



Journalism and Public Relations: Spotting the difference

Journalism and public relations are sometimes perceived as possessing similar traits and working towards related goals. A number of companies take on journalists as public relations persons because they believe journalists understand the public relations role and vice versa. In Ghana and around the world, it is not uncommon to find journalists move jobs to public relations practice. It is less common however, to find the reverse although it exists. These job-switches gives an indication of how we perceive the two professions as similar and therefore the belief that a change to either one may not be such a dramatic turn around.

Although news journalists and public relations professionals have a working relationship, usually symbiotic in nature, their expertise varies, their roles are different and their goals are not the same. Some persons have said that the main difference between the journalist and the public relations person is who their work serves. The journalist is known to serve the public while the public relations person is said to serve a client or an organization. This article answers two questions; what does the journalist do? What does the public relations person do? Answers to these questions can help us spot the differences between these two professions, aid us appreciate their perceived similarity and assist us understand their symbiotic relationship.

What do journalists do?

Kovach and Rosenstiel, authors of *The Elements of Journalism*, said the purpose of journalism is to “provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing”. In providing this information, journalists will tell you that they serve as a watchdog for society. Journalists believe they push people beyond complacency, and offer a voice to the voiceless. In other words, journalists do not work for media houses per se but for the people in their society. In the end, their story ideas must ask two questions: who

cares? And so what? If the story has a good answer for these two questions, the journalist goes ahead to write the story. How do they do this?

Journalists need to gather needed information before they can start writing a story. In gathering information, the journalist would usually use three ways: observation, interviewing sources and background research. In observing, a journalist can attend events, lectures and other public addresses to witness proceedings and matters that will be discussed. This is a good way one can gather information for a story. A journalist can also conduct some experiments, tests and polls to help obtain useful information. The second way a journalist gathers information is through interviews. The journalist interviews experts, witnesses, leaders, officeholders, politicians, and anyone who can provide relevant information for the story. Interviewing can be done face-to-face, on the phone, by email, through letters, etc. The third way to gather stories is by research. A journalist may use the internet, search from a library, read scholarly works, bibliographies, government documents, journals, biographies, archives, the Hansard, and reference books. Research can also be done by reading newspapers, viewing audio-visual materials, and watching some television programmes. These tools help journalists find stories which are relevant to the society.

Journalists write or broadcast different types of stories. Hard news is usually short, focused and timely as it tells plots of a story that is happening in the moment. Feature stories are not necessarily timely but are usually on a needed topical issue in the society and are more in-depth in nature. Whether for a newspaper, magazine, radio, television, or the internet, journalism often satisfies the characteristics discussed so far. After a story is written, the journalist then concerns himself/herself with editing the piece of work to make it a compelling, relevant and an interesting piece for readers or listeners. This is done by correcting grammatical errors, organizing the issues in a consistent, coherent manner, checking the facts of the story, making sure all quotations are correct, among others. This is essential as mistakes in a journalist's piece of work can have serious consequences on the sources of the journalist, the media house he/she works for and the journalist's profession.

Beyond writing, photo journalism seems to have become a useful skill for journalists to acquire because they use photography to enhance their stories. Photography can be in the form of still photographs or videos. Whichever form it takes, journalism is enhanced by the use of picture because pictures tell the story faster than words may. Manasseh Azuri Awuni, Ghana's Journalist of the year in 2012, wrote a feature titled "*a boy's suffering, a father's pain!*" This story centred on a 13 year old boy who survived a school building collapse incident but was in dire need of medical attention. Lack of funds prevented his father from taking him for medical aid. This feature, which was published in some newspapers, on television and on the internet carried strong emotional appeal especially because of the pictures of this boy in bed, crippled with terrible bed sores. The pictures told the story so effectively.

The work of journalists goes a long way to inform society on issues that affect them, as well as educate people on the society they live in so they can make more informed choices. Usually done in what is termed 'investigative journalism', journalism can keep people on their toes and propel them to do the right thing and can also lead to the arrests of persons breaking the law or bring irresponsible persons to book.

What do public relations persons do?

Public relations roles vary in work levels and in different organizations. However, there are some basic assignments undertaken by most public relations persons. Their job, as stated earlier, is to serve their clients or organizations. How do they do this?

First of all, public relations persons usually do a lot of writing and editing of various communication materials for both their internal and external stakeholders. They write news releases for both the print and broadcast media, they write feature stories as thought leaders, they compose text for internal newsletters, websites, key messages for press kits, annual reports, brochures, film and documentary scripts, trade publications, product and technical collateral material. In this way, writing skills are a necessary requirement that plays a central role in public relations work. The practitioner also creates communication materials through production work such as photography, computer desk-top publishing, audio and video recording and editing as well as preparing audio-visual presentations.

Media relations and the ability to place one's piece of work in the media is a vital job of the public relations person. This is one of the reasons why some companies hire journalists, who they believe can do media relations, so their stories are placed in the media quite often. Media relations, however involves more than that. It involves developing and maintaining cordial and oftentimes personal relationships with the media. Usually this relationship helps public relations persons respond to media requests for information, facilitates access to authoritative sources and sometimes leads as well as help them verify stories. This relationship also helps public relations persons contact media personnel and get them to publish or broadcast news originated by the organization.

Like journalism, research is believed to be the backbone of the public relations person. They use internet search engines, conduct survey or hire research firms to undertake specific research for the organization. Public relations persons use research as a tool to gather information about the perceptions of their publics, issues in their sector, the political climate of the time, the media landscape, and other concerns related to the organization and its stakeholders. The public relations profession requires strategic programming and collaboration with other managers in an organization in order to determine their needs, establish their priorities, set goals and objectives and develop a strategy and tactics to attain the set goals. The public relations person needs to administer personnel, a budget and schedule sheet to facilitate the management of these plans. Giving solid advice to management on social, political and the regulatory environment is also a role of the public relations person. This advisory role includes giving counsel on how to respond to crises and working with the management of the organization to devise strategies for managing or responding to critical and sensitive issues.

If you are a public relations person, you are also required to organize and coordinate news conferences, media soirees, product launches, grand openings, anniversary celebrations, fundraising events, visiting dignitaries and other special events organized by the organizations. This requires creative and spot-on organizational skills, access to vendors, access to media for coverage and access to high ranking persons of society who may be invited guests at some of these events. At these events, and most often beyond media platforms, a public relations person either speaks on behalf of his/her organization or

coaches others for specific speaking assignments. In preparing others to speak on behalf of the organization, a public relations person trains management on how to deal with the media and ways to improve public speaking and presentation skills. The practitioner also needs to help introduce positive changes in the organizational culture, policy, structure and process. Finally, the public relations person is seen as the liaison person between the organization and the media, the community, the employees, the government and all other publics of that organization. This role means the public relations person must listen, negotiate, manage conflict as well as meet and entertain their organizations' guests.

Spotted the difference?

The roles of the journalist and that of public relations person vary extensively. Their roles however make them meet on some platforms and engage in different ways. This may give each other an idea of their respective roles but does not necessarily mean they completely understand each other's work. Both jobs are not 8-5 jobs. Both require a lot of impromptu assignments and writing. Both jobs require constant research and keeping one's ears on the ground for information. Both professions communicate but in different, interestingly diverse ways. Learning and experience is the one way out if journalists are to know what public relations is all about and vice versa.