

## Exploring Public Relations Practitioners' Actual Practice: Jimma Zonal Government Offices in Focus

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**Abstract:** This study aimed at describing public relations practitioners' actual (existing) practice in terms of roles and models, in Jimma zonal sector offices. The study involved both quantitative and qualitative methods using semi-structured questionnaire, in-depth interview and document analysis as data collection tools. Key informants were selected using purposive sampling technique. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the quantitative data and thematic analyses were employed for qualitative data analysis. The result of the study shows that the contribution of public relation (PR) practitioners in terms of managerial tasks in sector offices was low and they were busy doing technical tasks and playing technician roles. The study also found out that publicity, public information and two-way asymmetrical models were highly practiced and employed. The overall practice of PR practitioners was not effective and did not reach the objectives according to the stated goal in the analyzed document. The result in this regard also revealed that the practice was not receiving due consideration from zonal higher officials and even it was considered to be valueless in their eyes. The public's interest was not the primary consideration of zonal officials' PR activities as most of them had political affiliations. It is, therefore, recommended that PR practitioners and the organizations/ offices/institutes could be professionally and structurally organized; practitioners in particular might get involved in strategic planning and decision making to make the activities of PR more effective.

**Keywords:** PR models; PR practitioners; PR roles; Public relations

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## 1. Introduction

History tells us that Ethiopians have been practicing public relation (PR) activities for centuries even though it was not equated to the modern practice of PR. While utilizing their indigenous communication systems, they acquired their traditional PR knowledge and skills through socialization. Different kinds of indigenous communication existed in Ethiopia amongst different ethnic groups like the one in *Gada* system of Oromo community: a person named “Abbaa Dubbii”, who is among the Gada officials, is equivalent to the current PR. He is a speaker who presents the decision of the presidium to the assembly which is equivalent to the current press secretariat (Workneh, 2001), and *Dagu* communication system of Afar community is a highly developed traditional system of information management (Chege, Jane, Askew, Susan, and Jacinta Muteshi-Strachan, 2004). These are among the few indigenous (traditional) communication of which a spokesperson (the contemporary discipline calls the PR) was assigned to achieve their objectives. These traditional activities have been transferred from generation to generation up to the reign of Emperor Minilik II, the researchers presume.

According to Ministry of Information (1966), “Awaj Negari” (the Herald), which could be described as the medium (the channel) of mass communication in Ethiopia, introduced the drum and drum like voice (an instrument with a remarkable voice) (the Herald). Later on, this was replaced by other media. Supporting the above idea, Des Wilson (2008) sees traditional communication forms like talking drums and wooden drums as mass media because of their ability to reach large numbers of people in Africa. The other scholars associated Wilson’s reality with the history of PRs in Ethiopia. Bereket (2015), a student researcher, eloquently described the time when PR was introduced and practiced in Ethiopia. He mentions Queen Sheba, who traveled to Jerusalem to benefit from King Solomon’s wisdom.

The modern public relations practice is relatively a new and emerging discipline in most developing countries, but it can be argued that it is as old as human civilization. However, the current researchers believe that the practice of PRs is getting consideration in every aspect of life and it is considered as a management function. Based on this assumption, mentioning classical researchers Faxon Company (2018) in their document defined public relations as a management function which tabulates public attitudes, defines policies, procedures and interests of an organization followed by executing a program of action to earn public understanding and acceptance. Furthermore, PRs helps the management to be informed on and responsive to public opinions. As per the review of Geremew (2017), PRs emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public’s interest by helping management to effectively utilize changes, to serve as an early warning system to help anticipate trends, and to use research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

As to Grunig, Grunig, and Dozier (2002), many of the PRs practitioners function at a ‘tactical’ level, implementing communications tasks defined by other people. Though there is growing evidence to suggest that PRs is an important and necessary tool for strategic management, many PR practitioners are signified by having a seat on the board and enjoying the respect and recognition of their peers.

According to Lages and Simkin (2003), the positioning of PRs as a management discipline implies that PRs activities are broader than communication techniques and broader than specialized PRs programs such as media relations, community relations, and others. There are arguments that PRs is not effectual when practitioners master the technical skills without the understanding of when and why to use PRs to make communication more competent for organizations.

As to the practical experience of the researchers, the issue of public relations practices in different countries, especially in the developing world, has been misunderstood within the field of communication in general and public relation in particular. Moreover, practitioners’ and all others do not have clear understanding about the role of PR practitioners; as being a technician or managerial one. The prevailing consensus is that most public relations practitioners work as technicians rather than as managers. In a similar vein, Dozier (1992) argued that unless public relations activities are

considered in a management role, the organizational influence of understanding the role of public relations would be minimized.

Kotler and Armstrong (1994) observed that public relations is generally being treated as a marketing stepchild, an after-thought to more serious promotional planning. This type of thinking seems true in Ethiopia's public relations activities. This means PRs is not an independent organization the practitioners always promote the organization's accomplishments.

For researchers like Geremew (2017), it seems that PR in Ethiopia is less significant in the eyes of top-level management in an organization. As a result, the concept of the PRs practices is not in the right track (it is not as per the standard of the theory). In spite of significant changes in the focus and practice of PRs during the last decade in Ethiopia, the term is still misused and misunderstood in many organizations. It is often wrongly associated with propaganda, publicity, and manipulation. Similarly, Rosenberg (2013) argued that many people wrongly assume that PRs is preoccupied with image making in the sense of creating a false front or cover-up.

**Defining public relations:** Scholars like Theaker and Yexley (2017), in Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, and Agee (2003: 7) have been demarcating the boundaries of the definitions that could be given to public relations. They briefed the concept as follows:

Public relations is a distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain lines of communication, understanding, acceptance, and cooperation between an organization and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and ethical communication techniques as its principal tools.

Therefore, the freer society becomes, the more regulated it becomes, and the more citizens are expected to act responsibly. Therefore, PRs officers should listen to society and focus on how the reputation of the organization can be managed effectively (Ophukah, 2003).

The following definition by Ogbuagu (2003: 9) defines PRs in terms of listening to the public and acting accordingly:

The management function which evaluates public attitudes identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes programs of action to earn public understanding and acceptance, including a policy of enlightened self-interest by which process a business or organization continually tries to win the goodwill and understanding of its customers, employees and the public at large.

Many other definitions have gained recognition over the years. Among them the following definition which gained wide acceptance according to newsletter of PR News are "PRs is the management function that identifies, establishes, and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and the various public on whom its success or failure depends" (Wilcox *et al.*, 2003).

Similarly, Grunig and Hunt (1984) explain that most of the definitions of PRs contains two elements: communication and management.

Thus, so many scholars defined PRs as the management of communication between an organization and the public.

As a result, PRs must be a two-way activity: listening to what the public thinks and projecting the organization's messages based on the public's thinking. It follows that PRs activities can only be effective and influential where the aims of the organization are compatible with the aims of the public (Haywood, 2002).

**Models of public relations:** A review of current PRs texts indicate that the field of PRs continues to look to other disciplines for its theory base. However, Grunig and Hunt (1984) offer an excellent description of the four historic models of PRs practice (Botan and Hazleton, 1989).

For Botan and Hazleton (1989), scholars like Grunig and Hunt (1984) offer four theoretical models of PRs that are based on the direction of the flow of communication between an organization and its publics and the nature and the potential that it has to influence the public. Grunig and Hunt (1984) specify two developments in PRs. First, a two-way communication (listening and speaking to the

public) has at least begun to replace one-way (speaking only). Second, PRs goals have extended beyond enhancing awareness and information level to persuasion, and ideally to relationship building. Progress toward a two-way communication has been somewhat more rapid on the whole, and more universal than progress toward a relationship building approach (Culbertson and Chen, 1996). Researchers like Grunig and Hunt have written that the practice of PRs typically falls into one of the following four models (Guth and Marsh, 2005).

**Press agency/publicity model:** According to Grunig and Hunt (1984), the first model, press agency/ publicity, finds its roots in the work of press agents or publicists prior to the 1900s. The press agency/publicity and the public information models both stress information via outgoing information from the organization to the public and the relative absence of feedback. They are distinguished from one another primarily based on the former's willingness to advocate a position at the expense of computing truth and objectivity. Some managers act as a one-way communicator constantly transmitting but never receiving; they all have mouths but no ears (Haywood, 2002).

In this role, practitioners focus on media relations. They tend to be technicians-as opposed to strategist-interested in short-term gains. Often, their focus is on promoting the organization, and they believe that the generation of publicity is their primary purpose (Guth and Marsh, 2005). Little attention is paid to insure either accuracy or a favorable reputation. The press agency model applies when a PRs program strives only for favorable publicity in the mass media, often in a deceptive way (Culbertson and Chen, 1996).

Propaganda is not about communication between an organization and its public; it is about the organization. Its first aim is to dissolve communication between people in order to disable their ability to form the public. If propaganda does not succeed in disabling the public, then it does not attempt to communicate with them but to discourage them from pursuing their cause. Propaganda, therefore, cannot be accepted as a form of PRs. The major tool of propaganda is not communication, which is by definition something two-sided, but information that helps to create constraints to communication or one-sided information flow described in the classical communication theories as a sender-receiver model (Culbertson and Chen, 1996).

**Public information model:** The second model, public information, developed around 1900. Feedback is not an essential element in this PRs model (Botan and Hazleton, 1989). In this model, practitioners act like reporters within their own organizations. Their focus is on the dissemination of objective and accurate information. These individuals tend to be tacticians rather than counselors (Guth and Marsh 2005). The public-information model uses "journalism-in-residence" to disseminate relatively objective information through the mass media and controlled media such as newspapers, brochures, and direct mail. The public information model does not volunteer negative information (Culbertson and Chen, 1996).

Public information differs from press agency because the intent of public information is to inform rather than to press for promotion and publicity, but the communication is still essentially one-way. Today this model represents PRs practices in government, educational institutions, nonprofit organizations, and even in some corporations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984).

**Two-way asymmetrical model:** The third level in the development of PRs is the two-way asymmetric model that emerged in the 1920s. The communication obtained from the receivers is used to tell management what their publics will accept. Grunig and Hunt (1984: 7) noted "the organization does not change as a result of PRs; it attempts to change public attitudes and behavior." The model considers PRs to be a scientific persuasion. That is it uses available social science knowledge and audience research to construct a persuasive campaign. The feedback is primarily to help construct a better message (Botan and Hazleton 1989). In this model, the role of practitioners is to bring the target publics around to a certain way of thinking through advocacy (Guth and Marsh, 2005).

Expertise or knowledge in the communication department performs these tasks: persuading a public that the organization is right on an issue, getting the public to behave as the organization wants, manipulating the public scientifically and using attitudes theory in a campaign. In PRs, the broad goal

is to persuade the public to behave, as the organization wants them to behave before beginning a PRs program. Besides, one should examine attitude surveys to ensure the organization and its policies are described in ways its publics would be most likely to accept. After completing a PRs program, research should be done to determine how effective this program has been in changing people's attitudes (Rice and Atkin, 2001). The two-way asymmetric model uses research to develop messages that are likely to persuade strategic publics to behave as the organization wants (Culbertson and Chen, 1996).

Grunig and Hunt (1984) stated that PRs practitioners use surveys, interviews, and focus groups to measure public relationships so that the organization can design PRs programs that will gain the support of key publics. Although feedback is built into the process, the organization is much more interested in having the public adjust to the organization than the reverse.

In an asymmetrical worldview, power in decision-making tends to remain on the side of the organization and it is not shared with public. An authoritative organizational culture arises from an asymmetrical worldview (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006).

**Two-way symmetrical model:** Best practices in PRs suggest that an asymmetrical system for communication is desirable in an organization. The two-way symmetrical model allows for more input from the public that can provide innovative solutions and corrective discourse, both essential for sound strategic PR management.

An impediment to the symmetric model is the imbalance in power among the publics and in their relationship to management. Nevertheless, the symmetrical model is offered here as one to which an organization can aspire (Newsom, Turk and Kruckeberg, 2004). There is a movement throughout the world from one-way to two-way communication and more emphasis on knowledge and persuasion as a part of relationship building (Ibid). One reason the two-way symmetrical model for PRs is seen as desirable is that it allows for input from all affected publics and for negotiations about policy decisions (Ibid.). Only a two-way symmetrical model represented a break from the predominant worldview that PRs is a way of manipulating the public for the sake of the organization (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002). PRs philosophy puts much emphasis on the need for two-way communication (Black, 2004).

The two-way symmetric model is marked by its interactive characteristic. No longer are communications with public asymmetrical; instead, they are truly two-sided (Botan and Hazleton 1989). In the two-way symmetric model, however, both the flow of communication and influence between the organization and its publics is more balanced. Grunig and Hunt refer to the desired state of mutual understanding that is quite similar to what other authors (such as Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006) have referred to as social responsibility.

Essentially, the public has as much potential for influence over the organization as the latter has over the public. The role of PRs practitioners is therefore to act as the agent for the creation of mutual understanding (Botan and Hazleton, 1989).

Communication must be a two-way process; otherwise, strictly speaking, it is not communications. Feedback is vitally important to check how well one's messages are accepted by the audiences to be influenced (Haywood, 2002). In this role, practitioners serve as the catalyst for conflict resolution and consensus. Their goal is to encourage two-way communication that leads to mutual understanding and cooperation (Guth and Marsh, 2005).

The open system model uses "two-way symmetric" approaches, meaning that communication is two-way and that information exchange causes changes on both sides of the organization-public relationships. Thus, organizations employing open systems PRs maintain their relationships by adjusting and adapting themselves and their publics to ever-changing social, political, and economic environments (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006).

Here the practitioner and client listen carefully to key publics, but it is not primarily to enhance persuasion. Relationship building, not persuasion, is the primary goal. Research suggests that all four types of PRs are alive and well in various places. All play a role in specific situations. However,

Grunig (1992) reported substantial evidence that truly excellent PRs emphasize the two-way models, particularly the symmetric version (Culbertson and Chen, 1996).

The asymmetrical worldview incorporates the ideas of negotiation, conflict resolution, and compromise in operating procedures of an organization. The organization is not only self-oriented but also oriented on satisfying the interests of the strategic public. Therefore, desires and goals are set in a shared fashion by incorporating some of what the public was not. Participative organizational cultures are based on a symmetrical worldview that values dialogue and two-sided input (Cutlip, Center and Broom, 2006). According to these scholars, excellent PRs departments have practitioners who have learned a theoretical body of knowledge in PRs.

The two-way symmetrical model conceptualizes both the persuasive and relationship-building goals of PRs (Grunig, Grunig and Dozier, 2002). Other scholars have tested the two-way symmetrical model in both Western and non-Western countries but they came up with mixed results (e.g., Liu and Horsley, 2007; Holtzhausen and Voto, 2002; Rhee, 2002; Robert, 2005; Wakefield, 2000). On the other hand, Grunig (1992) followed Hellweg and Berman's (1989) suggestion and redesigned the four models in terms of two continua: Craft and Professional PRs. In other words, communication seem to be taken as an end of everything for practitioners of Craft PRs. To them, the purpose of PRs is simply to get publicity or information into the media or other channels of communication. Practitioners of professional PRs, in contrast, rely on a body of knowledge as well as technique and see PRs as having a strategic purpose for an organization: to manage conflict and build relationships with strategic publics that limit the autonomy of the organization.

Based on the above background information, this particular study aims at answering the following questions: (1) What are public relations practitioners' roles in Jimma Zonal Government offices? (2) Which model of PRs is being used by Jimma Zonal Government offices practitioners?

## **2. Research Methods**

### **2.1. Research Design and Approach**

The study was conducted in Jimma town zonal sector offices from January 15 to June 2018. The study used a cross-sectional exploratory study design to investigate the research problem. Because it is a one-time or snapshot kind of the study that did not use a longitudinal study design. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used to address the study' objectives so that triangulation of the findings could be possible. The quantitative approach involved the generation of data in quantitative form which can be subjected to quantitative analysis. Qualitative approach was used to provide insights into the respondents' that help the researchers to identify different realities or to understand the nature of the case.

### **2.2. Sample Size, Sampling Techniques and Procedures**

#### **2.2.1. Sample size**

To study the PRs roles and models, the participants were those PRs practitioners and managers or deputies of each zonal office. There were 33 (thirty three) sector offices extracted from four clusters in Jimma zone and an independent one named Jimma zone government communication affairs office. These sectors were according to the classification in Oromia yearbook (2008) that mentions 4 (four) major clusters were practiced into the current zonal structure in Oromia. In this case, there was a deputy in each of these sectors; they work as a PR personnel, and also there was an office where both managers and deputies were working together. On the other hand, if there were no deputy, the managers would be serving as PR practitioners in their respective offices. Accordingly, 5(five) sector offices had only managers while 27 (twenty-seven) sector offices had the deputy working as a PR practitioners in the office. Adding to that, in Jimma Zone Government Communication Affairs Office (JZGCAO) and Jimma Zone Administration Office (JZAO), there were seven (7) and six (6) PR practitioners, respectively totaling forty-five (45) participants. Thus, the researchers enrolled all the

practitioners using the lottery method since they were a small number of practitioners in the study area.

### **2.2.2. Sampling technique and procedures**

The PR practitioners who involved in the study were selected purposively especially those who involved in providing information about the actual practice were considered as key informants. Those informants were deputies, managers, and team leaders who were purposively selected. As a result, the practitioners in JZGCAO, JZAO, and Jimma Zone Police Commission (JZPC) were selected for the interview. As a result, seven (7) individual informants; three (3) from JZGCAO, three (3) from JZAO, and one (1) from JZPC were selected accordingly. JZGCAO was chosen because it is the zonal government's spokesperson and the organization which is responsible to coordinate all the PRs activities in the area. The other sectors (JZAO and JZPC) were for their human resources and a well-equipped, organized, and existence of independent PRs team in their office.

## **2.3. Data Collection Methods**

### **2.3.1. Questionnaire**

The main goal of the questionnaire was to determine PRs model usage and PRs practitioners' roles in their respective offices in the study area. The questionnaire contained partially adopted items from Castelli (2007). It consisted of three (3) parts. The first part was dedicated to personal information of the respondents, such as sex, work experience, position, and academic qualifications, and part two required the respondents to answer issues related to the roles of PRs. In the third part, respondents were asked to indicate the models of PRs utilized in their respective offices. The rationale to adopt a five-point Likert scale was to generate comprehensive responses from the subjects providing them with an opportunity to indicate a range of options.

### **2.3.2. In-depth interview**

Since the aim of this study was to explore the practice of PRs practitioners and their recommendation, so interviewing the PRs practitioners in their respective sectorial offices was one way to achieve the desired objective. An extensive in-depth interview helped the researchers to know deeply how and why the practitioners answered specific and sensitive issues. These interviews were audio-recorded.

In addition, managers, deputies, and team leaders who worked in JZGCAO were interviewed. The researchers chose the JZGCAO because it was the zonal government's PRs officer, and as an office, it was responsible for coordinating all the PRs activities in the area. The office produced its own magazines, newspapers, gave press releases, conducted meetings with people, and had its own social media presence to accomplish its organizational objectives and goals. In addition, due to their human resources facilities and an independent and a well-equipped PRs office in the study area, other interviewees were selected from JZAO (the office head, deputy, and team leader) and JZPC (communication officer).

### **2.3.3. Document analysis**

The aim of this document analysis was to understand what was written and to see how PRs officers do their job in their respective offices. These documents included editorial policy, guidelines/manuals, ethical standards, strategic and yearly plans, performance reports, Oromia yearly book (2010), and Growth and Transformation Plan II (GTP II). This helped the researchers to compare PRs officers' practices, analyze the issues from different perspectives and to get the full picture of the issue under investigation. Any document material that adds value in answering the research questions was assessed and analyzed. To do this the researchers used a prepared checklist that contains pertinent issues that help to analyze the documents qualitatively.

## **2.4. Data Analysis and Procedure**

The quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Percentages, frequencies, and standard deviations (SD) were calculated. These were computed using SPSS version 22.0 for Windows to obtain summary descriptive statistics. Mean scores were determined for Likert items. Reliability analysis was also conducted to determine the Cronbach's alpha value.

Data analysis began with obtaining descriptive statistics for the data set. After analyzing the descriptive statistics, the researcher conducted a reliability analysis to determine the Cronbach's alpha value. Cronbach's alpha was used to determine how the variables under the study formed constructs among themselves, and whether or not to what extent the variables belonged together.

A Cronbach's alpha 0.625 was considered as a threshold of an acceptable level and an alpha value of 0.70 and above was considered very reliable (Stacks, 2002). When a Cronbach's alpha did not meet the threshold of 0.625, the variable that tested the lowest score was eliminated to increase the alpha. The data collected using an in-depth interview, open-ended questions and review was coded and thematically analyzed. These methods were applied to establish and/or explore the gaps or differences and additional knowledge between quantitatively collected data and the qualitative one.

## **3. Results**

According to the data obtained from the quantitative tools, socio-demographically, most respondents were males, comprising 69.0% of PR personnel and 60.2% of employees. In most government offices, the number of male employees was larger than female ones; the practitioners in the study setup were mainly males. As far as age is concerned, the majority of the respondents (66.6%) were with an age group of 21-40, and the larger proportion of employee respondents were (66.7%) within the age group of 21-40, and most PR personnel (98%) had either a diploma or degree level qualification. Regarding the position of practitioner respondents, most of them (71.4%) were deputy and PR personnel while the rest of them (29.6%) were managers and PR personnel.

The demographic result shows that the PRs personnel from both groups of individuals participating in this study were young in age. Similarly, these practitioners had either first degree or diploma, and this shows that the study participants were educated and in their prime.

### **3.1. Public Relations Practitioners' Roles**

The next series of questions was about PRs practitioners' role as PRs or communication professionals and to rate how often they do each of the items. The result is presented separately according to the constructs, namely the four roles identified in the literature. Items defining each role are summarized and presented in.



Table 1. PRs practitioners' roles as assessed by roles related items at JZSO, March 2018.

Description of the item	Scale (rating)			Mean score
	Always	Neutral	Never	
How do you rate your role in the PRs? Rate how often you do each of the following items.				
A. Technician role items $\alpha= 0.625$				
I produce brochures and other publications.	76.2%	2.4%	21.4%	2.54
I am the person who writes communication materials.	61.9%	14.3%	23.8%	2.38
I do photography and graphics for communications materials.	50%	16.7%	33.3%	2.16
I edit or review grammar and spelling in materials written by other departments.	52.4%	26.2%	21.4%	2.30
			Overall mean	2.35
B. Managerial role items $\alpha= 0.539$				
I take responsibility for the success or failure of my organization's PRs programs.	40.5%	16.7%	42.9%	1.97
I make communication policy decisions for my organization.	31%	4.8%	64.3%	1.66
I am hold accountable for the success or failure of PR programs.	31%	11.9%	57.1%	1.73
Involve in developing strategies for solving PRs and communication problems.	28.6%	7.1%	64.3%	1.64
Because of my experience and training, I am considered as the organization's expert in solving PRs problems.	38.1%	35.7%	26.2%	2.11
			Overall mean	1.87
C. Media Relations role items $\alpha= 0.688$				
I maintain media contacts for my organization.	73.8%	14.3%	11.9%	2.61
I keep others in the organization informed of what the media reports about our city and important issues.	54.8%	31%	14.3%	2.4
I am responsible for placing news releases.	64.3%	11.9%	23.8%	2.4
I use my journalistic skills to figure out what the media will consider newsworthy.	57.2%	19%	23.8%	2.33
			Overall mean	2.43
D. Communication Liaison role items $\alpha= 0.554$				
I create opportunities for management to hear the views of internal and external publics.	69%	21.4%	9.5%	2.59
I provide decision makers with suggestions, recommendation, and plans.	33.3%	0%	66.7%	1.67
I am a senior counsel to top decision makers when PR issues are involved.	42.9%	31%	26.2%	2.17
			Overall mean	2.14

Table 1 shows PRs practitioners' roles as assessed by roles-related items at JZSO. As is shown in the table, the majority of the respondents (76.2%, mean score 2.45) stated that they were always involved in producing brochures, pamphlets, and other publications (Table 1). A larger proportion of

respondents were also involved in writing communication materials (61.9%, mean score 2.38), doing photography and graphics for communications materials (50%, mean score 2.16), and edit or review grammar and spelling in materials written by other departments (52.4%, mean score 2.30). The overall mean score (2.35) of these items defines the roles of PRs officers as having a technician's role.

Regarding PRs practitioners as managers, the findings indicated a larger proportion of the respondents were not involved in making communication policies and decisions for their organizations (64.3%, mean score 1.67) and did not hold accountability for the success or failure of PRs programs (57.1%, mean score 1.73). Table 3 shows that the managerial roles represented and characterized by its mean score of 1.87.

Similarly, the majority of the respondents were always involved in maintaining media contacts for their organization (73.8%, mean score 2.61), followed by those responsible practitioners for placing news releases (64.3%, mean score 2.4), and kept others in the organization informed of what the media reports about their city and important issues (54.8%, mean score 2.4). The overall mean of the above items describing the media relations role of PRs practitioners was 2.43.

Moreover, the result concerning PRs practitioners as liaison officers as is shown in the table above indicates that a significant majority of the respondents were always working to create opportunities for the management to hear the views of internal and external publics (69%, mean score 2.59). Again, a larger proportion of the respondents were senior counsels to top decision-makers when communication or PRs issues were involved (42.9%, mean score 2.17), and even though the practitioners were not making communication policy decisions, they provided decision-makers with suggestions, recommendations, and plans (33.3%, mean score 1.67). The overall mean score of these items defining the PRs communication liaison role was 2.14.

As can be understood from the in-depth interview, the informants described their experiences and roles as practitioners being mostly of technicians. Only one key informant from GCAO expressed that he had a managerial role to play. The key informant who was a professional PRs practitioner from GCAO stated his roles as follows.

We are playing managerial roles. We coordinate PRs practitioners in the sector offices; we prepare a program in our offices based on the yearly strategies we have; we follow PRs programs if they are being implemented or not; and we conduct research before and after implementing the program. In case there is an issue, we take measures like informing the sector that is responsible to communicate the stakeholders. Though, we also do technical tasks like preparing events.

On the other hand, the same informant explained the role of practitioners in the other sectors saying:

PRs practitioners in other than GCAO are not playing the managerial role at all. This is because the practitioner does not have his/her own team to work with, so they are practicing PRs as an additional job, and they don't have a training to do such tasks.

Similarly, a 45-year-old key informant and PRs officer, with 14 years of work experience described their roles as follows.

Even though we are equipped with infrastructure, we are limited only to play a technical role that involves taking photos, putting notice, writing news releases for different media and organizing events. We have no participation in crisis communication and acts related to it. I feel nothing in this office.

Therefore, from this response we can understand that the existence of PRs in this office is not that much useful.

Additionally, the recorded documents (see under document analysis) by the practitioners also showed that PRs practitioners are busy doing technical activities in their offices. However, there are sets of programmed managerial roles that have been stated in their documents that come from the higher officials. These roles are like taking parts in solving issues, communicating crisis, making communication policy in their office etc. The document analysis also indicated that the practitioners have the authority to prepare government information and communication policy in a strategic way (from the strategic document) and implement it if permitted.

### 3.2. Public Relations Practitioners' Model Usage Analysis

The next series of questions were about PRs practitioners' model usage as a PRs or communication professional and they were intended to see how the practitioners rate themselves how often they practice each of the items. The result is presented separately according to the constructs, namely press agency, public information, two-way symmetrical, and two-way asymmetrical models are identified. Items defining each model are summarized and presented in Table 2.

Table 2. PRs Models used by respondents as assessed by PRs models items, JZSO, March 2018.

Description of the item	Scale (rating)			Mean score
How the following statements describe the practice of PR in your office as a whole?				
Press Agency $\alpha= 0.769$	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean
In our organization, PRs and publicity mean essentially the same thing.	66.7%	21.4%	11.9%	2.54
The PRs purpose is to get publicity for us.	88.1%	7.1%	4.8%	2.83
We determine success by the number of people who attend an event or use a new service.	85.7%	11.9%	2.4%	2.83
Convincing a reporter to publicize your organization.	73.8%	11.9%	14.3%	2.59
Getting your organization's name into the media.	71.4%	14.3%	14.3%	2.57
Keeping bad publicity from a staged event.	54.8%	19%	26.2%	2.28
Getting maximum publicity from a staged event.	59.5%	21.4%	19%	2.4
Performing as journalists inside your organization.	69%	9.5%	21.4%	2.47
			Overall mean	2.56
Public Information Items $\alpha= 0.662$	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean
In our office, PRs is more of a neutral disseminator of information than an advocate for the organization.	40.5%	16.7%	42.9%	1.97
Our PRs disseminate accurate information without volunteering unfavorable one.	85.7%	9.5%	4.8%	2.8
Keeping a news clipping is the only way to determine the success of our programs.	61.9%	23.8%	14.3%	2.47
In our workplace, everyone is so busy writing news stories or publications and no time to do research.	38.1%	33.3%	28.6%	2.09
Providing objective information about your organization.	61.9%	21.4%	16.7%	2.45
Understanding the news values of journalism.	73.8%	11.9%	14.3%	2.59
Preparing news stories that reporters will use.	73.8%	21.4%	4.8%	2.69
Producing and disseminating information with less regard for feedback.	54.8%	11.9%	33.3%	2.21
			Overall mean	2.5

Description of the item	Scale (rating)			Mean score
	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Mean
Two-way Asymmetrical $\alpha= 0.530$				
Before starting PRs program, we conduct research to determine public attitude toward our organization, and how those attitudes might be changed.	21.4%	14.3%	64.3%	1.57
After completing a PR program, we conduct research to determine how effective the program has been in changing people's attitudes.	73.8%	19%	7.1%	2.67
Before starting a PRs program, we conduct surveys or informal research to find out how much our management and their publics understand each other.	61.9%	16.7%	21.4%	2.4
In PRs, our broad goal is to persuade publics to behave as our organization wants them to behave.	78.6%	9.5%	11.9%	2.67
Manipulating publics scientifically.	9.5%	38.1%	52.4%	1.57
Persuading a public that your organization is right on an issue.	64.3%	23.8%	11.9%	2.52
			Overall mean	2.14
Two-way Symmetrical $\alpha= 0.556$				
Before start of PRs program, we look at attitude surveys to make sure we describe our organization and our policies in ways our publics are most likely to accept.	19%	16.7%	64.3%	1.54
Our PRs provides mediation to help our managers and their publics negotiate conflicts.	33.3%	9.5%	57.1%	1.76
The purpose of PRs is to change the attitudes and behaviors of our management as much as it is to change the attitudes of the public they affect.	26.2%	9.5%	64.3%	1.61
PRs is to develop mutual understanding between our management and the public's they affect.	7.1%	21.4%	71.4%	1.35
Helping management to understand the opinion of particular publics.	11.9%	23.8%	64.3%	1.48
			Overall mean	1.54

Table 2 presents the results of the kinds of PRs models being utilized in the study area. A significant proportion of respondents concluded that the purpose of PRs is to get publicity for their office or organization (88.1%, mean score 2.83). They determine how successful a PRs campaign was by the number of people who attended an event or use a new service (85.7%, mean score 2.83). The overall mean score of these items characterizing press agency was 2.56. This means that the press agency model is practiced more dominantly since most respondents agreed to the items. The Cronbach alpha for these items describing the press agency model was  $\alpha=.769$ . This is to mean that the items can be adopted and used to measure the variable under study.

Regarding the items related to the public information model of PRs (Table 2), a significant majority of the respondents indicated that their PRs officers disseminate accurate information without volunteering unfavorable one (85.7%, mean score 2.8) and prepare news stories that reporters will use (73.8%, mean score 2.69). In addition to these, a large proportion of the respondents commented that they provide objective information about their organization (61.9%, mean score 2.45) and produce and disseminate information with less regard for feedback (54.8%, means score 2.21). The overall mean score of these items describing the public information model was 2.5. This shows that the public information model of PR is the most dominant PR model in the study area. The Cronbach alpha for

these items describing the public information model was  $\alpha=.662$ . This means that the items used to measure the public information model can be adopted and used to measure the variable for further study.

With regard to the two-way asymmetrical model items of PRs, the majority of the respondents commented that they conduct research to determine how effective their programs have been in changing people's attitudes (73.8%, mean score 2.67) and persuading the publics to behave as their organization wants them to behave (78.6%, mean score 2.67). Similarly, a larger proportion of the respondents indicated that they conduct surveys or informal research to find out how much their management and publics understand each other (61.9%, mean score 2.4) and persuade a public that their organization is right on an issue (64.3%, mean score 2.52). The overall mean score of these items depicting the two-way asymmetrical model was 2.52. This result shows that the two-way asymmetrical model of PR is a dominantly practiced PR model in the study area. The Cronbach alpha for these items describing the two-way asymmetrical model was  $\alpha=.530$  (Table 2).

Regarding the items characterizing the two-way symmetrical model of PRs, the findings indicated that a larger proportion of the respondents objected to the following notions. Slightly over seventy percent (71.4%) of the respondents discounted the statement that "the purpose of PR is to develop mutual understanding between the management and the public's they affect" (mean score 1.35). Nearly two-third (64.3%) of the respondents also rejected the notions that state "we look at attitude surveys to make sure we describe our organization and our policies in ways our publics are most likely to accept" (mean score 1.54) and "our PRs provides mediation to help our managers and their publics negotiate conflicts" (57.1%, mean score 1.76). The overall mean of these items characterizing two-way symmetrical was 1.54. This shows that the two-way symmetrical model of PR is not practiced since the mean score is below 2.5 (the cut point). The Cronbach alpha for these items describing the two-way symmetrical model was  $\alpha=.556$  (Table 2).

As the in-depth interview reveals, the informants described their communication model as two-way communication system. One of the key informants explained the model as follows: "In our office we are using the two-way communication model in order to make the communication flows in two directions from the government to the public and from the public to the government."

Another informant also described the model saying:

We are following two-way communication model to address public issues. Moreover, we use this model to know more our public emotions and motives. So, we use this model for our interest. Meaning that, in order to continue the development in the country we had to know the public's intention.

Still, another key informant stated that:

We use two-way communication system to secure our interest against the public. We have to know the public more so we conduct research before and after applying a program and we also do it to know the publics' emotion towards the program and we make them believe that our program is correct or we modify the program. However, there is a situation where there is only one way model is applied depending on the behavior of the programs.

Similarly, according to the reviewed documents (see under document analysis), PRs practitioners follow a two-way communication model. This means a communication system of information flow from government to the public and from the public to the government conveyed through the practitioners and other stakeholders in each sector offices. Development, security, democracy, and good governance are the main pillars of the government. Having a two-way communication will help the public to see what the government is doing and work with the government in different projects that will change their life. The two-way communication also helps the PR practitioners to influence the country's political issues. This will help the government as well to let the public believe in it. However, the model is used to protect the interest of the government on the public.

#### 4. Discussion

The main objective of this study was to find out the practice of PRs practitioners in terms of roles and PRs models used in Jimma Zone sector offices. To achieve the objective a set of 16 items questionnaire that comprises four variables (the four roles of PR) was used to investigate the roles of PR practitioners in their office. Based on global literature, (four) 4 major roles were identified for the current study. These were managerial, technician, media relations, and communication liaison roles (Grunig, 1992). The measuring items were adopted from other studies and proved reliable.

Accordingly, the result showed that the practitioners are discharging their technician roles with (2.35 mean score) or tasks such as taking photos, writing speeches, and producing and disseminating information. The second dominant role that PRs officers had was the media relations role (with a 2.43 mean score) that involved maintaining media contact for their organization and being responsible for placing news releases. On the other hand, the managerial role of PRs officers was less practiced with the mean score 1.87. It was found that the contribution and involvement of the respondents in managerial tasks such as contributing to developing strategic planning in their office, managing crisis, and scanning and monitoring relevant environmental developments were low as manifested by low mean score.

This has been substantiated by the findings from the qualitative study; the data from the qualitative approach prevails that PR practitioners have little contribution in overall practice and they are mostly working technical activities.

Similarly, a local study conducted in Harar and Dire Dawa by Geremew (2017) has also demonstrated that PRPs are engaged mainly in technical activities. The study illustrated that PRPs are rarely involved in strategic planning, decision-making, and following up the implementation of plans in their organizations. It is also reported that the contributions of PRPs in strategic planning rarely exist due to a lack of PR professionals. This resulted in the confusion of recognizing PRs officers as communication experts and/or as management body (part of the management).

Geremew's (2017) finding is similar to the situation of the current study setup, in that only 11 (26.2%) respondents were PR professionals. On the other hand, the study in the USA by Castelli (2007) showed that the practitioners were greatly playing managerial roles. The respondents in this study asserted that they contribute to creating communications policies and solving PRs problems. Finally, Castelli (2007) reveals that one very notable issue about PRs growth in the U.S.A is the fact that its importance was and is still recognized by the government. Consequently, this recognition can boost the level of contribution of the PRs practitioners in the U.S.A.

From these studies, it is possible to observe the difference in the contributions or roles of PRs practitioners between developed and developing countries. In the developed world, PRs is seen as an important job and it is given due recognition. Moreover, PRs practitioners are considered as managers in their office. However, in developing countries PRs practitioners are mainly carrying out technical activities. This is because PRs practitioners lack the required professional qualification and they are not recognized as communication experts and managers.

#### 5. Conclusions

The objective of this paper was to explore the practice of PRs practitioners in the above-discussed study area. The study found out that PRs practitioners are doing more technical tasks including taking photos, writing speeches, and producing and disseminating information. This finding has been substantiated qualitatively.

The research results found that there are three dominant roles of PRs in the study area, namely the technician, media relations, and communication liaison. On the other hand, activities such as managing employees, formulating strategic plans, environmental scanning, and conducting formal research are all tasks that require higher levels of training and expertise that did not exist in the study setup.

The majority of PRs practitioners did not take part in top-level management and were not decision-makers. They were not allowed to play a major role in organizational strategic planning.

Moreover, the study revealed that, out of the four studied models of PRs, three models of PRs, namely the two-way asymmetrical, the public information, and the press agency model were in use in the study area. These dominant models were used by PRs practitioners in the study area.

To conclude, the overall PRs practice has been found that it needs more consideration from the senior executives. Without that kind of consideration, there will not be an effective practice of PRs in the study area. Surprisingly, the study revealed that there were some practitioners without any role. The interview findings show there were some practitioners who were doing what had been sent from their supervisors. These practitioners contributed nothing in the preparation of the document. However, the practitioners were optimistic that the current political situation in the country might fix this issue. In general, this shows that PRs practice was still at its infant stage.

## 6. Recommendations

To ensure effective PRs practice in the study area, the researchers made the following recommendations.

PRs practitioners should be encouraged to contribute more to managerial tasks and play a managerial role in their respective offices. They should also be encouraged to exercise managerial roles by involving them in strategic management and making them part of the strategic planning process. This will help them use PRs strategies to build harmony between government officials and all external and internal publics. According to excellence theory, performing a management role is essential for PRs practitioners to be included in strategic management.

This study recommends for the dominant coalitions that they have to give PRs professional recognition and consider them as a management function in their organization. PRs practitioners need to be encouraged to use a two-way symmetrical model in order to create a mutual understanding between two groups: the government, and the public through the open exchange of information.

The final recommendation is that practitioners need to work hard, mobilize the public and create awareness for managers and employees about the purpose of PRs and its value for organizational success. Consequently, creating awareness helps to enhance the practice by minimizing challenges and improving or changing the poor perception PRs practitioners had in the study setup. PRs needs an atmosphere of freedom and democracy, and an environment where individuals are respected, freedom of expression is guaranteed and differences are respected.

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