely to remain essential regardless of

the radical transformation that might take place, but is a complement which practitioners should take advantage of.

Panda et al (2019) investigated the potential of AI as a strategic disruption in a qualitative paper with 31 PR professionals. They sought to establish the general perception and attitude of PR professionals towards AI applications, which AI applications are meaningful in the PR industry and how the adoption of AI will impacts the jobs of PR professionals and client-agency relationship. The paper showed that AI is used to assist PR managers in designing campaigns, automate tactical and repetitive tasks, drawing insights from datasets, identifying and tailoring content for influencers and identifying and responding to crisis. The paper found that adoption of AI impacts content creation, automation of menial tasks, management of PR crisis and management of agency-client relationship. Most of the practitioners observed that AI had the potential to be a strategic disruption in the near future. The paper concluded on the need for employees to upskill in the AI age.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter is anchored on the Digital Generative Multimedia Tool Theory (DGMTT), and Technological Determinism. DGMTT relied on the production of media content by AI. The term "DGMTT" was first used by Onyejelem and Aondover in 2023. Onyejelem and Aondover propounded the theory in 2024 to investigate the possibilities of multimedia tools in producing digital material. This theory is at the forefront of innovation because it provides a way to bridge the gap between emerging technologies and traditional multimedia creation methods in order to improve the digital media environment and produce memorable and compelling multimedia contents in the constantly changing digital landscape (Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024a).

According to DGMTT, digital media tools are dynamic creators of fresh, original digital media forms rather than just tools for creating static material. This theory highlights the potential of digital media technologies to enable creative professionals such as designers, photographers, and artists to produce interactive and generative media that is capable of real-time evolution and adaptation. DGMTT offers a novel method for producing digital media that could revolutionize how we think about and use digital media tools during the creative process. This idea could have a big impact on the design, art, and digital media industries by opening up new avenues for innovation and creative expression (Onyejelem & Aondover, 2024b).

A brand-new idea called DGMTT clarifies the ideologies that define how digital generative tools affect the production, sharing, and consumption of multimedia material in the age of AI. The theory provides a useful framework for comprehending, analyzing, and elucidating AI's function in multimedia studies and communication. Media educators and digital content creators may meet audiences' desire to use new media technologies by using the capabilities of DGMTTs to provide personalized, adaptive, engaging, educational, entertaining, and persuasive experiences. DGMTT will be vital in determining the direction of communication, multimedia scholarship, and generative media tools as AI technologies advance.

A useful foundation for comprehending the revolutionary influence of AI on the production of multimedia content is offered by DGMTT. By using this theoretical framework, we may create well-informed plans for the efficient use of AI-powered media tools and gain a deeper understanding of their potential and associated obstacles. As a result, DGMTT presents a viable framework for managing the intricate and quickly changing field of AI-powered media content development. It offers a useful foundation for comprehending and analyzing how digital

technology might revolutionize the creative process in the film and media studies. DGMTT is therefore pertinent to this paper on the generation of multimedia material and AI-powered media creation tools.

The application of Digital Generative Multimedia Tools in public relations (PR) and governance is a growing field, leveraging advanced technologies like AI, machine learning, and data-driven content creation to enhance communication strategies, public engagement, and transparency. The integration of DGMTT in PR and governance represents a significant shift towards more dynamic, responsive, and transparent communication practices. However, it also requires careful management of ethical and practical challenges to ensure these technologies are used for the public good.

This chapter is driven by the Technological Determinism theory. The major tenet of the technological determinism theory is that technology is the primary driver of societal transformation. Technological determinism postulates that the main forces behind social and cultural development are inventions and advancements in technology. According to this theory, human behaviour is controlled and shaped by technology, not the other way around. The term is believed to have originated from American sociologist, Thorstein Veblen in 1929. In relating the theory to this paper, advancement in technology has brought Artificial intelligence to the limelight as it has risen in popularity, impacting various fields of profession including Public Relations, and changing the way some aspects of Public Relations is done, and the way PR practitioners carry out their tasks. These changes comprises of positives and negatives, opportunities and threats. Therefore, this paper seeks to explore these changes in the aspect of government's Public Relations in order to maximize the opportunities and minimize the threats.

Opportunities of AI in Government Public Relations

Crisis management: One of the functions of PR involves building and maintaining a positive public image and reputation of the government before its citizens and external publics. PR functions to discover areas of negative press and come up with initiatives to dispel them and strengthen areas of positive press (Odigbo in Asemah, 2019). AI is applicable in various stages of crisis communication. Predictive AI algorithms could be used in analysing historical data to identify patterns that give insight on issues that could generate crisis. Another important part of crisis communication where AI assists is in detecting and responding to fake news. Generative AI could also support government communicators in providing the public with consistent and persuasive messaging based on the sentiment analysis (Contentgroup, 2023).

Media Relations: Building relationships with people in the media, particularly journalists, is the aim of media relations since these individuals can assist an organization in sharing its stories with a wider audience (Dunleavy, 2023). It involves maintaining a database of media contacts, finding the right media outlets, establishing contacts with key journalists and influencers and keeping an eye on the news landscape to find pertinent stories to comment on. A few ways communicators might employ AI in media relations include research ideation, initial content generating and idea formulation. Generative AI can be given prompts to generate ideas on media pitches or news stories the government may want to send to the media. It can also help to fact check information (Renckens, 2023). The creation of analytics tools with AI capabilities is one of the most popular applications of AI in media relations. These tools provide a plethora of data that may be utilized to target important audiences, discover trends, gauge the effectiveness of advertising, and inform public relations campaigns. Natural language processing is a technique used by some AI-powered analytics platforms to assess the

sentiment and tone of news articles, social media postings, and other media content. Public Relations practitioners in government can use this information to craft messaging that is specifically tailored to their target audience and resonates with them (McGovern, 2024).

Public Reporting

It is the democratic obligation of public office holders in government such as ministries to communicate information to the public on the ministries' stewardship and its mission use of public funds. Public reporting is a component of government accountability to the people in a democracy. An example is giving annual reports on the activities or projects of agencies or ministries of the federal government and the outcomes. Public reporting has been revolutionised by the introduction of new channels for communication between government and citizenry such as e-governance. Reports from ministries can be posted on their websites accompanied with images, videos and other interactive elements. AI can be applied in this area through the introduction of chat bots to interact with citizens on their websites allowing for feedback. Also AI can help to carry out surveys to know for the citizens to make informed judgment of the performance of the ministries.

Sentiment Analysis

The government and its agencies are expected to be responsive to criticisms from citizens they claim to serve. Hence, listening to the public on various levels is one of the fundamental democratic goals of public relations in public administration (Lee, 2019). Active listening then results in changed agency behaviour so that it can perform better and be more responsive to the people.

Responsiveness to the public involves gauging public opinion through surveys. One of the PR functions is keeping abreast (through research and appraisal) with the views and opinions of

publics in this case the citizens of Nigeria, political parties and groups, monitoring trends (Asemah, 2019). This is important because knowing and assessing public opinion regarding government projects, initiatives and policies helps the government to devise better strategies, make more informed decisions in service to the people in order to build better relationships with its publics. Social media and online platforms are avenues where Nigerian expresses such thoughts and sentiments concerning the government. This is where AI technology is helpful to GPR. Algorithms can help in the identification of these trends and patterns via its ability to analyse large amounts of data on social media. AI powered tools such as Google Cloud Natural Language API can identify issues emerging or detect change in sentiments among the citizens (Seidenglanz & Baier, 2023).

Olabanjo et al. (2023) designed a Natural Language Processing framework to understand Nigeria 2023 presidential election based on public opinion using twitter (X) dataset. Their paper performed a sentiment analysis on two million tweets comprising personal and public tweets of the three most popular presidential candidates: Bola Tinubu, Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi with the use of three machine learning models. Their paper found that Bola Tinubu had the highest network of active friends, Atiku Abubakar had the highest number of followers and Peter Obi had the highest total impression and positive sentiments. Their paper concluded that Natural Language Understanding is a veritable tool for public opinion mining on social media space.

Furthermore, analytical tools driven by AI may produce precise insights, quantify feelings, and spot trends in real times, keeping PR experts in government informed by these data-driven insights, which will enable them to plan their campaigns ahead of time.

Automating Repetitive tasks: PR specialists in government carry out routine activities such as calendar updates, meeting scheduling, preparing meeting agenda and follow-ups, writing press releases. While these activities are done manually, AI technology can help save time on these mundane tasks. For example, generative AI can be used to create drafts of press releases.

Threats AI Poses to Government Public Relations

While AI presents the government with some opportunities to aid its PR functions towards its publics (citizens), there are also threats that can affect its PR practice. One of the PR functions includes concerted efforts to correct misinformation and disinformation against government, political parties or politicians.

AI facilitates the creation of deep fakes which are tools for misinformation or spread of fake news. Ekpan et al, (2023) examined the use of deep fake in Nigeria's 2023 general elections using a quantitative survey method with respondents from South-South region of Nigeria. Findings showed that deep fakes in form of pictures and audiovisuals were widely used on social media and were used as tools for propaganda to smear the image of some political candidates. This shows that deep fakes, when used by malicious actors can create bad press for the government

Conclusion

This chapter has presented various ways AI can be beneficial and risky to government Public Relations. The application of AI in governance and public relations (PR) in Nigeria presents numerous opportunities and threats, shaped by the country's unique social, economic, and political landscape. The paper argues that incorporating AI into Nigerian public relations and government presents a number of promising avenues for

enhancing effectiveness, judgment, and citizen involvement. However, it also poses notable threats, particularly concerning ethical considerations, cybersecurity, and job displacement. AI can monitor public sentiment on social media platforms, helping the government and PR professionals understand public concerns in real time and respond accordingly. AI-powered tools can visualize complex government data, making it more accessible and understandable to the public, thereby enhancing transparency. AI can be used to detect patterns of corruption or financial irregularities within government institutions, promoting accountability. In terms of threats, AI technologies can be exploited to create deepfakes or spread misinformation, which can undermine public trust in governance and create social unrest.

Not all citizens have equal access to digital technologies, particularly in rural areas. This digital divide can exacerbate inequalities, leaving some segments of the population underrepresented in AI-driven governance and PR initiatives. The chapter concludes that to harness the benefits of AI while mitigating its risks, it is crucial to develop robust regulatory frameworks, invest in infrastructure and education, and ensure that ethical considerations are at the forefront of AI deployment. AI presents a powerful tool for enhancing governance and public relations in Nigeria, but its application must be carefully managed to avoid exacerbating existing social challenges and to ensure that all citizens benefit from technological advancements.

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