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A qualitative study on the impact of globalisation on public relations practice in Ghana

ABSTRACT

The article analyses the perceived impact of globalisation on public relations practice in Ghana by examining how Ghanaian PR practitioners are utilising the opportunities that globalisation offers while dealing with the challenges it brings. The qualitative interview technique was used to interview a total of five (5) PR practitioners from the non-banking financial services sector. Results show PR practitioners are very much aware of the demand placed on them by globalisation. Communication infrastructural challenges as well as a lack of technological skills is proving a huge challenge in the management of communication activities. As multinational organisations continue to flood into the country, the competition will be keen. Practitioners need to upgrade their skills, especially in the area of digital communication, and knowledge regarding the current standards of practice in the era of globalisation. It is essential for PR educators in Ghana to respond to the challenge of globalisation by redefining their teaching curriculums to reflect the dynamics of international practice. Moreover, it is time for African PR scholars to make a significant contribution to this discussion from an African perspective. The limited number of interviewees and the selection of practitioners from a particular sector of the economy, however, means the research cannot be generalised.

Keywords: globalisation, public relations, communication management, reputation management, information communication technology, Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Since the turn of the 21st century, globalisation has become a buzzword to signify the shrinking of the world into what is now commonly referred to as a global village. Globalisation has reshaped the way businesses, both large and small, operate, not only across borders but also within nations. Small organisations, which hitherto struggled to reach other markets due to budget constraints, are now able to use websites, weblogs, and social media to reach customers, potential investors and other key stakeholders worldwide (Coombs & Heath, 2006). According to Coombs and Heath (2006:456), “search engines, discussion groups, and weblogs create the awareness that cannot be accomplished with limited advertising dollars”. In effect, the breakdown of economic, geographical and cultural barriers, as well as the democratisation of the world, has had a profound effect on business operations across the world (L’Etang, 2008; Miller, 2015; Sriramesh, 2010).

This article investigates how globalisation is influencing PR practice in Ghana. Scholars agree that globalisation has resulted in opportunities as well as challenges for PR professionals charged with managing the communication activities of their organisations (L’Etang, 2009; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2007). Literature on the practice of PR has seen a tremendous growth since the turn of the century. The body of knowledge on issues affecting the profession continues to increase as scholars attempt to identify a common theoretical foundation that reflects the state of PR globally. However, evidence also shows that the discussions on international PR practice are lopsided and are mainly skewed towards western, and in part Asian, perspectives. Very few of these discussions focus on African countries. A search through literature did not reveal anything on the issue in any African country, save for a 2007 article by Amodu. Although PR has operated in Africa for more than half a century (Skinner, 2013:17), there is very little documented evidence to show. It must be acknowledged that some attempts have been made by several African PR scholars in the last few years to address this gap, but the overall level of publication pales compared to their western counterparts. In the case of Ghana, the situation is even more serious as there is very little information on the nature of PR practice there. A search through literature on PR in Ghana will find a few (see Amoakohene, 2015; Thompson, 2018; Anani-Bossman & Tella, 2017; Anani-Bossman & Mudzanani, 2020; Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2009). Again, the debate on globalisation and its implications for PR practice has mainly been viewed from the perspective of multinational organisations rather than local organisations. Literature on the subject mostly looks at how multinational organisations must behave in order to be successful in different cultural environments. There is very little on how globalisation is influencing the practice of PR at the local level. This article thus seeks to contribute to literature on the issue from a Ghanaian perspective. According to Verčič et al. (2001), practitioners can only draw conclusions on what the profession should consist of in the 21st century when there is an understanding of the current status of thinking and practices across the globe.

The paper will begin by briefly reviewing the development of PR in Ghana. This will be followed

by discussing globalisation, some theoretical debates on globalisation, as well as literature on globalisation and PR. The discussion will then focus on our methodological approach and a discussion of results, including their implications for PR practice and scholarship in Ghana.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. PUBLIC RELATIONS IN GHANA

Modern PR was first introduced to Ghana by the British Colonial administration (Thompson, 2018). However, the report of the Watson Commission in 1984 resulted in the establishment of an Information Bureau (currently, the Information Services Department) for the newly elected government of Dr Kwame Nkrumah in 1957 (Amoakohene, 2015). Practitioners were mostly journalists with no formal PR background. According to Amoakohene (2015) PR at the time was not viewed as a profession and those who practiced were from several backgrounds. The period between 1966 and 1992 was marked by civilian and military rules. This was a period of political, social and economic instability. PR was stifled as a result. The transition to full democracy and the liberalisation of the airwaves in 1992 led to the emergence of PR as a profession. PR has since become fully established, with many organisations now having PR departments. Ghana also has a well-established umbrella body, the Institute of Public Relations (IPR, Ghana) that organises professional courses for practitioners. Many educational institutions are also operating departments of communication studies with PR as a core aspect of their programmes.

Despite the increasing growth of PR in Ghana, there is very little information about the standard of practice. A search through literature shows very few publications on PR practice in Ghana (Thompson, 2018; Anani-Bossman & Tella, 2017; Wu & Baah-Boakye, 2008, 2009; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2008). In the only known study on globalisation and PR in Ghana, Wu and Baah-Boakye (2014) asked respondents to identify the obstacles that international organisations were likely to face when entering Ghana and how PR agencies can help international clients to overcome the obstacles. Respondents mentioned obstacles such as cultural differences, economic differences, language, understanding of the Ghanaian market, etc. It is worthy to note that their research did not focus on Ghanaian businesses, but rather, international businesses. The current research therefore focuses on how globalisation is influencing PR practice in Ghana, especially among local businesses. This is in line with the call by Rensburg (2007) for practitioners on the continent to do research on globalisation in Africa.

2. GLOBALISATION

Globalisation has been defined severally in different disciplines, from international business to global public policy. This makes the concept quite complex to define. However, scholars (Lee, 2005; L'Etang, 2008; Ni, 2013; Sriramesh, 2010; Verčič, Zeffass & Wiesenber, 2015) have generally associated it with the breaking down of economic, political, societal, and cultural

barriers, the emergence of new social relationships beyond borders, interconnectedness of the world, and shrinking of time. Sriramesh (2013:3), for instance, describes it as the “buzzword” of the 21st century. Verčič et al. (2015:785) also define it as “economic, social, and political interference around the world,” while Kelleher (2018) defines it as the convergence of cultural, economic, and technology. Finally, Stiglitz (cited in Alaimo 2017:2) defined globalisation as the

... closer integration of the countries and people of the world which has been brought about by the enormous reduction of costs of transportation and communication, and the breaking down of artificial barriers to the flows of goods, services, capital, knowledge, and to a lesser extent people across borders.

Regardless of the varied definitions, scholars generally agree that globalisation has impacted not only businesses but professions as well, including PR (Pal & Dutta, 2008; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Sriramesh, 2010; Verčič et al., 2015). Sharpe and Pritchard (2004:35), for instance, link the development of PR as a profession globally to three key factors: communication, democracy, and global social interdependence. Others, including Ni (2013), Heath (2013), and Wilcox, Cameron and Reber (2015) identified various dimensions of globalisation’s impact on PR.

3. THEORETICAL DEBATES

The last two decades in particular have witnessed intense scholarly discussion on globalisation and PR. This has led to several attempts to develop a global theory that aptly describes how PR should be practiced internationally (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Wakefield, 2011). Wakefield (2011) acknowledged the lack of theory that is specific to PR within global settings. Verčič, Grunig and Grunig (1996), however, proposed a framework to describe the practice of PR in different cultures. The generic principles of public relations and specific applications is a set of principles that suggests that organisations should be able to practice excellent PR in any global environment by applying these principles while also acknowledging local specialties in the implementation of the principles. In other words, organisations should be able to use the principles to their benefit while implementing them in accordance with the cultural, political, social, and environmental systems of a specific country. The principles were organised into five environmental variables: political ideology, economic system, degree of activism, culture, and media system. In building on the theory of generic principles and specific applications, Sriramesh and Verčič (2009:3-21) proposed a theoretical framework of global PR practice where they recategorised the original five variables of the generic principles and specific applications into three: a country’s infrastructure (composed of the political system, legal system, level of economic development, and the level of social activism), media environment (media control, outreach, and access), and societal culture. Verčič et al. (2015) found a resemblance between the generic principles and specific application and the term glocalisation.

Wakefield (2007), however, argued that this term was too rigid and did not allow practitioners to fully appreciate local stakeholders and also manage relationships properly. Wakefield (2011:6) therefore proposed the world-class PR model which, he argued, was an extension of the generic principles and specific application framework. The model posited that organisations were to continuously and concurrently think globally and locally and act globally and locally. The model consisted of six variables that ensured effectiveness: purpose, executive support, staffing and teamwork, training, communication style, and response preparedness. These models, particularly the generic principles, have often been criticised for being western focused without paying attention to the complexities of non-western societies. In Africa, some scholars (Mersham, Skinner, & Rensburg, 2011) have therefore called for a model that takes cognisance of the unique characteristics of the African continent. Although PR has advanced massively on the continent, the development of a framework that captures the African uniqueness is yet to be realised.

4. GLOBALISATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE

Wilcox et al. (2015) attribute the spread of PR globally to technological, social, economic, and political changes, as well as the increasing understanding of PR as a critical aspect of branding, marketing, and public diplomacy. Several scholars (L'Etang, 2009; Reddi, 2004; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2007; Starck & Kruckeberg, 2004) have commented on the impact of globalisation on PR practice globally. Newsom, Turk, and Kruckeberg (2010), for instance, note that advances in technology – such as the significant differences in the way the media functions – and increased globalisation have affected communication, in the process reshaping the way issues are handled. Similarly, Wilcox et al. (2015) postulate that the internet and social media have made it possible for organisations to conduct PR and marketing campaigns that directly reach the consumer. Broom and Sha (2012:347) also suggest that practitioners now need special skills such as the ability to see the business and stakeholders from a global perspective, sensitivity to cultural differences, understanding the global media environment, and ability to leverage technology to stay in touch with colleagues around the globe, to be able to communicate effectively in a borderless environment. Seitel (2017) posits that globalisation has accelerated the integration of markets and businesses globally. Customers are now just a “mouse-click away”. He further states that globalisation has led to an increase in international alliances, mergers and affiliations. Organisations have therefore become aware of the importance of communicating the opportunities and benefits that will increase support and loyalty among employees worldwide (Seitel, 2017:257). This presents opportunities for practitioners to further develop their multicultural skills in order to perform their roles effectively. Ni (2009) examined how multinational organisations manage relationships with local employees. His findings suggested that different global strategies were perceived to be related to different relationships.

Technology, in particular, has been found to be a key factor in spearheading the globalisation

process (Kelleher 2018, Newsom et al. 2010). In the words of Verčič (2017:104), “technology has enabled globalisation, and together they have changed our lives forever”. Technology has rapidly enhanced the speed at which information and communication flows. Information can be easily sent and at the same time accessed across time and geographical boundaries. This clearly offers numerous opportunities for the PR practitioner. Organisations can take advantage of technological advancements to engage their stakeholders at the interpersonal level using innovative means. According to Reddi (2004:22) technology has the capacity to influence all segments of an organisation’s stakeholders. L’Etang (2008) agrees when she suggests that technology has given communication practitioners the opportunity to engage global stakeholders. The internet, for instance, now allows practitioners to provide information to their stakeholders speedily. Practitioners are able to engage their audience faster, conduct research thoroughly and faster without having to rely on physical information resources, build corporate communication online and develop communication strategies and tactics that attract global consumers and investors (Lattimore et al., 2013).

Despite these opportunities, the general belief also is that globalisation poses a challenge to practitioners. Literature (Reddi, 2004; Sriramesh, 2010; Tench & Yeoman, 2017) shows that a borderless society means dealing with multiple publics of diverse multicultural backgrounds. Practitioners can no longer categorise stakeholders as internal and external as these stakeholders have now become complex to define. The advent of digital and social media has made the practice more challenging. According to Broom and Sha (2012) digital and social media technologies have transformed the global marketplace, posing a huge challenge for PR practitioners. Broom and Sha identified four key challenges that the new media environment poses to practitioners: Staying abreast of changing technology, responding to the demand for transparency, dealing with new media players who communicate directly with organisational stakeholders, and representing organisations in the new social media environment. Tench and Yeoman (2017:172) contend that what an organisation does, even if local, may have “global implications and attract global attention”. Corporate scandals in the past few years have led to a great demand for transparency, accountability, and good behaviour, as organisations are now under constant scrutiny from regulators, activists, and even dissatisfied employees (Marsteller, 2011).

Meyer (2009, para. 6) also postulates a shift in the balance of power from the organisation to the consumer, as consumers now have access to information. Marsteller (2011) concurs by pointing out that the internet, and social media in particular, are now being used by activists, vocal consumers, and journalists to draw attention to issues and mobilise public opinion. Marsteller and Berland (2011) found that most business executives believe it is now difficult to control news flow and reputation. Their study further found that the internet, social media and the need to respond quickly were the main challenges of reputational management. Zerfass et al. (2015) also found that digital technologies and the social web were regarded as huge challenges in reputational management. Broom and Sha (2012:222) therefore conclude that:

It is simply foolish to think that bad news can be hidden, mistakes can remain secret, and misdeeds will not get reported. Controlling what is made public is no longer possible to the extent it was before the internet took that power away from organizations of all types.

Seitel (2017) also discusses the issue of ethics by positing that organisations have now been forced to walk the fine line between behaving responsibly and promoting their products, as a result of globalisation and the spread of social media. This sense of responsibility can only be accomplished through PR techniques. For PR practitioners in Ghana, globalisation represents a shift in the way of doing things. Whether working for local or international organisations, practitioners in Ghana should understand the need to develop the right skills and improve their standard of behaviour in order to remain relevant. Other areas that have been discussed over the years include issues of online reputational management (Marsteller, 2011), crisis communication (Schwarz, 2014), and the scope and challenges of PR in a digital era (Verma, 2015).

Much has been written on the impact of globalisation on PR practice. However, most of it is not based on empirical research, at least not in the generic sense. One can nevertheless, find an appreciable amount of literature on some aspects of PR work, especially how the internet and social media are influencing public relations, and the influence of environmental variables such as culture on PR practice. The few empirical studies found included a publication by Fitzpatrick and Whillock (1993), which is quite dated, and Verčič et al. (2015), who empirically verified global PR and communication management from the perspective of Europe. Again conferences such as the seventh International Public Relations Research Conference (2004) held in the USA and the 14th International Public Relations Symposium (Bledcom, 2007) were based on the themes “Globalization: Challenges and Opportunities for Public Relations,” and “The Impact of Globalization on Public Relations”, respectively. For Africa, no such literature exists and this makes the present research even more relevant.

The discussion so far shows that globalisation has had a profound effect on the practice of PR worldwide. However, the paucity of information regarding how PR in Ghana has been influenced requires further discussion. Walker (2012) describes Africa, including Ghana, as a largely untapped area, hence the need to further explore issues of PR practice. This study therefore attempts to explore the gap in current information regarding the influence of globalisation on PR practice in Ghana. The following research questions guided the research:

- (1). How is globalisation conceptualised by Ghanaian PR practitioners, and how is it linked with PR?*
- (2). In what ways, if any, has globalisation affected the practice of PR in Ghana?*
- (3). If Ghanaian PR practitioners recognise the difference between global and local PR, what are Ghanaian practitioners doing to ensure they gain the necessary expertise?*

2. METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, a qualitative research approach was deemed appropriate. The semi-structured interview method was used to gather data from PR practitioners. The semi-structured interview is premised on a set of predetermined questions and is asked in a consistent and systematic order (Lune & Berg, 2017). The semi-structured interview was considered appropriate because it is flexible and allows for further probing, and questions can be reordered during the interview. The purposive sampling technique was used to recruit five communication managers who were members of the Institute of Public Relations, Ghana, and who also worked in the financial services sector, particularly the non-banking financial institutions. The institutions were also local organisations. The choice of the sector was premised on its prominence within the economy of Ghana and also the fact that it has witnessed several scandals in the past two to three years. Trust in the sector is therefore low. PR practitioners within the sector are therefore working overtime to restore trust. They were therefore in a position to demonstrate how globalisation is influencing the practice of PR. Invitations were sent by email to 10 practitioners to participate in the research. However, only five responded. Literature (Morgan, 2008; Bryman, 2012) justifies the use of a small sample size in qualitative research where emphasis is placed on rich detail and highly contextual understanding of specific phenomena. Research has identified sample sizes between four (4) and 40 (Daymon & Holloway, 2011) and one (1) to 95 (Bryman, 2012). The five respondents were therefore considered sufficient to go ahead with the interviews. The practitioners consisted of three males and two females. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes. Before the interview, the purpose of the study was explained to participants. Participants were then asked to sign a consent form. Permission was also sought for the interview to be audio taped. An interview guide consisting mainly of open-ended questions was used to conduct the interviews.

The interviews were transcribed using the computer-based software Atlas.ti. The software allowed the researchers to draw out patterns and themes easily. The interpretation of the data, however, was the responsibility of the researchers. The data analysis and interpretation was based on what Lichtman (2013) describes as the “three C’s”: codes, categories, concepts. This is similar to the techniques of Miles and Huberman (1994), who suggested three stages of qualitative data analysis: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. Important and recurring themes and patterns were highlighted during the data reduction process. Interpretations were made by identifying the key themes, clustering categories and noting the relationships that developed among patterns.

3. RESULTS

RQ1. How is globalisation conceptualised by Ghanaian PR practitioners, and how is it linked

with PR?

Conceptualisation of globalisation and its linkage with PR: In order to appreciate the nature of the topic, participants were first asked about their understanding of globalisation and whether they saw a link between the concept and PR. The overall response showed that participants were very familiar with globalisation and its linkage with PR practice. This is reflected in the statement of one participant:

It is all being powered by technological infrastructure that is building up around the world. For me, it is all about synchronising business activities, social relations and engagement in such a way that one person can be in one location and thousand other places at the same time through the help of technology". Another participant was also of the opinion that globalisation has made the world a smaller place where businesses can no longer hide in their little corners and think everything will be alright. Globalisation was also associated with networking with the "outside world.

These definitions align with the views of scholars such as Sriramesh and Štumberger (2017), Verčič, et al, (2015), and Ni (2013). The key concepts of networking, technology and interconnectedness were highlighted as defining globalisation.

All the participants acknowledged that the way PR practitioners operated had changed dramatically due to globalisation. Participants were of the view that practitioners now have to work with a larger audience in mind. Clients of organisations are both foreign and local, and any PR activity must be geared towards satisfying everyone and this means operating by international standards. In effect, PR cannot operate in isolation from globalisation as the two have a strong connection. Commenting on this, a participant opined:

In the insurance industry, I can no longer afford to look at things from a local perspective. We have key stakeholders in countries like South Africa, Nigeria, and the UK, and everything I do now must match up with their global standards. My organisation had a serious crisis recently and I had to deal not only with the local partners but our key stakeholders in other countries as well. PR can therefore not be regarded as a local matter anymore.

This comment was supported by another participant who asserted that,

Previously, most of our clients were locals, with very few foreigners. This has changed in the last five years as we have seen more foreigners becoming key clients. As an investment organisation, this has changed the way we view things. Our stakeholders have broadened and this has made my work more challenging as I have to deal with clients from different cultural environments.

The views expressed shows that PR practices have moved beyond borders and that even local organisations can no longer regard themselves as locals. In the words of Alaimo (2017:2) practitioners can no longer “safely assume that they will remain disconnected from the broader international community”. Gregory (2017:172) also affirmed this when she posits that the actions of an organisation can have global implications and “attract global attention”.

RQ2: In what ways, if any, has globalisation affected the practice of PR in Ghana?

Participants identified a number of areas that have shaped the PR practice in Ghana as a result of Globalisation. These have been categorised and are presented below.

Information communication technology: The impact of ICT on PR has been well documented in literature. Indeed, there is a general consensus that advancement in technology is actually the driver behind globalisation. The opportunities ICT offers the PR profession as well as the challenges it brings has been discussed at length. Participants were in no doubt that technology has pushed PR to a new level across the globe, as one participant puts it:

If you have practiced PR for a very long time, you would have realized that there was nothing like email. When you have to send a press statement, you put it in an envelope and move to the media house. Now you can send it through emails. Now that there is the advent of WhatsApp, we have what we call owned media. People can now go to your website and search for information you want to send to the public. ICT has re-shaped the way we send information to the media houses, and how we communicate information to the public in general.

Another participant concurred when she said that “I am now able to reach a wider audience and get immediate and real-time feedback, all at a reduced cost”. This is corroborated by another participant who asserted:

The internet and, in particular social media, is allowing people to promote their business globally. If it had not been for the internet I do not think, we will have some of these social media apps that are helping. Now, people are telling their own stories without actually having to pay to the traditional media.

The participants acknowledged that technology and social media have made PR more challenging and exciting, although they did acknowledge that they are yet to utilise its full capacity: “Clearly, ICT is what is shaping the practice and the earlier we jump on it the better”, said one participant. Other comments pointed to the fact that ICT has benefited PR in Ghana as practitioners are able to develop their own platforms to engage their stakeholders, something which is less expensive than placing banners or ads on the platforms of others.

Despite these exciting opportunities that ICT offers, participants were also quick to acknowledge the

challenges they face. Social media in particular was cited as posing the greatest challenge as one participant put it: "One comment by a customer on a Facebook page goes viral or a bad headline on news portal about an organisation create reputational problem for the organisation". Participants clearly understand the threat ICT poses to reputational management. Dealing with issues and crisis in the current globalised era is now a huge challenge. To the participants, one has to be careful when addressing issues or crisis using social media platforms. They, nevertheless, admit that ICT and social media can be used to solve issues and crisis quickly and further gain support for their organisations. They agreed that one needs to be tactful when dealing with clients now as any suspicion of a cover-up or unsatisfactory answers may lead to a social media backlash. Three of the participants cited instances where they had to spend a lot of time dealing with minor issues that became serious due to a client taking it onto social media. A participant mentioned the lack of development of technological infrastructure as a huge challenge: "We also talk about lack of internet infrastructure, low connectivity, so you are not able to connect. I travelled to one of the regions and the internet connection was very bad I could not do much, so as PR practitioners you could face a lot of challenges." A fellow participant also noted that, "it is no longer enough to use emails to stay in touch with clients, especially due to the advent of social media. The inability to effectively utilise social media and other ICT tools by practitioners is a challenge".

All participants admitted that the opportunities far outweigh the challenges and if these challenges were adequately addressed, PR in Ghana will witness phenomenal growth, as ICT drives everything. As pointed out in the literature (see Gregory, 2017; Verčič, 2017; Marsteller, 2011) the emergence of ICT has offered several opportunities for PR practitioners to further enhance the profiles and reputation of their organisations. Access to information in real time and across geographical boundaries has never been easier. However, it has also created challenges that practitioners have to deal with daily. Gregory (2017:172) surmises that ICT "brings opportunities and pressures for organisations and public relations practitioners who need to be geared for action 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year." The findings also confirm the challenges raised by Skinner (2013), particularly, in relation to technological infrastructure; a view also shared by Joseph (2017). Ghana, and Africa in general, has a particular challenge when it comes to ICT. The lack of technological infrastructure, low level of knowledge on ICT usage, poor network, among others, means that PR practitioners are likely to face huge challenges in their day-to-day activities. Challenges PR practitioners face in Ghana can therefore be considered as peculiar compared to the challenges practitioners in the western world face.

Communicating with multiple stakeholders. The need to develop strategies to effectively communicate with and maintain relationships with multiple stakeholders has become paramount due to globalisation. Consequently, it has been suggested that practitioners or businesses can no longer operate with a local mindset and that everything they do should have a global perspective. PR is now described as being multicultural and multinational, hence practitioners are required to engage with publics in complex cultural environments. The need to develop cultural sensitivity, knowledge, and skills has never been more evident for practitioners as they attempt to deliver world-class PR (Athai, 2014). Participants were in no doubt that the global environment is indeed shaping communication

with multi-stakeholders, especially those in different cultures. According to one participant: “You need to have an understanding of the different environments, cultures and sometimes understanding of how the message will be received and not put all in one box”. Another participant noted that in his organisation, “when there is an issue involving people of different language and culture, we get someone who is competent in that culture to explain issues to the stakeholders in order to avoid any misrepresentation”. Another participant in the insurance industry also explained how he has had to be careful when dealing with people of different languages due to the ability to misinterpret issues easily. Two of the participants also cited difficulties they have had in dealing with clients from Saudi Arabia and Brazil, mainly because of language and cultural barriers. The general consensus was that communicating with diverse stakeholders in a global environment has been made more challenging and tasking. The challenging nature of communicating across different cultures is clearly highlighted by Gregory (2017:172) when she states that “even if the organisation is local, what it does may have global implications and attract global attention”. Practitioners also have the challenging task of always scrutinising what is placed on their websites and social media platforms as it can be accessed by individuals from other cultures, with possible implications. Ferreira (2003) thus acknowledges the need for PR practitioners to review their role and gain new skills in order to adapt to emerging forces of globalisation.

PR and communication / media relations activities. Responses to the impact of globalisation on media relations activities of practitioners were mixed. One participant, in particular, was of the view that globalisation has had a minimal influence on the practice of media relations. However, this view was not shared by his colleagues, who believed that media relations activities had been affected, as reflected in the following comments:

Because of the nature of my job, I have journalists who come from Reuters, Bloomberg to cover events. In those days we used to write letters to them but now because of that connection it is very easy, to communicate to the international audience ... On the global sphere the engagement has become very professional, and less costly. Because you do not need to pay.

In Ghana, there is the belief that unless it is a scandal or crisis, the media will not be interested in publishing a story. An organisation will therefore have to pay to get coverage. Participants note that the onset of globalisation has changed all that since they can now deal with outside media without having to pay so much. The advantage is that the international media also gives them a wider coverage. Participants stressed that online media in particular has benefited PR practice in Ghana as stakeholders are able access information easily without having to wait for the organisation to announce it via the traditional media. According to a participant: “You get your own free media space to publish whatever you want. You can easily react to situations or comments about your products or services. If you are being truthful about it why hide? It is less expensive to handle”. Nevertheless, participants also realise that online media can pose problems for their organisations. Inaccurate information can lead to misinformation and this can be carried far in a matter of minutes. A little miscommunication or different interpretation could

damage an organisation. Participants indicated the need to quickly react to complaints while ensuring every bit of information that goes out is accurate. Participants noted that globalisation had increased their scope of work. In the words of a participant:

Because of our external stakeholders and partners, the department is responsible for managing all protocols. I am the only one who writes letters for someone to travel or receive a partner from outside Ghana. I am almost like managing the relationship through the value chain. So that has opened up my scope; making a huge demand on me because I am managing my boss and the organisation.

The findings reflect the views of some scholars (see Wilcox et al., 2015; Verma, 2014; Kelleher, 2018; Seitel, 2017), who assert that practitioners are now able to engage in interactive communication and immediate feedback; gain access to information easily; gain access to global media coverage; provide easy access to copies of speeches, publications, new product information etc.; and respond quickly to emerging issues.

Communication strategy development: An interesting finding from the interviews is that the strategic plans of PR practitioners do not reflect the global nature of PR practice. Much as participants recognised the importance of aligning their communication strategies with the challenges thrown up by globalisation, only one admitted to having a strategy with international appeal: "If you are a PR practitioner, you will not only look at the internal or country publics but external as well, especially those outside your country". The participant emphasised the importance of developing a strategic plan that reflects current global trends. The other participants postulated that because most of their activities are mainly localised, much of their strategic plan takes a local component. They did note that plans are altered to accommodate their international stakeholders when the need arises. The issue arose of whether PR practitioners should develop and implement a single global PR strategy or develop different strategies for different cultural environments. Those who support the development of culture-specific strategies argued that the diverse nature of countries and cultures calls for designing specific strategies to respond to local opportunities and challenges. Practitioners are therefore not obliged to use concepts that have different meanings for targeted publics. Those who support a global approach asserted that starting new strategies every time will prove inhibitory for organisations. Another downside to using an international approach is that the organisation is unlikely to gain from the several creative ideas it can create when all of its global PR team brainstorm together to develop a common strategy. The client is also likely to lack a global identity (Alaimo 2017:3-21). The generic principle (discussed earlier in the literature review) was therefore seen as a compromise between the two extreme ends. This means that almost every aspect of PR practice can be regarded as global or international. The results show that one does not need to move to another country to practice international or global PR. This is a view supported by Sriramesh (2009a:xxxv) when he states that "even 'domestic' publics are becoming multinational and multicultural due to globalization", and Kelleher (2018), who argues that one does not need to work in an international organisation or global agency to work in

international PR because small organisations can communicate often across national borders. The result mostly aligns with the generic principle that proposes the adaptation of strategies depending on the environment.

Professionalism and practitioner skills: Evidence shows that globalisation has had a great influence on the skills and professionalism of PR practitioners. Participants agreed that globalisation has greatly influenced the way they do things now. A participant made the following comment:

Day in, day out we are connecting with people, learning from them the good and the bad. In terms of practice it has improved. Now, people know what PR is about, we are really managing communication in a professional way now.

Participants said they had been forced to improve their skills and learn new things in order to better serve their organisations. They are now doing more to bring the organisation and its stakeholders together due to the fierce competition that globalisation has brought.

Transparency and accountability. Participants felt that the rise of globalisation had resulted in a greater demand for transparency and accountability: “You have to be transparent and accountable to be accepted. Good global practice has it that once you deal with a global audience, it is essential for you to show transparency and accountability,” said one participant. Participants also posited that transparency was essential, hence there was the need for the dissemination of accurate information because it was also a way of enhancing the credibility of the organisation. Two of the participants, however, indicated that transparency does not mean sending out every single piece of information, but that one must ensure that the truth is always spoken and that organisations are honest with their publics. Many scholars (including Amodu, 2007; Marsteller, 2011; Reddi, 2004) have noted how globalisation is influencing PR (as noted in the literature review). The result is a confirmation of what these scholars have spoken about. Reddi (2004) in particular, highlighted several issues including reputation management, technological opportunities and challenges, and measurement. Ifigeneia and Dimitrios (2018) also noted that social media has reshaped PR within the current global system. The outcome of this research highlighted some of these things to show that PR in Ghana is being influenced by global events.

RQ3. If Ghanaian PR practitioners recognise the difference in the standards of practice between global and local PR, what are Ghanaian practitioners doing to ensure they gain the necessary expertise?

Participants were of the view that globalisation has placed added pressure on them to excel. This means constantly being on their toes, upgrading themselves and working extra to please

a more demanding, wider public. As noted by a participant, “In the last two years, I have taken some courses with the Institute of Public Relations, Ghana, to upgrade myself. I have also taken some management lessons to enable me better understand the business.” Participants confirmed that they need to gain new knowledge and the skills required to practice PR at an international level. Participants said they needed to engage in continuous reading to keep abreast with contemporary issues in the communication industry, attend workshops, and engage in professional developments to improve their skills. “For me, I try to read around PR, what is happening in the PR world, whenever I have the time. I know I can improve on this as it is the only way to remain relevant.” The participants noted that knowledge and understanding of current standards of practice was critical to ensure they were not left behind. This is reflected in the comment of a female participant:

PR is taking the front stage in Ghana, but practitioners must develop themselves. We must be able to development ourselves. With the advancement of technology, we cannot slip. As for the opportunities they will come, but we must be up to the task. Communication institutions, Practitioners and organisations must position themselves due to the global environment now. PR people are driving the conversation, but we must become relevant.

Participants acknowledged the need to know more about the landscape of other environments, especially in the areas of cultural differences, regulations, language and, most importantly, how the media operate in other countries:

For me, it is important to learn about the cultural nuances that influence businesses in other countries. If I want to succeed as a practitioner, then I need to know what happens in other countries, especially where my clients are from.

Participants, however, felt that a lack of knowledge about other environments would not be an issue as the majority of their clients are locals. Overall participants are not oblivious of the responsibilities that lie ahead of them and what they need to do to take advantage of the opportunities that globalisation offers while at the same time dealing with the challenges that it brings. Literature (Ferguson, 2013; Yang & Taylor, 2014; Coombs & Holladay, 2014; Broom & Sha, 2012; Verčič, et al., 2015) has highlighted the importance of skills development by PR practitioners to remain relevant. The call for constant education among practitioners continues to grow as the world daily becomes more complex.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The result of the research shows that globalisation is influencing the way PR is practiced in Ghana. Globalisation offers great opportunities, but at the same time challenges which must be

surmounted if practitioners are to effectively manage the reputation of their organisations in this digital environment. For Ghanaian PR practitioners, their work has become more challenging, as organisations are relying on them to effectively sell the organisation in an environment where local businesses compete with multinational ones. What is even more challenging is that these multinational organisations come with better communication and technology infrastructure. To be effective, practitioners need advanced and modern communication tools. As the results showed, despite advancement in communication infrastructure, Ghana, like most African countries, still faces challenges with internet access. The findings clearly indicated the difficulty in using technology. Skinner (2013:16) acknowledges this by noting that factors such as “the scarcity of information and communication technology infrastructure, the high cost of international bandwidth, and the dearth of relevant local content” have all contributed to limit the progress of the profession on the continent. This means that practitioners who work with local organisations will have to work extra hard to ensure that they overcome these challenges and actively engage diverse stakeholders at both local and international levels. According to Verwey (2000:51) PR practitioners, more than ever before, have the tough task of leading their organisations at various levels, including the integration of relationships with various stakeholders, management functions, corporate and organisational structures, and integration with society. However, this can only occur if practitioners show a clear understanding and knowledge of the major issues and trends influencing businesses and society and effectively communicate the long-term implications to management. Lee (2005:15) opines that local organisations “cannot be free from global influence on management decision making because globalisation is shaping the environment to which organisations should adapt”. In other words, the decisions of organisations will be greatly influenced by global forces whether organisations accept it or not. This puts enormous pressure on Ghanaian practitioners to develop strategies that speak to global issues, even if most of their clients are locals.

For PR practitioners in Ghana to meet the challenges of globalisation, it will be essential for them to upgrade their skills, especially in the area of digital communication. Practitioners must learn to properly utilise the various ICT tools, especially social media, e-PR, among others, to enable them effectively to engage their key publics. The fact that most of an organisation’s clients are locally based does not mean the practitioner only works with a local mindset since the potential to expand is always available, as Tench and Yeoman (2017) and Walker (2012) have clearly noted. Having a global mentality also builds the practitioner’s own credibility and market worth.

The study, though limited in sample size, has brought to the fore the need for the development of a framework that will guide the practice of PR by African countries. As the discussion on a common global theory of international PR continues, Africa must make its position known in the discussion. So far, literature has mainly been from a western perspective, just as discussions on globalisation’s effect have mainly been from multinational organisations from the west entering other cultures, especially non-western countries. However, as Mersham, Skinner and Rensburg (2011:1) note, it is time for an African body of knowledge based on the African worldview due to

the complex and diverse nature of the continent. Discussions on globalisation's impact on PR practice cannot ignore these complexities. More importantly, the discussion on theory building should also focus on how globalisation is influencing practitioners of local or non-multinational organisations. Ultimately, it behoves African scholars to engage in these discussions as this is the only way Africa can "effectively engage in the global refocusing of world economics and discussions on how PR is practiced in various countries in these regions,"(Mersham et al. 2001:1).

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE STUDIES

Regardless of the findings, the present study has its limitations. First of all, the small sample size, as well as the selection of a particular sector of the economy, means that the result can not be generalised. Given this, it is suggested that a broader research be conducted looking at how globalisation is influencing PR practice in Ghana. This can also be extended to the African environment, looking at the implications for African PR scholarship and practice.

6. CONCLUSION

Although the result of this study cannot be generalised in the sense that only five (5) participants were used, we believe that it has contributed to the discussion on the subject as there is no known study of the subject in Ghana. Sriramesh (2008:8) correctly points to the "serious deficiency in terms of empirical evidence from different parts of the world about phenomena relevant to PR practice". Sriramesh further acknowledges that much of "international" literature can only be found in mostly Asia and a few eastern European countries. With the exception of South Africa, the rest of Africa is mostly missing when it comes to discussions on PR practice. This article has therefore contributed to the literature from a Ghanaian perspective. We believe that PR in Ghana has a bright future as the country continues to open its borders to the rest of the world. Several multinational organisations as well as international PR agencies continue to set up business in the country. We believe that this will further bring in the needed exposure to international standards of PR practice which will further improve the profession. Practitioners must take up the challenge to redefine themselves globally as professionals. This is the only way by which they can lead the communication revolution in their organisations and help maintain their organisations' reputations, locally and internationally.

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