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THE PLACE OF STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC RELATIONS: PR PRACTICE AND PROFESSIONALISATION IN NIGERIAN GOVERNMENT AND PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Strategic communication and public relations (PR) are increasingly central to how governments explain policies, manage reputation, engage stakeholders and build public confidence. Strategic communication extends beyond information dissemination to encompass coordination, dialogue and institutional legitimacy (Hallahan et al., 2007), while PR supports beneficial relationships between organisations and their publics (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, 2006). This paper examines strategic communication and PR professionalisation in Nigerian public institutions, investigating the extent to which PR has moved from publicity toward a strategic management function supporting dialogue, participation and governance.

Anchored in Excellence Theory and Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model, and further informed by Grunig's (1992) work on excellence in communication management, the study adopts a qualitative, library-based design drawing on scholarly literature, professional documents and government reports. Recent developments including BPSR–NIPR collaboration on communication capacity-building and stakeholder engagement (BPSR, 2025; Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, 2025) signal growing institutional attention to strategic communication in Nigeria. Findings show that while PR structures exist across public institutions, gaps remain between recognition and integration into governance and decision-making, with communication dominated by publicity and reactive crisis management rather than listening, participation and evaluation.

The paper argues that professionalisation should encompass qualifications, ethical standards, continuous development, leadership participation, research and accountability, concluding that repositioning PR as a governance function can strengthen institutional credibility and citizen engagement. It recommends stronger professional standards, capacity development, feedback mechanisms, communication research and ethical collaboration among government, NIPR and academia.

Keywords: Strategic Communication, Public Relations, Professionalisation, Nigeria government, public institutions

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Introduction

The relationship between government and citizens is fundamentally a relationship of communication. Government formulates and implements policies, provides public services, regulates social and economic activities, responds to crises and communicates decisions to citizens and other stakeholders. Citizens, in turn, seek information, express expectations, question governmental actions, provide feedback and demand accountability. The quality of this interaction has significant implications for institutional legitimacy, public confidence and the effectiveness of governance. In this context, strategic communication and public relations (PR) have assumed an increasingly important position within contemporary public administration.

The changing communication environment has further expanded the responsibilities of government communication institutions. The emergence of digital and social media, the rapid circulation of information, the growth of misinformation and disinformation, and the increasing expectation for immediate governmental responses have altered the traditional relationship between public institutions and their publics. Government communication can no longer depend exclusively on press releases, official statements, traditional media briefings or one-directional information dissemination. Contemporary public institutions are increasingly required to identify and understand diverse stakeholders, anticipate communication challenges, listen to citizens, provide timely and credible information, manage institutional reputation, respond to crises and create mechanisms through which citizens can participate in communication processes.

Strategic communication provides an appropriate conceptual lens for understanding this transformation. Hallahan et al. (2007) conceptualise strategic communication as the purposeful use of communication by an organisation to fulfil its mission. From this perspective, communication is not simply an administrative activity or a publicity mechanism; it is a strategic organisational resource that should be aligned with institutional objectives, decision-making, stakeholder relationships and measurable outcomes. Strategic communication therefore encompasses a range of interconnected activities, including public relations, corporate communication, media relations, crisis communication, internal communication, stakeholder engagement, public affairs, digital communication, and reputation management and communication evaluation.

Public relations constitute an important component of this broader strategic communication environment. Traditionally associated with the management of relationships between organisations and their publics, PR has progressively developed from a publicity-oriented occupation into a more complex management and professional function. Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006) describe public relations in terms of the management function concerned with establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics upon whom its success depends. This conception is particularly significant in the public sector because government institutions do not operate solely for commercial objectives. Their effectiveness is closely associated with public interest, service delivery, legitimacy, accountability, participation and citizens' perceptions of institutional performance.

The significance of strategic communication and public relations is particularly pronounced in Nigeria. Nigeria's plural social structure, large and diverse population, federal administrative system, rapidly changing media environment and complex governance challenges create a communication environment in which public institutions must engage with multiple and sometimes competing publics. Federal ministries, departments and agencies, state institutions, local government authorities, universities, regulatory bodies, commissions and other public organisations routinely communicate policies, programmes and institutional decisions to citizens. The effectiveness of these communication processes can influence how policies are understood, how public institutions are perceived and whether citizens are able to participate meaningfully in governance.

The Nigerian public sector has also demonstrated increasing institutional recognition of the strategic character of communication. For example, the Federal Ministry of Education's 2025–2027 Communications Strategy and Framework identifies unified messaging and branding, stakeholder engagement and public trust, crisis communication and reputation management, monitoring and evaluation, and professionalisation of communication among its strategic pillars. Similarly, the Bureau of Public Service Reforms has worked with NIPR on strengthening communication capacity among government leaders and developing tools for assessing strategic communication, stakeholder engagement, crisis response and feedback management across ministries, departments and agencies.

These developments suggest a growing institutional understanding that effective public-sector reform and service delivery require more than administrative action; they also require systematic communication with citizens and stakeholders.

The Federal Government has further undertaken capacity-building initiatives for information and public relations officers. In August 2025, BPSR and its partners trained information and public relations officers from ministries, departments and agencies in strategic communication and stakeholder management, with emphasis on policy communication, transparency, crisis and risk communication, stakeholder engagement and responses to misinformation. Such initiatives demonstrate the increasing importance attached to professional communication competencies within the public service.

The institutional structure of public relations is also visible within government communication arrangements. The Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation, for example, maintains a Public Relations and Protocol function whose stated responsibilities include developing relationships among government, the media and various publics, implementing PR strategies and supporting mechanisms for information gathering, dissemination and response. In July 2025, the Bureau of Public Procurement also engaged NIPR on the use of strategic communication in communicating institutional reforms and strengthening public understanding of procurement-related policies. The engagement included emphasis on the role of certified PR professionals and capacity building for public-sector communication personnel.

These developments raise an important scholarly question: to what extent has the institutional recognition of strategic communication translated into genuinely professional, strategic and dialogic public relations practice within Nigerian government and public institutions? The existence of communication departments, information officers and PR units does not necessarily establish that communication has attained strategic management status. Professionalisation involves more than creating positions or assigning communication responsibilities to designated officers. It encompasses professional education, competence, ethical standards, regulatory compliance, continuing professional development, professional autonomy, evidence-based practice, research, evaluation and the capacity to participate meaningfully in organisational decision-making.

This distinction is important because public relations can perform fundamentally different functions within

public institutions. At one level, PR may function primarily as a publicity mechanism through which government activities and achievements are announced to the public. At another level, it can operate as a strategic management function that conducts environmental scanning, identifies stakeholder expectations, provides communication intelligence to institutional leaders, facilitates dialogue, manages relationships and evaluates communication outcomes. The difference between these approaches has important implications for governance. Where communication is primarily one-directional, citizens may remain recipients of government information. Where communication incorporates listening, dialogue and feedback, citizens can become active participants in the governance communication process.

The theoretical foundation for examining this distinction is provided by Excellence Theory, developed principally through the work of James E. Grunig and his associates. The theory proposes that public relations can contribute to organisational effectiveness when it is managed strategically, participates in organisational decision-making and facilitates quality relationships between organisations and their publics. The two-way symmetrical model is particularly relevant because it emphasises mutual understanding, dialogue and relationship management rather than communication as a purely persuasive or publicity-oriented activity (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 1992). Although the theory emerged largely from organisational and corporate communication scholarship, its principles provide a useful framework for examining government communication, where accountability and the relationship between public institutions and citizens are central.

The Nigerian context, however, requires the theory to be examined critically rather than applied mechanically. Public institutions operate within administrative, political, legal, cultural and bureaucratic environments that may influence the autonomy and functions of communication professionals. The public relations practitioner may therefore be required simultaneously to serve institutional leadership, communicate government policies, respond to media demands, protect institutional reputation, address public concerns and operate within professional and ethical obligations. These potentially competing expectations make professional identity and strategic positioning important areas of inquiry.

Professionalisation is consequently central to the discussion. The development of public relations in Nigeria has been supported by professional institutions and regulatory arrangements, particularly through the

Nigerian Institute of Public Relations. The professionalisation agenda seeks to establish standards concerning education, competence, ethics and professional practice. Yet the existence of regulatory structures does not automatically eliminate weaknesses in practice. The critical issue is whether professional standards are consistently translated into organisational structures, recruitment practices, career development, ethical conduct, strategic participation and measurable performance within government institutions.

The contemporary Nigerian communication environment has made this question even more significant. Public institutions now operate in an environment characterised by rapid information flows, fragmented media audiences and heightened expectations of transparency and responsiveness. Government communication officers must therefore understand not only traditional media relations but also digital communication, social listening, crisis communication, stakeholder mapping, misinformation management, data-informed communication and communication evaluation. The Federal Government's recent efforts to standardise public-service communication and develop professional communication frameworks further illustrate this changing environment. In May 2025, for instance, the Office of the Head of the Civil Service of the Federation received the Nigerian Public Service Writing Style Manual, designed to promote clarity, consistency and professionalism in official communication across federal public institutions.

The emerging emphasis on citizen trust is equally important. In September 2025, BPSR and NIPR formalised collaboration aimed at strengthening transparency, accountability and citizens' confidence in governance, including strategic communication, stakeholder engagement and mechanisms for obtaining citizens' feedback. This development reinforces the argument that contemporary public relations in government should not be conceptualised solely as the management of institutional image. Rather, it should be examined as part of the broader governance process through which institutions explain policies, listen to citizens, respond to concerns, build relationships and enhance institutional credibility.

Against this background, this seminar examines the place of strategic communication and public relations practice and professionalisation in Nigerian government and public institutions. The central concern is not simply whether PR exists within government institutions, but how it is positioned, practised and professionalised; the extent to which it

participates in strategic decision-making; the degree to which communication is genuinely dialogic and stakeholder-centred; and the institutional conditions that facilitate or constrain professional practice.

The paper therefore approaches public relations as both a communication function and a governance resource. It argues that the professionalisation of PR should be assessed not merely through the presence of PR departments or professional designations, but through the quality of professional competence, ethical practice, strategic participation, stakeholder engagement, research and evaluation. Such an approach makes it possible to distinguish between communication that merely informs citizens about governmental actions and communication that creates structured opportunities for listening, dialogue, feedback and mutual understanding.

The study is significant for three principal reasons. First, it contributes to the academic discourse on strategic communication and public relations by examining professional practice within the distinctive institutional environment of Nigerian government and public institutions. Second, it provides a basis for assessing the extent to which contemporary public-sector communication reflects the principles associated with Excellence Theory and two-way symmetrical communication. Third, it has practical implications for government administrators, communication professionals, professional associations and academic institutions concerned with strengthening professional standards and communication capacity in the Nigerian public sector.

The paper is organised into major sections covering the statement of the problem, objectives and research questions, conceptual clarification, review of related literature, historical development and professionalisation of public relations in Nigeria, theoretical framework, methodology, analysis and discussion, challenges confronting PR practice, prospects for strategic communication and professionalisation, and recommendations. The paper concludes by proposing a strategic and professional orientation to public relations in which communication practitioners are positioned not simply as disseminators of official information but as professional advisers, relationship managers, researchers, strategic communicators and facilitators of constructive engagement between public institutions and citizens.

Statement of the Problem

Public relations practice in Nigerian government and public institutions is beset by a fundamental contradiction: while formal institutional structures for

PR exist including designated departments, professional bodies, and enabling legislation the actual practice of public relations remains largely misaligned with globally recognised standards of professional and ethical communication. The gap between the formal institutionalisation of PR and its substantive practice reflects deep-seated structural, political, and attitudinal challenges that have impeded the professionalisation of the field.

Several interrelated problems characterise this context. First, there exists a widespread conflation of PR with propaganda and political image management in Nigerian public institutions. Government PR practitioners are frequently co-opted into advancing partisan political interests rather than facilitating genuine public communication (Nwosu, 2004; Okafor, 2017). This instrumentalisation of PR not only distorts its professional purpose but also erodes public trust in governmental communication.

Second, the training and professional development of PR practitioners in Nigerian public institutions remain inadequate. Many individuals occupying PR roles in government agencies do not possess formal qualifications in public relations or communication studies, and continuing professional development is inconsistent (NIPR, 2020).

This skills deficit compromises the quality and effectiveness of strategic communication in public institutions.

Third, the regulatory framework for PR practice in Nigeria, while formally established, suffers from weak enforcement. The NIPR Act mandates membership of the Institute for practice, but compliance and disciplinary mechanisms remain inadequate to ensure ethical and professional standards across public institutions (Ajala, 2005).

Fourth, PR practice in Nigerian government is predominantly one-way and asymmetrical characterised by information dissemination from government to citizens rather than genuine dialogue and stakeholder engagement. This model, which Grunig and Hunt (1984) describe as the press agency or public information model, falls significantly short of the two-way symmetrical ideal associated with excellent PR practice. The consequence is that Nigerian public institutions miss opportunities to engage meaningfully with diverse publics, respond to public concerns, and build the relational capital that undergirds democratic governance.

These problems collectively point to a significant gap in the literature on Nigerian PR practice that this paper seeks to address: a theoretically grounded, systematic

examination of the state of PR professionalisation in Nigerian government and public institutions, and the conditions necessary for its transformation.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the historical development of public relations practice in Nigerian government and public institutions.
2. To assess the current state of PR professionalisation in Nigerian public institutions against the standards of the Excellence Theory and Two-Way Symmetrical Model.
3. To identify the structural, political, and attitudinal factors that constrains the professionalisation of PR in Nigerian government.
4. To evaluate the role of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) in advancing professional standards and ethical practice.
5. To propose evidence-based recommendations for the reform and enhancement of PR practice and professionalisation in Nigerian public institutions.

Literature Review

Conceptualising Strategic Communication and Public Relations

The relationship between strategic communication and public relations is one of conceptual overlap and institutional interdependence. Strategic communication, as elaborated by Hallahan et al. (2007), refers to the intentional communicative efforts of organisations in pursuit of their missions. It encompasses marketing communication, political communication, organisational communication, and public relations each contributing a distinctive set of tools and orientations. Public relations, however, occupies a particularly central position within this constellation because of its explicit focus on relationship management between organisations and their multiple publics.

Cutlip, Center and Broom (2006, p. 6) define public relations as "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and the publics on whom its success or failure depends." This definition foregrounds three critical elements: the managerial character of PR, the centrality of relationships, and the recognition of mutual benefit as the ultimate criterion of successful practice. For governmental and public institutions, these elements translate into

responsibilities of transparency, stakeholder engagement, and democratic accountability.

Toth (2009) further distinguishes strategic communication from tactical communication, noting that the former involves deliberate alignment of communication activities with organisational goals and environmental dynamics. In the governmental context, strategic communication therefore encompasses the communication of public policies, the management of government-citizen relations, crisis communication, and the building of institutional legitimacy. These functions are intrinsically connected to the broader imperatives of democratic governance and public trust.

Scholars have also drawn attention to the contested nature of PR as a concept in non-Western contexts. L'Etang (2008) caution against the uncritical application of Anglo-American PR frameworks to African contexts, arguing that local historical, political, and cultural dynamics shape the meaning and practice of PR in ways that require contextual sensitivity. This caution is particularly apposite for Nigeria, where the colonial legacy, ethnic diversity, and distinctive political culture have produced a PR environment that cannot simply be mapped onto Western templates.

Historical Development of Public Relations in Nigeria

The origins of organised public relations practice in Nigeria can be traced to the colonial period, when the British colonial administration employed information and publicity officers to manage the communication needs of colonial governance (Nwosu, 2004). These officers were charged principally with disseminating government information to the colonised population a function that was by definition asymmetrical and propagandistic, given the fundamentally unequal power relations of colonial administration.

Following Nigeria's independence in 1960, the newly constituted Nigerian state inherited these colonial communication structures and adapted them to the needs of post-colonial governance. The Federal Information Service and various state-level information ministries became the primary vehicles for government communication, with an emphasis on promoting national unity and projecting governmental authority. In this early post-independence period, the distinction between PR and government propaganda was largely blurred, as communication was directed primarily at mobilising popular support for government programmes rather than facilitating genuine public dialogue.

The formal institutionalisation of PR as a distinct profession in Nigeria gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s. The Public Relations Association of Nigeria (PRAN) was established in 1963, marking the first organised attempt to define PR as a discrete professional field distinct from journalism and advertising. PRAN laid the groundwork for what would later become the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (Ajala, 2005). The succession of military governments between 1966 and 1999, with brief civilian interludes, significantly shaped the character of PR in Nigerian public institutions during this period. Military governments, lacking democratic legitimacy, relied heavily on information control and image management rather than genuine public engagement, reinforcing asymmetrical communication patterns.

The transition to civilian democratic governance in 1999 created new opportunities and imperatives for PR in Nigerian public institutions. Democratic governance, at least in principle, demands transparent communication, stakeholder participation, and accountability values that align with the ideals of excellent PR practice. Scholars such as Okafor (2017) and Olusegun (2019) have noted, however, that the return to democracy did not automatically transform the character of PR practice in Nigerian public institutions.

Old habits of image management, information control, and politically motivated communication persisted, even as new democratic pressures began to reshape the communicative environment.

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR): Structure, Role, and Limitations

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations (NIPR) was established by Decree No. 16 of 1990, now the NIPR Act, Cap N119, Laws of the Federation of Nigeria 2004. The Institute is mandated to determine the standards of knowledge and skill required of practitioners regulate and control the practice of public relations in Nigeria, and promote the profession in accordance with international best practices. Membership of NIPR is a prerequisite for lawful practice of PR in Nigeria, a provision that underscores the Institute's regulatory authority.

NIPR has made significant contributions to the formalisation of PR education and training in Nigeria. The Institute offers professional examinations leading to the award of the Certificate in Public Relations (CPR) and the Diploma in Public Relations, and it collaborates with Nigerian universities in the development of PR curricula. NIPR also publishes professional codes of ethics designed to guide the

conduct of practitioners, and it maintains disciplinary panels empowered to sanction members for professional misconduct (NIPR, 2020).

Despite these achievements, NIPR faces substantial challenges in fulfilling its regulatory mandate. Ajala (2005) identifies weak enforcement of membership requirements, particularly in government agencies where many individuals practise PR without formal NIPR accreditation, as a critical weakness. The Institute's disciplinary mechanisms have also been criticised as insufficiently vigorous, with few documented cases of practitioners being sanctioned for ethical violations. This enforcement deficit has implications for the overall quality and integrity of PR practice in public institutions.

Udoakah (2014) further highlights the tension between NIPR's professional mandate and the political pressures that shape PR practice in government settings. He observes that NIPR has struggled to insulate professional standards from political interference, particularly in contexts where government PR practitioners are directly appointed by elected officials and are therefore susceptible to political direction. This structural vulnerability compromises the professional independence that is a hallmark of excellent PR practice.

The Institute has also been criticised for insufficient investment in continuing professional development (CPD) and for limited engagement with international PR bodies such as the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA). While NIPR is a member of the GA, the integration of global best practices into Nigerian PR education and training remains incomplete (Olusegun, 2019). These limitations collectively constrain the Institute's capacity to drive the transformation of PR practice in Nigerian public institutions.

Models of PR Practice in Nigerian Government Institutions

Grunig and Hunt's (1984) typology of four PR models press agency/publicity, public information, two-way asymmetrical, and two-way symmetrical provides a useful analytical lens for examining PR practice in Nigerian government institutions. Each model represents a distinct orientation to communication: from the one-directional, truth-optional press agency model to the dialogic, mutually beneficial two-way symmetrical model.

Empirical studies of PR practice in Nigerian public institutions consistently suggest that the press agency and public information models predominate.

Nwosu (2004) found that government PR practitioners in Nigeria are primarily engaged in media relations activities issuing press releases, organising press conferences, and managing the government's public image rather than in the kind of systematic stakeholder research and dialogue that characterises two-way communication. Similarly, Okafor (2017) observed that PR departments in Nigerian federal ministries function largely as publicity units, concerned with projecting a favourable image of government rather than with genuinely engaging citizen concerns.

The dominance of the press agency and public information models in Nigerian government PR is not merely a function of practitioner preferences but reflects deeper structural and political constraints. Government PR departments are typically underfunded, understaffed, and subordinated to political authorities who define communication objectives in terms of image management and electoral advantage rather than public service (Udoakah, 2014). The consequence is a PR practice that is reactive rather than proactive, tactical rather than strategic, and asymmetrical rather than dialogic.

Some scholars have noted emerging elements of two-way communication in Nigerian governmental PR, particularly in the context of digital and social media. The proliferation of social media platforms has created new channels through which government institutions interact with citizens, and some agencies have begun to experiment with more interactive communication approaches (Akinfeleye & Okoye, 2011). However, these developments remain nascent and uneven, and the structural conditions necessary for institutionalised two-way symmetrical PR including organisational cultures that value public input, technical capacity for stakeholder research, and political will for genuine dialogue are not yet consistently present.

Professionalisation, Ethics, and Accountability in Nigerian PR

Professionalisation, understood as the process by which an occupation establishes and enforces standards of knowledge, ethical conduct, and public accountability (Abbott, 1988), is central to the project of transforming PR in Nigerian public institutions. The literature on professionalisation in Nigerian PR identifies several dimensions along which the field has made progress and several along which significant deficits remain.

In terms of educational infrastructure, PR has been incorporated into the curricula of numerous Nigerian universities, with dedicated programmes offered at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The National Universities Commission (NUC) minimum academic standards for mass communication programmes include PR as a core component, reflecting the formal recognition of the field within Nigerian higher education (NUC, 2018). However, the quality of PR education varies significantly across institutions, and the gap between academic preparation and professional practice remains a concern.

Ethical practice is a further dimension of professionalisation that presents challenges in the Nigerian PR context. The NIPR Code of Professional Ethics enjoins members to uphold truth, honesty, and the public interest in their professional activities. In practice, however, PR practitioners in government settings frequently confront ethical dilemmas arising from the tension between professional obligations and political directives. Okugo (2016) documents cases of government PR practitioners being instructed to suppress unfavourable information, fabricate achievements, or misrepresent government policies directives that directly contradict the ethical principles of the profession.

The concept of accountability is closely linked to both professionalisation and ethical practice. Scholars of PR in developing country contexts have emphasised the need for robust accountability mechanisms that hold practitioners responsible not only to their employers but to the broader public interest (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). In Nigeria, the accountability dimension of PR professionalism is particularly salient given the governance challenges including corruption, institutional opacity, and democratic deficits that characterise the public institutional environment. An accountable PR profession, aligned with democratic values and committed to public service, has the potential to contribute meaningfully to governance reform. However, realising this potential requires both external regulatory enforcement and internal professional commitment.

Gender and Diversity in Nigerian PR Practice

The literature on Nigerian PR practice has given increasing attention to questions of gender and diversity, reflecting broader concerns about equity and inclusion in professional fields. Studies have documented the predominance of women in entry-level and middle-level PR positions in Nigerian public institutions, alongside the persistence of gender disparities at senior and managerial levels (Olatunji, 2018). This pattern reflects broader gender inequities in Nigerian public sector employment and professional

life, and it has implications for the character and quality of PR practice since diverse teams are generally associated with more creative, responsive, and inclusive communication strategies.

The intersection of professional identity and gender in Nigerian PR is further complicated by cultural dynamics that shape expectations of women in professional roles. Female PR practitioners in government settings have reported experiencing tensions between professional assertiveness and cultural norms of deference, as well as limited access to mentorship and networking opportunities that are essential for career advancement (Olatunji, 2018). Addressing these dimensions of professional inequality is essential for the comprehensive professionalisation of PR in Nigerian public institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The Excellence Theory

The theoretical anchor of this paper is the Excellence Theory, a comprehensive framework for understanding and evaluating public relations practice developed by James E. Grunig and his associates through a landmark study commissioned by the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation in the 1980s (Grunig, 1992; Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

The Excellence Theory emerged from a large-scale, multi-country empirical investigation into what makes PR practice effective, and it has since become one of the most extensively cited and debated frameworks in PR scholarship.

At its core, the Excellence Theory proposes that excellent PR is characterised by a cluster of organisational and functional attributes that enable PR to contribute meaningfully to organisational effectiveness. Grunig (1992) identifies several key characteristics of excellent PR, including: the elevation of PR to a senior management function; the use of two-way communication with publics; the symmetrical orientation of communication, aiming at mutual understanding between organisations and their publics; integration of PR across the organisation; ethical conduct; and the empowerment of women and minorities in PR roles.

For this paper, the Excellence Theory provides a normative framework for evaluating the state of PR practice in Nigerian government and public institutions. By assessing the degree to which Nigerian governmental PR approximates or diverges from the characteristics of excellent PR as defined by the theory, it is possible to identify specific areas of

deficiency and to formulate targeted recommendations for reform. The theory also offers a developmental perspective, suggesting that PR practice evolves through identifiable stages, from less to more excellent forms, providing a trajectory for professionalisation efforts.

The Excellence Theory has been subject to significant scholarly critique. Critics have questioned its claims to universality, noting that the theory was derived primarily from research conducted in Western, predominantly Anglophone contexts and may not adequately capture the realities of PR practice in non-Western settings (Sriramesh & Verčič, 2009). L'Etang (2008) has challenged the normative assumptions embedded in the theory, arguing that its prescriptions reflect particular ideological commitments that are not self-evidently universal. These critiques are taken seriously in this paper, and the theory is applied with appropriate contextual sensitivity to the Nigerian case, recognising that local political, cultural, and institutional dynamics must inform the interpretation of its prescriptions.

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model

The Two-Way Symmetrical Model, first articulated by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and subsequently elaborated within the Excellence Theory framework, represents the normative ideal of PR communication.

In this model, communication flows in both directions between an organisation and its publics, with neither party's interests systematically privileged over the others. The organisation conducts research to understand public perspectives, adapts its policies and behaviours in response to public concerns, and engages in genuine dialogue rather than merely seeking to persuade or manipulate public opinion.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) contrast the two-way symmetrical model with three less normatively desirable models: the press agentry /publicity model, which uses communication primarily to generate favourable publicity through any available means; the public information model, which disseminates accurate information but in a one-directional manner; and the two-way asymmetrical model, which uses research to craft persuasive communication strategies that serve the organisation's interests without genuine responsiveness to public concerns. These models represent a progression from least to most sophisticated and ethically defensible forms of PR practice.

In the context of Nigerian government PR, the two-way symmetrical model has particular relevance as a normative standard because of its alignment with

democratic values. Democratic governance, as Habermas (1984) elaborates in his theory of communicative action, depends upon the possibility of rational discourse between citizens and governing institutions a discourse characterised by reciprocity, openness to persuasion, and the absence of coercive distortion. The two-way symmetrical model operationalises these communicative ideals within the specific context of organisational communication, providing a practical framework for democratic PR practice in governmental settings.

Murphy (1991) has offered a refinement of the two-way symmetrical model, drawing on game theory to argue that the model is better understood as a "mixed motive" framework in which both parties seek to advance their interests while also recognising the value of mutual adjustment. This nuanced reading of the model is particularly useful for the Nigerian governmental context, where the interests of government institutions and diverse citizen publics do not always converge and where the management of divergent interests is a central challenge of democratic communication.

Applying the two-way symmetrical model to Nigerian government PR reveals a significant gap between ideal and practice. As the literature review has documented, PR in Nigerian public institutions is predominantly asymmetrical, characterised by information dissemination rather than dialogue. Closing this gap requires not only changes in practitioner behaviour but transformations in organisational culture, political will, and regulatory environment transformations that are at the heart of the professionalisation agenda examined in this paper.

Integration of Theoretical Framework with Nigerian Context

While the Excellence Theory and Two-Way Symmetrical Model provide powerful normative and analytical tools, their application to the Nigerian context requires critical mediation. Nigerian scholars of PR, including Nwosu (2004), Okafor (2017), and Udoakah (2014), have consistently noted that the institutional, political, and cultural environment of Nigerian public institutions creates conditions that are structurally resistant to excellent PR practice as defined by these theories.

Sriramesh and Verčič (2009) propose a global PR framework that situates PR practice within its political, economic, cultural, and media environment a framework that is useful for contextualizing the Excellence Theory's prescriptions within the specificities of the Nigerian context.

Their framework draws attention to dimensions such as the level of political freedom, the nature of the media system, cultural values, and the level of economic development as factors that shape the possibilities and constraints of PR practice. In Nigeria, all of these dimensions present challenges to the realization of excellent, two-way symmetrical PR: political freedom is constrained by institutional corruption and elite capture; the media environment, while vibrant, is marked by commercial pressures and political interference; cultural values related to authority and hierarchy may privilege one-directional communication; and resource constraints limit investment in PR capacity.

This paper therefore positions the Excellence Theory and Two-Way Symmetrical Model as aspirational frameworks standards towards which Nigerian PR practice should be directed while recognising that the path towards these standards must be navigated through the specificities of the Nigerian institutional and cultural landscape. The theory's prescriptions are treated not as a blueprint to be mechanically applied but as a set of principles whose realisation requires contextually sensitive strategies for professionalisation and institutional reform.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, library-based research methodology, which involves the systematic collection, analysis, and synthesis of secondary data drawn from peer-reviewed academic journals, authored books, institutional reports, policy documents, and relevant Nigerian legislative texts. The library-based approach is appropriate for the purposes of this study, which aims to examine and synthesise existing knowledge on PR practice and professionalisation in Nigerian government and public institutions, rather than to generate new empirical data through primary fieldwork.

The selection of sources was guided by the criteria of relevance, scholarly credibility, and temporal currency. Priority was given to sources published within the last two decades (2004–2024), with older foundational texts particularly those of Grunig and Hunt (1984) and Grunig (1992) included for their theoretical significance. Nigerian-specific sources were privileged over generic international literature wherever available, in keeping with the contextual specificity of the research objectives. Sources were retrieved from academic databases including EBSCOhost, Google Scholar, and the online resources of the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations.

The analytical approach employed is thematic analysis, a method well-suited to qualitative library

research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis involves the identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurring patterns of meaning across a body of texts. In this study, themes were generated both deductively from the theoretical framework of the Excellence Theory and Two-Way Symmetrical Model and inductively, from patterns observed in the literature on Nigerian PR practice. The resulting thematic structure organises the discussion of findings below.

The limitations of the library-based methodology are acknowledged. Secondary data, by definition, does not allow for the direct investigation of practitioner experiences, organisational dynamics, or the nuances of specific institutional contexts. The findings of this paper are therefore best understood as a synthesis and interpretation of the existing scholarly conversation on Nigerian PR practice, rather than as a direct account of that practice. Future research employing primary data collection methods such as in-depth interviews with government PR practitioners or case studies of specific public institutions would complement and deepen the analysis offered here.

Discussion of Findings

The Character of PR Practice in Nigerian Public Institutions

The synthesis of the available literature on PR practice in Nigerian government and public institutions reveals a consistent pattern: practice is predominantly asymmetrical, predominantly reactive, and predominantly instrumental characteristics that place it firmly within the press agency and public information models described by Grunig and Hunt (1984), and that diverge significantly from the two-way symmetrical ideal of the Excellence Theory.

In Nigerian federal ministries, the PR function is typically lodged within departments variously designated as "information," "public affairs," or "press" units. These departments are staffed by officers whose principal responsibilities include drafting press releases, organising media briefings, managing ministerial social media accounts, and liaising with journalists. These activities, while not without value, represent a narrow and tactical conception of PR that falls far short of the strategic, dialogic, and research-driven practice envisioned by the Excellence Theory (Grunig, 1992).

The reactive character of PR in Nigerian public institutions is particularly noteworthy. Rather than anticipating public concerns and proactively engaging stakeholders, government PR departments typically respond to media reports, political controversies, or public crises after they have materialised.

This reactive posture reflects both a lack of strategic orientation and a lack of the organisational intelligence systematic stakeholder research, environmental scanning, and issues monitoring that excellent PR requires (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2006). Without these intelligence-gathering capacities, PR practitioners are perpetually in a position of catch-up, managing reputational damage rather than building enduring relationships of trust and mutual understanding.

The instrumentalisation of PR for political purposes represents perhaps the most serious obstacle to excellent PR practice in Nigerian public institutions. Scholars across multiple studies have documented the use of government PR departments to advance partisan political agendas promoting the ruling party's image, managing electoral communication, and suppressing information damaging to political principals (Nwosu, 2004; Okafor, 2017). This political instrumentalisation of PR is facilitated by the structural subordination of PR departments to elected political officials, who exercise direct control over communication activities and set the agenda for public information.

Professionalisation: Progress and Persistent Deficits

The professionalisation of PR in Nigerian public institutions presents a picture of partial progress against a backdrop of persistent and deeply rooted deficits. The formal infrastructure of professionalisation the NIPR, university PR programmes, a legislative framework, and a code of ethics is in place, and this infrastructure represents a genuine achievement that should not be minimised. However, the gap between formal institutional arrangements and substantive professional practice remains wide.

In terms of educational preparation, the evidence suggests that a significant proportion of individuals practising PR in Nigerian government agencies do not possess formal qualifications in public relations or a related field. While the NIPR Act requires membership of the Institute as a condition of practice, compliance is uneven, particularly in agencies where political connections rather than professional credentials determine appointment to PR roles (Ajala, 2005). This credentialing deficit has direct implications for the quality of PR practice: practitioners who lack formal grounding in communication theory, ethical principles, and research methods are ill-equipped to deliver the kind of strategic, evidence-based, and ethically informed communication that excellent PR requires. Continuing professional development (CPD) represents a further dimension of professionalisation where significant deficits exist.

The pace of change in the communication environment driven by digital transformation, social media proliferation, and shifting public expectations demand ongoing investment in practitioner learning. Yet the literature suggests that formal CPD programmes for government PR practitioners in Nigeria are limited, and that access to international professional development resources remains constrained by both financial and logistical barriers (NIPR, 2020). The result is a practitioner community whose skills and knowledge base is inadequately updated to meet contemporary communication challenges.

The ethical dimension of professionalisation is perhaps the most complex. The NIPR Code of Professional Ethics provides a formal ethical framework, but its practical implementation is compromised by the political and institutional dynamics described above. Okugo (2016) notes that government PR practitioners often experience "role conflict" a tension between their professional ethical obligations and the expectations of their political superiors and that in most cases this conflict is resolved in favour of political compliance rather than professional ethics. This ethical subordination of PR practitioners to political authority fundamentally undermines the professional integrity of the field.

From the perspective of the Excellence Theory, the most critical deficit in Nigerian PR professionalisation is the absence of what Grunig (1992) terms the "PR worldview" at the level of organisational and political leadership. The Excellence Theory emphasises that PR cannot be excellent in isolation from the broader organisational culture: when senior leadership does not value genuine public engagement, does not understand the strategic importance of PR, and does not provide PR departments with the resources, authority, and independence necessary for effective practice, the prospects for excellent PR are severely limited. In Nigerian public institutions, this leadership support for excellent PR is largely absent, and this absence is the fundamental structural obstacle to professionalisation.

The NIPR and Regulatory Effectiveness

The Nigerian Institute of Public Relations occupies a central but contested position in the professionalisation of Nigerian PR. As the statutory regulatory body for PR practice, the NIPR has both the mandate and the potential to drive the transformation of PR in public institutions. The reality, however, is that NIPR's regulatory effectiveness is significantly constrained by a combination of institutional, financial, and political factors.

The Institute's enforcement of membership requirements is a critical weakness. The NIPR Act mandates membership as a condition of lawful practice, but the Institute lacks the administrative capacity and political backing to enforce this requirement effectively across the public sector. Government agencies routinely appoint individuals without NIPR membership to PR roles, often on the basis of political patronage or personal connections, without consequence (Ajala, 2005). This non-enforcement undermines the professional credentialing function that is central to any regulatory body's authority.

NIPR's disciplinary mechanism, while formally constituted, has been inactive in terms of sanctioning government PR practitioners for professional misconduct. The reasons for this inactivity are partly structural it is politically difficult for a body that depends on government goodwill for its operating environment to sanction government employees and partly resource-related, since the Institute lacks the investigative capacity for systematic monitoring of practitioner conduct. The result is a regulatory framework that is largely symbolic rather than substantively effective.

Despite these limitations, NIPR has made genuine contributions to the development of PR education and awareness in Nigeria. The Institute's annual symposia, professional publications, and advocacy activities have helped to raise the profile of PR as a distinct profession and to articulate standards of excellence that, even if imperfectly realised, provide a reference point for aspiring practitioners. NIPR's membership of the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management also provides a channel for the integration of international best practices into Nigerian PR discourse, even if the practical impact of this integration on government PR practice remains limited.

Digital Communication and New Opportunities for Symmetrical PR

The proliferation of digital and social media platforms in Nigeria has created new opportunities for more dialogic and interactive forms of government communication that approximate the two-way symmetrical model. Social media platforms including Twitter/X, Facebook, Instagram, and more recently TikTok have become significant arenas of government-public interaction in Nigeria, with many federal ministries, agencies, and senior officials maintaining active social media presences.

The potential of digital media for symmetrical PR is considerable: these platforms enable direct communication between government institutions and citizens, allow for rapid feedback and response, and create spaces for genuine public dialogue about governance issues. Some Nigerian government agencies have begun to use social media more interactively, responding to citizen queries, engaging with public criticism, and communicating policy information in accessible formats (Akinfeleye & Okoye, 2011). These developments represent a qualitative shift from the one-directional press release culture of traditional government PR.

However, the realisation of digital media's potential for symmetrical PR in Nigerian public institutions is constrained by several factors. Digital literacy and infrastructure gaps mean that significant portions of the Nigerian population particularly rural communities, older citizens, and those with lower levels of education are not reached by digital government communication, creating inclusion challenges. More fundamentally, the interactive affordances of social media are often deployed superficially in government PR practice: responses to citizen queries may be formulaic rather than genuine, and critical voices may be dismissed or ignored rather than genuinely engaged. The form of two-way communication may be present without its substance.

Furthermore, government social media accounts are frequently managed by political appointees or political communication staff whose primary orientation is towards promoting the government's image rather than facilitating genuine dialogue. The distinction between PR and political communication a distinction that is fundamental to professional PR ethics is often elided in this context, with consequences for the authenticity and credibility of digital government communication. For digital media to genuinely advance the cause of symmetrical PR in Nigerian public institutions, it must be embedded within a broader commitment to organisational dialogue and public engagement that goes beyond the tactical management of social media feeds.

Contextual Factors Shaping Nigerian PR Practice

Drawing on the global PR framework of Sriramesh and Verčič (2009), this section examines the contextual factors that shape PR practice in Nigerian public institutions: the political environment, the media system, cultural dynamics, and economic conditions.

- The Nigerian political environment is characterised by competitive multiparty democracy on the surface, but by significant

concentrations of elite power, institutional patronage, and democratic deficits in practice. The political class's instrumentalisation of government communication for electoral and factional purposes creates an environment that is structurally hostile to professional, non-partisan PR. Government PR practitioners operate within a political context in which their professional independence is systematically constrained, and in which the incentive structures favour loyalty to political principals over commitment to professional ethics.

- The Nigerian media system, while vibrant and pluralistic by African standards, is also characterised by significant challenges that affect the environment of PR practice. Commercial pressures have contributed to the prevalence of transactional journalism particularly the practice of "brown envelope journalism," whereby journalists receive financial inducements from sources including government PR departments (Okafor, 2017). This practice distorts the media environment in which government PR operates, creating perverse incentives for PR departments to invest in financial inducements rather than substantive information and genuine relationship-building with media organisations.
- Cultural dynamics, including respect for authority and hierarchical social structures, may influence the communication expectations and behaviours of both government PR practitioners and their publics in ways that reinforce asymmetrical communication. While it would be an oversimplification to attribute the predominance of one-way communication in Nigerian government PR solely to cultural factors since structural and political factors are equally important cultural dimensions cannot be ignored in any comprehensive account of the PR environment.
- Economic constraints at the institutional level also limit the capacities of government PR departments. Inadequate budgets restrict investment in PR research, professional development, modern communication technologies, and the skilled personnel necessary for excellent PR practice. Resource constraints are particularly acute in subnational government institutions state and local government PR departments where budgetary limitations are most severe and professional capacities most limited.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the place of strategic communication and public relations in Nigerian government and public institutions, with a specific focus on PR practice and professionalisation assessed through the lens of the Excellence Theory and the Two-Way Symmetrical Model. The analysis reveals a PR landscape characterised by significant formal institutionalisation including legislative frameworks, a regulatory body, university-based education, and a code of ethics alongside persistent substantive deficits in professional practice, ethical conduct, and communicative orientation.

The dominant models of PR practice in Nigerian public institutions remain the press a gentry and public information models, characterised by one-way, asymmetrical communication that serves political image management rather than genuine public engagement. The structural conditions that sustain these models political instrumentalisation of PR, weak regulatory enforcement, inadequate professional development, and organisational cultures that marginalise the PR function are deeply embedded in the institutional landscape of Nigerian government and will not be transformed by incremental changes in practitioner behaviour alone.

Nonetheless, the paper identifies genuine opportunities for transformation. The digital communication environment creates new channels for interactive, dialogic government communication that approximate the two-way symmetrical ideal. The global professionalisation of PR, channeled through bodies like the NIPR and the Global Alliance, provides normative resources and international models that can inform Nigerian reform efforts. And the democratic demands of an increasingly informed and assertive Nigerian citizenry create political pressures for more transparent, responsive, and accountable government communication.

Realising these opportunities requires a fundamental reorientation of PR in Nigerian public institutions from a tactical, politically subordinated function to a strategic, professionally autonomous, and ethically grounded practice that serves the public interest. This reorientation is not merely a technical or managerial challenge; it is a political and cultural challenge that requires commitment from the highest levels of government, sustained advocacy from the PR profession, and ongoing scholarly engagement to document progress, identify obstacles, and propose solutions.

The Excellence Theory and Two-Way Symmetrical Model provide a normative horizon for this transformation a vision of what PR in Nigerian public institutions could and should become. Realising this vision will require the contextually sensitive translation of these global frameworks into strategies that are responsive to the specific political, cultural, and institutional realities of Nigerian governance. This paper has sought to contribute to that translation project, and to lay the groundwork for further empirical and theoretical scholarship on PR professionalisation in Nigeria.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are advanced for policymakers, PR practitioners, the NIPR, and academic institutions:

1. **Legislative Reinforcement of NIPR's Regulatory Authority:** The federal government should enact amendments to the NIPR Act to strengthen the Institute's enforcement powers, including provisions for sanctions against government agencies that appoint unaccredited PR practitioners. Compliance with NIPR membership requirements should be made a condition of appointment to all PR roles in the public sector.
2. **Institutionalisation of PR as a Senior Management Function:** Nigerian government agencies should restructure their PR departments to ensure that PR directors have direct access to the chief executive and are involved in strategic decision-making. This restructuring is essential for enabling the strategic, proactive, and research-driven PR practice envisioned by the Excellence Theory.
3. **Investment in Professional Development:** Government agencies should invest in systematic continuing professional development programmes for PR practitioners, including training in stakeholder research, issues management, digital communication, and ethical decision-making. NIPR should develop and certify CPD programmes specifically tailored to the needs of government PR practitioners.
4. **Development of Two-Way Communication Platforms:** Government agencies should invest in formal mechanisms for stakeholder research and public consultation including surveys, focus groups, public hearings, and digital feedback platforms as a foundation for genuine two-way symmetrical communication.

Digital channels should be managed as genuine dialogue platforms rather than as vehicles for one-directional messaging.

5. **Strengthening Ethical Enforcement:** NIPR should establish a dedicated ethics enforcement unit with the mandate and resources to investigate and sanction professional misconduct, including by government PR practitioners. The Institute should also develop an ethics ombudsman function to provide guidance to practitioners facing ethical dilemmas in their professional roles.
6. **Promotion of Gender Equity in PR Leadership:** Government agencies and NIPR should develop and implement policies to advance gender equity in PR leadership roles, including mentorship programmes, flexible work arrangements, and transparent recruitment and promotion criteria. A diverse PR leadership is essential for the inclusive and representative communication that democratic governance demands.
7. **Academic and Research Investment:** Nigerian universities and research institutions should prioritise empirical research on PR practice in public institutions, generating the evidence base necessary to inform policy and professional development. NIPR should establish a research fund to support such research, and should create channels for translating research findings into professional guidance and policy advocacy.

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