

The use of research by public relations practitioners: A study of selected organisations in Ghana

ABSTRACT

The importance of research by public relations practitioners has been highlighted by leading scholars in most developed countries. However, studies show that the use of research by practitioners is more talked about than actually done. In Ghana, little is known about how practitioners use research. This paper therefore attempts to add to the limited literature by investigating whether public relations (PR) practice in Ghana is informed by research. Data was collected from 93 PR practitioners using a survey. The results suggest that although research is used by practitioners, the emphasis appears to be on media monitoring and content analysis. The implication is that research cannot be fully appreciated if it is based solely on the amount of publicity received. The value of PR in the eyes of management can only be enhanced if emphasis is placed on the impact and outcome of research. Practitioners must therefore use a more scientific approach in their research activities.

Albert Anani-Bossman lectures in Public Relations and Organisational Communication in the Department of Communication Studies at the Pentecost University College, Ghana. His research area of interest includes; PR research & evaluation, Public relations practices, organisational communication, and communication management. Fortune Tella is a lecturer at the Department of Communication Studies, Christian Service University College, Ghana. He lectures in public relations, corporate social responsibility and marketing communication. His research interest includes crisis communication management, corporate social responsibility and social media strategies for communication. Both Anani-Bossman and Tella are PhD candidates in Communication Science at UNISA, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The old public relations was based on intuition and instinct; the new public relations is based on the achievement of business results ... Today's resolute public relations practitioners must not only know how to measure results, they must know what to measure, what not to measure, why and how we measure up as a business, too! (Alfred Geduldig, cited in Raupp, 2008:179).

The discussion on the need for accountability in the field of public relations (PR) using research has been a major issue since the 1990s. The body of knowledge on this subject has increased ever since Jim Grunig made his famous *cri de coeur* (cry from the heart) about the lack of evaluation of PR in 1983 (Starčič & Jakopovič, 2016; Watson & Noble, 2007). Grunig, in commenting on the lack of research, made the following statement:

Lately, I have begun to feel more and more like the fundamentalist minister railing against sin; the difference being that I have railed for evaluation in public relations practice. Just as everyone is against sin, so most public relations people I talk to are for evaluation. People keep on sinning, however, and PR people continue not to do evaluation research (Grunig, 1992:336).

Indeed, a 2008 Delphi study of academics, practitioners and leaders of professional associations identified key issues in relation to PR practice; namely, measurement, expression of value and the contribution of PR to the organisation. The findings, as reflected below, show the essence of research, measurement and evaluation for the PR process and for demonstrating accountability:

- public relations' role in contributing to strategic decision-making, strategy development and realisation and organisational functioning
- the value that PR creates for organisations by building social capital, managing key relationships and realising organisational advantage, and
- the measurement and evaluation of PR both offline and online (Likely & Watson, 2013).

The body of knowledge on the use of research by practitioners has therefore been on the increase since the 20th century when PR began to take shape (Watson, 2012:2). However, most of the studies on public relations practice, including how practitioners use research, has mainly been from western perspectives. Thus, models, recommendations and frameworks developed have naturally been conceptualised to suit western perspectives (Van Ruler & Verčič, 2002; Mersham, Skinner, & Rensburg, 2011; Rensburg & Van Heerden, 2005; Verčič et al., 2001). Literature on PR practice in developing countries, including Ghana, is either non-existent or scant.

In an effort to codify a global body of knowledge on PR practice, it is important that Africa be strongly represented. Moreover, the discussion on research and evaluation would not be complete without input from other countries, since PR is now a global phenomenon. Van Heerden (2004), however, notes that the participation of Africa will only be possible when the continent is able to contribute significantly to the practice of PR according to global terms. This means that if the body

of knowledge on research and evaluation is to be enriched, then it is important to determine how practitioners in Africa use research (if any) in the performance of their activities.

The PR industry, as stated earlier, has experienced phenomenal growth since the turn of the 21st century. This has been aided in part by political stability, rapid socioeconomic development and, most importantly, the advent of globalisation (Heath & Coombs, 2006; Skinner, 2013; Sriramesh & Verčič 2009; Sriramesh & Verčič, 2007). Butterick (2011), for instance, notes that PR has now become a global phenomenon permeating through cultures. The growth in the world economy that has resulted from globalisation has implications for Africa and African PR practice in particular. Ghana is part of the global system with many multinational organisations such as AngloGold, Tullow, Unilever, Nestlé and MTN among others opening subsidiaries in the country. The entry of these organisations has greatly influenced the way businesses are run in the country. Consequently, practitioners are now required to do more than ever to show how their activities contribute to the bottom line and are now judged on the basis of their level of contribution to organisational goals.

Despite the phenomenal growth of the industry in Ghana, there is a lack of evidence on how practitioners use research in the country. This study therefore attempts to investigate the way PR practitioners in Ghana use research for strategic planning and evaluating success. The article will first discuss the problem statement and this will be followed by a review of the literature on the topic. The methodology will then be discussed after which an analysis of the findings and their implications for the body of knowledge will be discussed.

1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Scholars, mostly from America, Western Europe and Australia, have suggested that the use of research in PR activities is generally not encouraging. Research conducted to assess PR practitioners' attitude towards research since the 1980s has shown that practitioners often "talk the talk" but never "walk the walk" (Broom & Sha, 2012; Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Raup, 2008; Xavier et al., 2005). The quote by Alfred Geduldig at the beginning of this article sums up what scholars have been saying about PR research.

While debates on the subject continue in the developed nations, the situation in developing nations, including Ghana, is different. There is no documented evidence that the practice of public relations is influenced by sound research or that such a discussion has even taken place among practitioners and academics on the African continent. Kwansah-Aidoo (2008) posits that any evidence of discussion on the subject is undocumented anecdotal support for the idea that research gets little attention in developing countries. Although the developed countries have well-structured and established systems that have greatly influenced the literature and empirical evidence found in PR, it does not necessarily mean that the practice is not active in developing countries (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009; Van Heerden & Rensburg, 2005). Skinner (2013) acknowledges this by pointing out that PR in Africa has been in existence for more than half a century. Nevertheless, researchers agree that very little is known about PR practice in Africa (Freitag & Stokes, 2009; Kwansah-Aidoo, 2008; Ming-Yi & Baah-Boakye, 2008; Sriramesh &

Verčič, 2009). This situation limits Africa's ability to be part of the global discussion on the subject. In the light of the paucity of research evidence on the use of research, the goal of this study is to investigate the use of research by PR practitioners in selected organisations in Ghana. The following section will focus on the literature review.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The goal of this research is to investigate how PR practitioners in Ghana use research, if any, in their day-to-day activities.

Many have argued that the value of what a practitioner does can only be determined through research, measurement and evaluation. Public relations practitioners are required to show return on investment (ROI). Scholars therefore argue that research plays a pivotal role in demonstrating accountability and effectiveness (Austin & Pinkleton, 2008; Jugenheimer et al., 2014; Michaelson & Stacks, 2011, 2014; Xavier, Mehta, & Gregory, 2005). Bowen, Rawlins, and Martin (2012) describe the importance of research in public relations by contending that three-quarters of PR activities are based on research alone. These authors point out that public relations management can only be realised through formative and evaluative research. Stacks (2011) and Macnamara (2008) acknowledge that PR has evolved from a technical role to a management role, which is focused on building and maintaining relationships with an organisation and its stakeholders, and it is therefore essential for practitioners to adopt standards that meet the requirements of modern professional management.

Research is essential in the management process as decisions, which are usually influenced by a variety of factors, cannot be made in a vacuum. This means the practitioner's strategic PR activities or policies must be based on clear and thorough research. PR has undergone a great transition from the era of publicity to a more scientific profession, especially with the advent of information communication technology (ICT). It is no longer about generating publicity, building image and focusing on the management of relationships. The profession has evolved into a sophisticated collection of communications where it is no longer an afterthought but a core part of an organisation's communication mix (Michaelson & Stacks, 2014). Michaelson and Stacks (2014) attribute this evolution to the inclusion of research, measurement and evaluation as a core part of the practice. Macnamara (2008) notes that management in organisations, both public and private, are using both informal and formal research to evaluate key areas of organisational activities as a means of ensuring accountability and it is important for PR to follow suit. Stacks (2011) also emphasises the importance of research in PR by stating that research is a core aspect of the work of practitioners. This is reflected in the following statement:

... when they offer communication strategies, counsel on communication problems, and educate clients as to the best public relations strategies or actions. Without research, professionals are left to "fly by the seats of their pants", that is, they are reduced to taking, at best, educated guesses regarding the problem and potential intervention programmes, and thus they run a greater risk of being unable to predict outcomes accurately (Stacks, 2011:6)

This means that knowing when a programme begins or how it evolves or what the end will be is impossible without research. In effect, without research the practitioner cannot demonstrate the efficacy of any PR programme and cannot be accountable since research is an integral part of any PR activity (Wilcox, Cameron, & Reber, 2015). The benefits of research have been stated severally by researchers and authors (Austin & Pinkleton, 2006; McCoy & Hargie, 2013; Michaelson & Stacks, 2014; Wilcox et al., 2015; Broom & Sha, 2012). Dozier (cited in Grunig, 1992:335) stresses the importance of research to the “professionalization” and “evolution” of the profession. However, concerns have been raised, as evidenced in numerous studies, that the use of research, measurement and evaluation is more talked about than practised. Center and Jackson (2003) are of the view that while measurement and evaluation have emerged as a key component of PR practice, there is a lack of clarity regarding the reporting of PR success against actual achievement. McCoy and Hargie (2013) contend that despite the strong theoretical foundation, the plethora of frameworks that offer guidelines on PR research and evaluation and the existence of numerous methods and tools, the research activities among practitioners have been very disappointing. This corroborates the point made by Macnamara (2006:2) and Grunig and Hunt (1984) that despite the growing recognition of the essence of research and evaluation, uptake by practitioners is quite slow. In the words of Grunig and Hunt (1984:77) most practitioners still prefer to “fly by the seat of their pants and use intuition rather than intellectual procedures to solve public relations problems”. Robinson, however, argues that the days when practitioners worked with intuition can no longer hold. According to Robinson:

The old “flying by the seat of your pants” approach to solving public relations problems is over. While there will always be a need for the intuitively based decision under some circumstances, decision based on hunch, guessing, experience and the rationale that “this is the way we have always done it” are a thing of the past (cited in Grunig, 1992:336).

From Robinson’s perspective, PR practitioners are “applied social scientists” who must draw on theory and research to make decisions, plan programmes and evaluate impact.

A study by the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) found a gap between what practitioners said and what they did (Raupp, 2008). Stacks (2016) and Kwansah-Aidoo (2008) note that research is one of the more practical PR areas that practitioners seem to fear the most. Many academics attribute this to the informal approach to research – media clippings – adopted by early practitioners, who were mainly journalists, which confirmed the study by the IPRA. Evidence also shows that practitioners tend to have limited knowledge and understanding of the use of research or restrict its use to particular types, including programme output (Gregory, 2001; Pohl & Vandeventer, 2001, Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). A research study conducted in the United Kingdom found that the research metrics used were mostly informal and/or qualitative in nature, including feedback from journalists or discussions with stakeholders (Xavier et al., 2005). However, the nature of today’s modern business environment means that practitioners must deliver evidence that the bottom line has been achieved because the current business and social environment is becoming increasingly competitive. The onus is therefore on practitioners to manage research activities that eventually demonstrate value and accountability (Anderson et al., 2009). Indeed, the importance of research in the PR practised is seen in the fact that the

subject has been one of the top priorities for practitioners, academics and researchers owing to its ability to enhance the industry's credibility, especially as it strives towards professionalism (McCoy & Hargie, 2013). Commenting on this, Grunig (2006) articulates that in as much as the use of research in the profession has seen some improvement, the profession is still far from being a research-based one.

Grunig (2006) asserts that PR research by practitioners focuses mainly on the short-term effects of marketing communication programmes. Research of this nature is mostly conducted to justify money spent on PR programmes as well as to prove that media publicity has value for the organisation. In effect, PR research is not intended to plan effective programmes or improve them. A series of studies reviewed by Macnamara (2006) concluded that while the quality of research and evaluation has improved, the same cannot be said of actual utilisation.

The discussion so far shows the importance that both academics and practitioners alike attach to research and evaluation. A review of available literature, however, shows that Africa – despite evidence of the growth of PR on the continent – has been significantly omitted in the development of a body of knowledge on a subject of such importance. Rensburg (2008) attributes this to a lack of information about Africa as a whole. Apart from South Africa, from where most of the African literature on PR emanates, very little is known about PR practice in Africa and most importantly whether it is even backed by research. In Ghana, the only known literature on research was published in 2008 by Kwansah-Aidoo, who conducted a study on the use of research in public enterprises in Ghana. The findings showed that PR practice in the public sector was informed by research and that research activities were aimed at building consensus. But this is the only known research that exists in Ghana; moreover, the research was conducted among public sector workers with 30 respondents, leaving a gap in knowledge of the state of practice in the private sector. Apart from this, the review of literature on the subject in Africa revealed nothing. In view of this, Rensburg (2008) calls on Africans to take responsibility for their own development, including developing a body of knowledge that ultimately contributes to the global discussion on public relations practice. Having this in mind, the current research sought to answer two key questions: (1) What are the current perceptions of PR practitioners in Ghana concerning the use of research? (2) Are the activities of Ghanaian PR practitioners informed by research? It is hoped that answers to these questions will help shed light on the topic under investigation.

3. METHODOLOGY

To effectively ascertain the research patterns of PR practitioners, the study developed and implemented a survey to understand general attitudes towards PR research. A questionnaire consisting of 23 questions was the main instrument used in the data gathering process. The questionnaire was adapted from instruments used by researchers who have undertaken similar projects to fit the Ghanaian environment. A purposive sampling technique was employed to select PR practitioners from various sectors of the Ghanaian economy to participate in the study. These practitioners consisted of both members and non-members of the Institute of Public Relations (IPR, Ghana). The IPR membership data could not be relied upon fully since some of the members are journalists who are not practising PR practitioners, affiliate students, as well as honorary members who do not have a PR background. In addition, not every practitioner is a registered

member of the institution. The survey used both an online and a self-administration method to gather data from professionals. Questionnaires were distributed to 120 practitioners of which 93 were retrieved, showing a return rate of 77.5%.

4. FINDINGS

Respondents consisted of 60% males and 40% females. The high male ratio is no indication of any gender imbalance in the industry as there is no empirically verified data in Ghana to prove this. Some authors (Sriramesh, 2005; Wilcox et al., 2015) suggest that there are more women in public relations than men, especially in the United States. Others also suggest that the ratio of men in PR, particularly in Eastern Europe and developing countries, is higher than women (Braun, 2007; Tsestura, 2014; Wu, 2006). The survey consisted of heads of public relations departments (43%), senior officers (32%) and junior officers (25%). The majority of the practitioners (63%) were from the private sector (corporate organisations, estate development, consultancy etc.), while the rest (37%) were from the government sector. Of significance is the fact that a large proportion of the respondents (57%) had a master's degree, while 38% had a first degree, with a minority (5%) having a diploma certificate. Not surprisingly, 68% of the respondents had their education in PR, whereas 30% stated that they had majored in both public relations and journalism. Interestingly, a few of them (2%), although practising as PR practitioners, had a background in marketing. The table below shows the demography of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	n	%
Gender		
Male	56	60.2
Female	37	39.8
Position		
Managerial	40	43.0
Senior officer	30	32.3
Officer	23	24.7
Level of education		
Masters	53	57.0
First degree	35	37.6
Diploma	5	5.4
Qualification		
Public relations	63	67.7
Public relations & journalism	28	30.1
Marketing	2	2.2
Sector		
Private	59	63.4
Public	34	36.6

4.1 Views about the use of research in public relations

Initial studies on the use of research showed that practitioners did not engage in much research, even though they did acknowledge its importance to their work (Broom & Sha, 2012; Stacks, Dodd, & Men, 2011). Wilcox et al. (2015:225), however, acknowledge the progress that has been made in the last decade as practitioners seek to show their clients and employers what has been achieved. The current research sought to investigate practitioners' use of research in their activities. Overall, the responses showed a strong belief by practitioners that PR activities must be research based. The majority of practitioners (94.6%) acknowledged the use of research, with a few (5.4%) responding in the negative.

Several items measured the importance practitioners assigned to research. The items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale (see Table 2). Although most of the practitioners responded, a few abstained. Responses were categorised into three groups (strongly agree/agree, neutral, strongly disagree/disagree). The response pattern shows that practitioners ($n = 80$; 87.9%) strongly agreed that PR activities require research and that research should be an integral part of any PR activity ($n = 77$; 85.6%). Half of the practitioners ($n = 44$; 50.6%) disagreed when asked to comment on the fact that research should be used sparingly due to its demanding nature. Nearly one-third ($n = 28$; 32.2%) agreed that research should be used sparingly while 17% stayed neutral. Again, less than half (47.2%) disagreed that PR is more experience-based than research-based, while 31.5% strongly agreed/agreed and one-fifth (20.2%) neither agreed nor disagreed. Most (68%) of the respondents expressed their disagreement with the statement "it is impossible to evaluate PR activities"; nearly one-fifth (19.3%), however, agreed.

Bowen et al. (2012) postulate that research allows practitioners to be part of the dominant coalition and is a way to "illustrate [the] value and worth of their activities". Research is therefore a "strategic foundation of modern public relations management". Indeed, these authors assert that, without research, PR cannot be regarded as a true management function. The argument by Bowen et al. was affirmed by a majority (68.5%) of practitioners who did not believe that PR can be included in the management process without research. Others (15.7%), however, held a different view. The overall responses confirm the argument by Bowen et al. (2012) that PR without research is premised mainly on just experience or instinct, neither of which plays a large role in strategic management. Broom and Sha (2012) also assert that without research, a practitioner will be limited in his/her knowledge of the issue and will be unable to recommend any effective solution. The results above show that practitioners in Ghana are very serious about research and recognise its effect.

Table 2: Views about the use of research

Variables	n	%
Use of research in PR activities		
Yes	88	94.6
No	5	5.4
PR activities require research		
Strongly agree	80	87.9
Neither agree nor disagree	6	6.6
Strongly disagree	5	5.5
Research should be made an integral part of any PR activity		
Strongly agree	77	85.6
Neither agree nor disagree	5	5.6
Strongly disagree	8	8.9
Research is demanding and should be used sparingly		
Strongly agree	28	32.2
Neither agree nor disagree	15	17.2
Strongly disagree	44	50.6
PR is more experienced based than research based		
Strongly agree	28	31.5
Neither agree nor disagree	18	20.2
Strongly disagree	43	48.3
It is impossible to evaluate PR activities		
Strongly agree	17	19.3
Neither agree nor disagree	2	3.4
Strongly disagree	68	77.3
PR can be included in the management process without research		
Strongly agree	14	15.7
Neither agree nor disagree	7	7.9
Strongly disagree	68	76.4

Note: Not all respondents answered all the questions

4.2 Goals of public relations research

A key aspect of the study was to determine why practitioners engage in research activities. Stacks et al. (2011) outline seven goals of research including environmental scanning, knowing the current PR position on an issue, assessing communication activities, and measuring communication effectiveness. Wilcox et al. (2015) also point out that research in PR is used to

plan strategy, test messages, generate publicity, measure success, prevent crises and sway public opinion. Finally, Grunig and Grunig (2008) note that in order for PR to be symmetrical, it must be based on research. The goal of research in symmetrical PR is to gain information that contributes to building mutual understanding. With this in mind, the research sought to find out the purpose of research in respondents' respective organisations. Responses show that research is done for a variety of reasons including strategic planning and programme development ($n = 66$, 21.7%), measuring media coverage ($n = 48$, 15.8%), reviewing the effectiveness of campaign programmes ($n = 40$, 13.8%), enhancing organisational credibility ($n = 41$, 13.5%), and building mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics ($n = 40$, 13.2%). Other goals of research are tracking issues and attitudes ($n = 36$, 11.8%) and helping stakeholders understand the organisation better ($n = 33$, 10.9%).

Table 3: Multiple responses for goals of research

Variables	n	(%)	
		Respondents	Responses
Strategic planning and programme development	66	100.0	21.7
Measuring media coverage	48	72.7	15.8
Review effectiveness of campaign programmes	40	60.6	13.2
Track issues and attitudes	36	54.5	11.8
Build mutual understanding between the organisation and its publics	40	60.6	13.2
Help stakeholders understand the organisation better	33	50.0	10.9
Enhance credibility of organisation	41	62.1	13.5

Note: Respondents were allowed more than one answer, plus not all of them answered all the questions.

4.3 Types of research practitioners conduct

Dozier and Repper (1992) distinguish between environmental monitoring or scanning, which identifies issues and evaluation that determine the success or otherwise of a programme. Evaluation research builds on the findings of environmental monitoring. Dozier (1990:5-6) points out that due to the complex nature of evaluative research, practitioners often focus more on environmental monitoring than evaluation. He is, however, of the view that both monitoring and evaluation can be done together, a view shared by Lindenmann (2006). To determine the use of either monitoring or evaluation, respondents were asked to show the extent to which they use these types of research. The findings (Table 4) show a variation in responses. Monitoring and evaluation appear to have equal importance for most practitioners. Nearly half (47.1%) indicated that their research involved 50% monitoring and 50% evaluation. What is significant, though, is that almost a quarter (24.1%) place more emphasis on monitoring than evaluation (60–80% monitoring & 20–40% evaluation). This result confirms the findings of Kwansah-Aidoo (2008), that 40% of practitioners engaged in 60 to 80% environmental

monitoring, and 20 to 40% but less than 40% (33.3) gave equal attention to monitoring and evaluation. It must be pointed out that Kwansah-Aidoo's research used 30 respondents and was conducted much earlier, hence the variation is understandable

Table 4: Type of research practitioners engage in

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
100% monitoring	7	8.4
50% monitoring & 50% evaluation	39	47.1
100% evaluation	8	9.6
60–80% evaluation & 20–40% monitoring	9	10.8
60–80% monitoring & 20–40% evaluation	20	24.1
Total	83	100

Note: Not all respondents answered all the questions

4.4 Areas of focus in public relations research

Knowledge of specific areas of research was essential to determine whether practitioners focused on a few areas or researched several issues. The findings (Table 5) show that research activities focus mainly on media relations, and crisis and issues management ($n = 51$ each, 25.2%). This is followed closely by internal and corporate communication with 48 respondents (23.8%) and public issues campaign and debate ($n = 21$, 10.4%). Other areas of research with values of less than 10% are event management (7.9%); speech writing (5.0%) and others such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), community/consumer relations constituting 2.5%.

Table 5: Areas of focus

Variables	<i>n</i>	(%)	
		Respondents	Responses
Media relations	51	100	25.2
Crisis and issues management	51	100	25.2
Public issues campaign and debate	21	41.2	10.4
Internal and corporate communication	48	94.1	23.8
Speech writing	10	19.6	5.0
Event management	16	31.4	7.9
Others (CSR, consumer/community relations)	5	9.8	2.5

Note: Respondents were allowed more than one answer, plus not all of them answered all the questions.

4.5 Methods used for research

The research sought to determine the methods practitioners use and how often they use such methods in research. Media clippings appear to be the main method used for monitoring (61%) and planning (36%), while one-third (33.8%) use them for evaluation purposes. This is followed by media content analysis (24.7% – planning; 43.9% – monitoring; 42.2% – evaluation). Interestingly, surveys did not feature that much, with only a quarter saying they use surveys for planning (25.6%) and monitoring (25%), while 28% use them for evaluation. The use of media clippings and content analysis for monitoring is quite popular among practitioners as other research has shown (Pooi Yin, Krishnan, & Ean, 2012; Starčić & Jakopović, 2016; Watson, 2004; Wright, Leggetter, & Zeffass, 2009). Starčić and Jakopović (2016), for instance, found that content analysis was the most common method (57%) used to measure the impact of PR activities, with surveys and focus groups following at 34% and 20% respectively. The results also highlight concerns raised by Grunig (2008) that practitioners tend to use media monitoring to show the worth of PR activities. Findings from the study indicate that focus groups and interviews (21% each) are the least used for evaluation and monitoring.

Table 6: Research methods often/always used to plan, monitor & evaluate PR activities

Variables (N = 83)	%		
	Plan	Monitor	Evaluate
Media clippings	36.0	61.0	33.8
Media content analysis	24.7	43.9	42.2
Survey	25.6	25.0	28.0
Focus group discussion	20.7	16.3	21
Interview	23.5	22.2	21
Internet and library search	31.3	24.1	24.7
Field report	28.2	20.3	37.5

Clearly, the techniques being used by practitioners are a mixture of social science methods and media-centred techniques, although the usage rate appears to lean more towards media-centred techniques.

4.6 Who the research is carried out by and research ability

A key concern was to determine who did the research as well as researcher’s own ability to do good research. According to the practitioners (n = 47, 52.8%), research is mainly done in-house but over one-third (n = 35, 39.3%) indicated they use an agency in addition to in-house. Only seven (7.9%) respondents admitted using an agency. Indeed, practitioners claimed they were very good at research (n = 53, 58.9). A further 14 (15.6%) said they had excellent research skills, with a quarter (25.5%) indicating their research ability to be

average. The majority (50 = 56.2%) was therefore of the view that they felt comfortable conducting research on their own, whereas 28 (31.5%) respondents preferred to use an agency. However, one-eighth (12.3%) felt they were not into research and were not sure how they felt about using an agency or conducting the research themselves. Grunig (2008) acknowledges that today's practitioner has access to research firms, research divisions of PR firms and in-house research departments. In addition, many practitioners have had training in research methods.

When asked at what stage of the PR process research is carried out, 42 (47.2%) practitioners said research was carried out at the planning, implementing and evaluation stages. One-third (33.7%), however, carry out research only at the planning stage, with 12.4% indicating research was done at the planning and the evaluation stage. Only one person (1.1%) indicated that this was done at the implementation stage. Wilcox et al. (2015) note that research is a "multipronged" tool that is part of every aspect of a PR programme. Bowen et al. (2012) suggest that research should not only be conducted at the end of the programme but throughout the programme. Macnamara (2006) also asserts that as much as evaluative research is done at the end of a campaign, it is essential for measurement and evaluation to start early and continue throughout the programme. This allows for both formative and evaluative research to inter-relate and merge.

4.7 Proportion of annual PR budget allocated for research

Strangely, most of the practitioners (42.2%) either did not know or were not sure what percentage of their annual budget was allocated to research. A little over one-eighth (13.3%), however, believed that they allocated between 11 and 15% for research activities, while 10% said more than 20%. The rest allocated less than 10% of their annual budget to research. While studies show that PR departments spend about 3% of their budget on research, some experts recommend between 5 and 10%. This percentage is, however, expected to rise with the increasing use of digital analytics and social media monitoring (Wilcox et al., 2015).

Table 7: Proportion of total annual budget allocated for research activities

Variables	n	%
Less than 1%	8	8.9
1–5%	10	11.1
6–10%	10	11.1
11–15%	12	13.3
16–20%	3	3.3
More than 20%	9	10.0
Don't know/not sure	38	42.2

Note: Not all respondents answered all the questions

Based on the allocation of budget, respondents were asked to agree or disagree with the statement “lack of sufficient budget accounts for low level of research in my organisation”. There was wide agreement (69.3% = 26.4% strongly agreed and 42.9% agreed) with this assertion; however, almost a quarter (24.2%) disagreed, while about 7% were not sure. The results clearly show that budgetary allocation is very influential in the ability of practitioners to conduct research. Lack of budget for research has been identified as one of the claims often made by practitioners as the reason for not engaging in research (Lindenmann, 2006; Macnamara, 2015; Wright et al., 2009;). Lindenmann (cited in Macnamara, 2015), however, suggests many ways to do research in a cost-effective way, including omnibus surveys, self-administered mini-surveys of small samples, and online surveys. Macnamara (2015) also identifies a range of formal and informal methods, low cost and no-cost methods, such as case studies, consultative groups, online feedback forums, and self-administered e-surveys.

5. DISCUSSION

The results give a clear indication that PR practitioners in Ghana have a high regard for research in their daily activities. Although the use of research in public relations has not been widely investigated in Africa, or for that matter Ghana, this study confirms that practitioners do understand the need for research and use research as well. For instance, the majority (87.9%) believed that PR activities require research and that research should be made an integral part of any PR activity. Grunig (2014), in an interview as part of the *Thought leaders in PR measurement* series, acknowledged the critical role that research plays in strategic PR: “Without it, the public relations function will continue to serve only in a messenger role and not a strategic role.” Grunig draws a strong correlation between the amount of research a PR department does and the respect and value senior managers have for the communication function.

Of note is that almost one-third (32.2%) thought that PR research is demanding and should be used sparingly, while 17.2% neither agreed nor disagreed. Overall, the results suggest that half of the respondents were not in favour of the frequent use of research due to its laborious nature. This contrasts with the overwhelming agreement that research is an integral part of PR activities. This seeming contradiction is further enhanced by other responses. For instance, 31.5% agreed with the statement that PR is more experienced-based rather than research-based, whereas one-fifth (20.2%) stayed neutral. The finding does, however, support the findings of Walker (cited in Watson & Noble, 2007) and other scholars (Kwansah-Aidoo, 2008; Starčić & Jakopovič, 2016) regarding the gulf between practitioner attitudes toward research and practice. Several reasons have been given for this attitude, including the small numbers of practitioners in the department, insufficient funds, and lack of time. Others suggest that PR is more of an art than a science, hence the difficulty in measuring it. This is hardly surprising as almost one-fifth (19.3%) supported the view that PR was impossible to evaluate. Lindenmann, however, disputes this view. He states: “Let’s get something straight right off the bat. First it is possible to measure public relations effectiveness ... second, measuring public relations effectiveness does not have to be either unbelievably expensive or laboriously time-consuming” (cited in Wilcox et al., 2015:225). Other scholars have also attributed the real reason for the reluctance in doing research to a lack

of knowledge/expertise (Baskin et al., 2010; Watson & Noble, 2007). Grunig (2014) asserts that “the one variable that consistently explains why public relations practitioners do what they do is their level of knowledge”. What is interesting though is that practitioners believe that PR cannot be part of the management process if it is not backed by research. This acknowledgement is in line with a widely held agreement that PR enhances the managerial role of the practitioner and ensures the practitioner becomes part of the dominant coalition. Grunig (2014), in commenting on this, suggests that to participate in strategic management, a practitioner should provide unique information to management, and research provides that information.

There has been much debate (as noted earlier) regarding the point at which research should occur. The results show an encouraging trend, as nearly half (47.2%) of said research is carried out at all three (planning, implementation and evaluation) stages. This result is contrary to that of Kwansah-Aidoo (2008), where the majority (43%) conducted research only at the planning stage. However, Kwansah-Aidoo focused mainly on the public sector while the majority of respondents in this research were mainly from the private sector. Again, since Kwansah-Aidoo's research was done in 2008, a lot could have happened since then. Scholars recommend that research should be part of the entire PR process (Lindenmann, 2006; Wilcox et al., 2015). What this means is that a large proportion of PR research is done only at the scanning stage, as noted by Dozier and Repper (1992). Within the context of this research, it can be concluded that 47.2% practise the symmetrical model which uses research to formulate messages that lead to mutually beneficial relationships; however, this is less than half of the population. A significant percentage also apply the asymmetrical model whereby practitioners conduct research but with the aim of developing messages that persuade the public to act in favour of the organisation rather than looking at programme impact. This means that if research is focused on the planning phase alone, practitioners will have difficulty in determining the result of their PR activities. What is interesting, though, is that the use of asymmetric communication was realised mainly from the public sector.

The use of media clippings and media content analysis mostly for planning, monitoring and evaluation is an indication that research is mainly media centred. This feeds into some of the findings of scholars, as well as concerns raised that practitioners often go for the easy option rather than using more rigorous social science methods such as surveys (Macnamara, 2008, 2006; Mutua, 2016; Starčić & Jakopovič, 2016; Watson, 2004; Wilcox et al., 2015). What is clear is that when it comes to research tools there is not much difference between practitioners in developing countries and those in advanced countries. If practitioners are to be able to use research to diagnose issues and opportunities as well as measure return on investment, then there is the need to give equal attention to other essential tools such as surveys and focus group discussions. It is, however, worth noting that these tools are not neglected, even if they are not used in the same breath.

Another interesting finding worth commenting on is that significant number of practitioners (42.2%) did not know how much of their annual budget they spend on research. This is hardly surprising, as Gronstedt (cited in English, 2005) found in his study. In Gronstedt's study, half of practitioners said they rarely or never budget for research. Practitioners who conducted research mostly used

around 10% of their total budget (William, cited in English 2006). Watson (cited in Macnamara, 2008) found that 75% of practitioners spent less than 5% of their total budget on research.

General findings suggest that although practitioners use a mixture of methods in research activities, there is an obvious orientation towards media monitoring and media content analysis. While media research (media monitoring and content analysis) is essential in helping to track the coverage of organisations, Wood (cited in Kwansah-Aidoo, 2008) believes that it is important to determine the more “strategic impact of communication on organizational relationships”. If practitioners are to fully show value for money and enhance their credibility in the eyes of management, then they need to ensure that they utilise research tools that show impact. Although tools such as surveys, interviews and focus group discussions are used, media monitoring and content analysis clearly dominate.

6. IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Overall, the results of the study provide a sound basis for looking at the overall contribution of research to PR efforts. The findings show that studies on research in Ghana focus more on the general use of research. It would therefore be appropriate to focus specifically on the use of evaluation to measure research outcomes. The result is an indication that research in PR practice in Ghana has progressed since the findings of Kwansah-Aidoo (2008). Moreover, research is clearly recognised as important for practitioners in Ghana. However, for PR to be more symmetrical, which is regarded as best practice, it should be based on sound research. One area that can also be looked at is knowledge and understanding of the various research tools, especially the use of social media/internet tools in the age of digitisation. What is obvious though is that more research needs to be done in the area of measurement and evaluation, since this is an area that is largely unexplored. Indeed, the literature on PR practice in Ghana is very limited and the result of this research will further assist in the effort to understand the practice from the perspective of a developing country.

7. CONCLUSION

The current study has shown that more research needs to be done on the way practitioners, not only in Ghana but across Africa, use research in their daily activities. The signs are encouraging, however. The growing nature of PR activities has been facilitated by the increasing competition and the need to show results. Practitioners should see research as an opportunity to show their value and to obtain the recognition that they crave, especially in the eyes of management. What is certain is that PR research is growing as practitioners become more strategic and are increasingly being made part of the dominant coalition. What is needed now is further studies on evaluative research, as well as the methods used in research, especially because we find ourselves in a digitised environment.

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