

The Conditions and Challenges of the PR Industry in Pakistan in the 21st Century: Practitioners' Perspective and Perceptions

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the professional maturity of the profession by highlighting the problems faced by the practitioners and their professional solutions. The data and analysis are based on structured qualitative interviews of the highest ranked PR (public relation) professionals working as the heads of PR departments in government and private institutions. Practitioners urged to establish Pakistani public relations substructures well-suited with local cultural realities. Practitioners believed that public relations critical role in strengthening democracy in Pakistan to promote democratic traditions and usage of social capital, civil society and public sphere, recognitions of PR as a management function, preparation of a national narrative against terrorism, adoption of new technological advancements, less focusing on internal public and controlling unrealistic boss publicity are the major challenges in the public relations industry in Pakistan.

Key Words: PR conditions in Pakistan, PR practitioners' opinions, The Future of PR in Pakistan.

Introduction

Documentation of public relations scholarship and practice in Asian countries in general and South Asian nations specifically, is a recent phenomenon. The studies related to this documentation of the professions cover various aspects of public relations including its history, professional landscape, theoretical perspectives, professionalism, plight of the practitioners, models and roles preferences adopted by the practitioners and comparison of the published frequency of the scholarship ([Sriramesh, 2003](#); [Sriramesh and Vercic, 2003](#)).

The new millennium proved to be the start of a new era for public relations scholarship in Pakistan. Organizations working in government, semi-government and corporate sector envisioned to either initiate their own public relations muscles or to professionally strengthen their already established public relations units. Thus, the growth of public relations during the first two decades of the new century were more pragmatic as compare to the pace of the profession during eighties and nineties. The growth in the public relations industry, obviously resulted in maturity of the profession, more acceptance of the function within dominant coalition and providing/offering more professional opportunities of professional career and growth to the practitioners of the field in Pakistan. One of the important reasons behind all these processes happening in public relations industry in Pakistan is the rapid media and technology growth in the country in the wake of new information order of the world. The advancement in technology and adoption of more social media vehicles by the consumers disturb the power of the governments and

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corporations related to information spread. These power imbalance situations create more space for public relations apparatus to be used by government and corporate sector to strengthen their narratives ([Mukhtar, M., 2019](#); [Masood, A., 2017](#)).

The main purpose of this paper is to examine public relation conditions/practices in Pakistan by exploring and analyzing the perceptions and vision of the practitioners of the field. The perceptions of the practitioners are explored in terms of their opinions about the conditions of the industry, their critical discourse about the profession, their comments about the future of the industry and their opinions to better create pragmatic professional standards of the profession ([Lattimore & Lattimore, 2004](#)). The paper explores the following research questions;

RQ1. What is the Practitioners' critique about the practice of public relations in Pakistan?

RQ2. What are the emerging challenges of the profession as observed by its practitioners in Pakistan?

Methods

This research is based on qualitative interviews of the practitioners, conducted online using Qualtrics. A structured questionnaire with open ended questions was routed into the mailboxes of the practitioners heading public relations departments. The practitioners were chosen purposively based on their experience and expertise in the field. Twenty interviews were conducted taking ten practitioners from government sector and ten practitioners of corporate/private sector ([Britten, N., 1995](#); [Tongco, M., 2007](#)).

The practitioners were asked to provide their views generally about the professional and craft practice of public relations in the country. The opinions were collected from the highest ranked experienced professionals in the field having at least fifteen years of experience. The opinions were sought mainly about three important aspects including present conditions of the industry, the prospects and scope of the practice and recommended solutions to professional growth making it in line with international standards.

Results and Analysis

Practitioners' Critique about the Practice of Public Relations

RQ1. What is the Practitioners' Critique about the Practice of Public Relations in Pakistan?

Practitioners had of the view that practice of public relations in Pakistan is no different from other Asian countries in its standards and professional depth and it is also comparable with the world as well. But most the literature of the scholarship is not enough documented. One practitioner said, "there is need to build on previous researches conducted in this field however, considering ground realities, the scope of public relations should be enhanced". Some practitioners believed that public relations is considered being an integral and essential part of the management process now but other believed the space, prestige and status of the profession was being negotiated in many organizations.

The practitioners opined that the evolutionary process of the profession was slow paced in the country but now it has become an important persuasive business industry inspiring all the relevant stakeholders. The spread of the industry is everywhere including government, private sector, semi-government corporations and multinationals entities. Public relations has become an important need of all entrepreneurs and all the other fields of public involvement and interaction.

One practitioner said, "Not enough importance is given to PR departments in Pakistan as compare to other developed countries where media is active and plays a vital role in making and changing public perceptions". Another practitioner said, "The job of public relations officer is thankless almost in entire Pakistan. When any news item against the organization publishes, or the desire news of management does not get attention in print media, they become angry without keeping the fact in their mind that the

media-Men cannot be stopped to highlight the issues if there are any grey areas within organizations. Thus, this job is very sensitive but thankless one". Some practitioners thought their duties being tough, challenging, overloaded and less esteemed.

Practitioners also possessed faith in the power of public relations to invest in democratic process of the country. One practitioner said, "Public relations has an important role to play in political process. There is need to highlight its role in a democracy like Pakistan. Productive and contributive PR is required in Pakistan and public relations should assume a proactive role rather than a fire-fighting role". Some of the practitioners were more critical towards unethical and nonprofessional practices and inadequate staff strength in their offices. But other claimed to have good reflection of ethical and professional standards comparable to other Asian nations. One practitioner was of the opinion, "Most of the media cell are working in Pakistan with a very less staffing arrangement. Most of these offices are headed by non-technical and non-professional persons and public relations officers are facing exploitations by them".

Another practitioner said, "Management of organizations need to have better understanding of the role of public relations and should equip them with better human and material resources. PR profession in Pakistan is not built on highest professional standards. Trust between senior reporting head and PR official is essential, there should be no political game while dealing with issues and giving weightage to the person having PR experience. PR person must be involved in every contentious and in routine matter. Equal privileges should be granted to PR person as enjoyed by other senior executives. Image building is more important on constructive projects because if public doesn't know everything is immaterial".

One more practitioner said, "We are not meeting with the standards of PR and we are not making things easier, so that the people can understand what our goal is? Our basic aim must be to give proper awareness at proper place and forum so, people can get more benefit out of public relations activities and we can achieve our goal in real manner rather just getting face values".

Some practitioners carped the inappropriate acknowledgement of public relations apparatus in the country. One practitioner alleged, "Proper recognition of this department is still needed to be highlighted in organizations. Status of the PR department should be enhanced by giving right and access to information". Another practitioner thought, "Public Relations is still at a nascent stage in Pakistan. Steps should be taken at higher level to change the perception towards public relations and to highlight its importance and its role in building relationship between the organization and the public. Public relation in Pakistan is somehow thriving in recent years but still mixed up with advertising and other marketing communication forces".

Some professional accept that perspectives and paradigm of public relations scholarship are changing with changing patterns of the increased social media progression and usage. One practitioner said, "Public relations play a pivotal role in the development process of an organization. As social media is penetrated deeply in our lives so PR through social media is vital". Another practitioner said, "The PR practitioners in Pakistan are still ignoring the social media utilization which results in adopting conventional methods and mostly relying on few news clippings".

Another practitioner said, "There is acute deficit of understanding about the PR when it comes to the management and PR is never taken on account while taking significant decisions about the organization". Some practitioner considered publicity as the most practiced purpose of the scholarship in the country. One practitioner said, "It is a challenging task that public relations in Pakistan is unfortunately mixed with protocol related duties and generally it is mostly taken and perceived as a function based on publicity measures".

A vast majority of the practitioners have confidence in public relations being a reputed and a rising profession. One practitioner said, "PR in Pakistan is in growing phase. Most of the share is added by multinational brands whom know the importance of PR more as compare to local brands". Another practitioner said, "PR field is growing in Pakistan day by day, especially in lines of communication. Public

relations industry in Pakistan requires a lot of research and cross media laws are needed to be implemented In letter & spirit. We have created mammoth media houses that have turned out to be pressure groups influencing political elite and power corridors. Media management is an emerging phenomenon keeping in view of mushroom growth of media”.

All practitioners advised the need of launching more specific degree courses in institutions of higher learning. One practitioner said, “The universities in the country must have a specialized department i.e. media management. I have more than seven years of experience in public relations and similar assignments. I have an operational knowledge of public relations, demonstrated skills in generating communications and information content development and its subsequent dissemination for organizational image building. I have a proven track record of liaison with media and coordination with the government functionaries and other stakeholders. I have served three different public and private sector organizations to accomplish several similar assignments. Initially PR departments were considered only for issuing media hand outs and press releases. Now the situation has been changed. The PR departments are now considered as key to deal with external world outside any organization. Though public relations practices are evolving in Pakistan and there is a growing realization about significance of effective communication with the stakeholders, but very few people are available and trained to do PR jobs in a real professional manner”. Another practitioner said, “PR is now evolving in Pakistan as more and more companies are hiring the PR services of a professional PR firm and companies are placing much importance to it as they are curious about their image in public. Secondly, companies are also focusing on government relations besides PR. More research and training are required as per my point of view to compete these emerging needs. Public relations is a very important position in any organization and institutions aspire to hire well experienced and trained people for this job”.

Another practitioner said, “PR in Pakistan is in mushrooming stage where different organizations have dedicated resources and some organizations hire PR firms. I believe we are not at par yet and still there is a lot of space for educated and professional PR practitioners”.

All government sector practitioners were critical towards more administrative aspects of public relations in the government institutions. One practitioner observed, “In Pakistan, the PR is not considered as important as it is recognized in other developing nations. Research based- initiatives, training and exposure visits, well paid employment structures and effective public relations policies can make wonders for the organization in particular and for the country in general. With trends of digital PR, everyday it is making the old modes of communications irrelevant. Public relations in Pakistan, is unfortunately being run in a bureaucratic manner due to which the trust gap remains widened. The profession is suffocated and is being used as a fire brigade tool i.e. its need is realized when something negative is carried by the press. Moreover, there is top down approach and no two-way process involved. The organizations mostly apply traditional tools of communication. Feedback mechanisms are non-existent and there is no inclusiveness in the decision- making process. Pakistan is a multicultural society. Communication is always difficult in such societies. Proper research is needed to understand the dynamics of the social setup, cultural, political and economic environment. Public relation is considered much more a scientific tool now. For effectiveness, public relations need to be more research-based preferences involving all the technical skills to achieve professional excellence and organizational goals besides creating a win-win situation for both the publics and the organization”.

Public Relations Challenges in Pakistan

RQ2. What are the emerging challenges of the profession as observed by its practitioners in Pakistan?

The importance of public relations has increased in new and emerging global communication scenario (Karlberg, 1996). Majority of the practitioners were of the view that poor democratic traditions in Pakistan posed foremost challenge to public relations industry. The public relations scholarship not only has to

survive within poor democratic traditions and culture but also must enhance its own professional image by helping vulnerable democratic culture. The media scene is rapidly changing since the start of the new Millennium and more and more satellite channels are initiating their transmission in Pakistan. Political Institutions with weak infrastructure feel deserted and susceptible against pulsating media. Thus, public relations scholarship needs to play an inspiring role to establish pragmatic interrelations between media and democratic institutions in Pakistan ([Khan, 2001](#)).

The practitioners concluded that public relations scholarship can promote democratic traditions by evolving a purposeful and healthy communication network through a well-placed research-based communication approaches and management of critical mass media treatment. The conceptions of public sphere and civil society may be benefitted to enhance the positive part of public relations in democratic system ([Hiebert, 2005](#); [Taylor & Doerfel, 2005](#); [Raupp, 2004](#); [Davis, 2000](#)). The influence of inner forces of vibrant civil society and social capital cannot be ignored in a developing nation like Pakistan and public relations must capitalize these forces ([Sommerfeldt, 2013](#)). Some practitioners perceived that analyzing and implementing communicative circumstances of the scholarship in explicit system of democracy seemed very tough. But majority of the practitioners perceived that public relations scholarship has this ability to provide this facilitative role by linking the conceptions of public sphere, civil society and social capital ([Willis, 2012](#); [Hiebert, 2005](#); [Raupp, 2004](#)).

Majority of the practitioners were of the view that the functioning of PR is based on mutually trust-oriented atmosphere having in-depth communication-oriented engagement and reciprocal relationships between institutions within a social structure. This three-layered function encourages formulation of social capital which in turns creates a vibrant civil society. A pulsating civil society nurtures public sphere and thus a pragmatic political/democratic debate is shared investing the potential of all internal forces. The media organizations moderate a dynamic affiliation between public sphere and civil society. Role of media is critical and supportive being an activist to rotate trust among governments and social institutions. And within this apparatus of trust building, public relations play its role of acquiring media relations by placing an information feeding mechanism from democratic institutions to media ([Taylor & Botan, 2006](#); [Sommerfeldt, 2013](#)).

Secondly, practitioners opined that public relations needs to be practice as management function to get maximum results but in Pakistani scenario many organizations do not understand this aspect. By performing public relations as a management function, it is easy to gauge the influence of policies of government on people and to adjust the actions of the government vis-à-vis public interest by counseling high-ups. Practitioners say that public relations apparatuses within public sector organizations are needed more trained professionals, compatible budgetary provisions, professional atmosphere, and research-based structure. Some of the practitioners advise that public relations professionals should put aside their shallow political philosophies and should use theoretical perspectives of public relations while applying strategies ([Kruckeberg, 1995](#)).

Practitioners shared that the third significant challenge in public relations industry in Pakistan is to prepare a national narrative against terrorism and to facilitate security-oriented departments in their fight against terrorism e.g. one practitioner said, " Security agencies (Defense and Interior Ministries and their allied departments e.g. police, rangers, Army etc.) need to have strong public relations departments so that they can place proper information in time for target publics and can manage to build confidence among the masses".

Practitioners thought new technological developments were the fourth challenge for their field in Pakistan. These technology related/based developments can play a substantial part in practice. Practitioner should adopt new technology in practice to make their tools compatible with the changing atmosphere and changing communication needs of the public ([Jethwaney & Sarkar, 2005](#)). Better results of influencing

public opinion can be achieved by using interactive tools and by learning global patterns of publics ([Marken, 2007](#); [Lee, 2006](#)).

Practitioners believed that the public relations campaigns in Pakistan are generally launched for influencing public opinion of the external publics only while internally involved publics remains an ignorant part in these Public relations programs. Further, media public is considered the most important public and obviously media relations role is more practiced role in Pakistani PR industry. Organizational managements and public relations officials should understand this missing element of PR campaigns for internal publics. Public relations practitioners in Pakistan need to understand the importance of resolving internal communications issues and information leakage reasons to better place their organizational image externally ([Masood, A., 2017](#)).

Unrealistic boss publicity is also a major challenge for many practitioners working in public sector PR departments in Pakistan. Practitioners thought it a wastage of efforts and resources and stressed the need to focusing on organizational image rather boss image. Most of the practitioners put this blame on their political and bureaucratic bosses for generations of this boss publicity but they would remain part of the problem if they would not educate their bosses by using their professional space and proficient opinion ([Masood, A., 2017](#)).

Conclusion

Practitioners of public relations in Pakistan perceived that practice of public relations in Pakistan is no different than other South Asian nations. Some practitioners think that the recognition and importance of the function on a continuum is far behind than developed nations, but mushroom growth has been started since the start of the century. Some of the practitioners claimed that although, PR is slow paced in Pakistan as compared to developed nations, but public relations standards can be compared with any developed nation. Practitioners urged to initiate masters' degree program in Pakistani universities. Practitioners were critical towards non-professional practices, less staffing in PR departments, exploitation by bosses and media, improper PR apparatus, deficit of management understanding, ignorance of social media use and bureaucratic functioning in public sector.

When it comes to challenges, practitioners supposed that public relations' critical role in strengthening democracy in Pakistan is to promote democratic traditions and usage of social capital, civil society and public sphere, recognition of PR as a management function, preparation of a national narrative against terrorism, adoption of new technological advancements, less focusing on internal public and controlling unrealistic boss publicity are the major challenges in public relations industry in Pakistan.

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