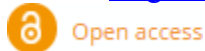


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## Research Article

# Potentials of Internet of Things for effective public relations activities: Are professionals ready?

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## Abstract

The research explored public relations professionals' views on the potentials of adoption of the Internet of Things (IoT) for their functions. High level of competitiveness in business engendered by globalization and technological advancement has made relationship-building sacrosanct to business survival. The advent of Internet-based communication has increased the sophistication of the target audience of public relations, which requires a matching upgrade of the technological versatility of practitioners. Decisions on customer satisfaction are increasingly based on data and the best sources of data are the customers themselves. Consequently, the IoT offers an unprecedented avenue for data gathering through the "assistance" of customers themselves. This study, therefore, adopted an online survey to evaluate the views of 100 public

relations professionals on their need for IoT, and a t-test was used to analyse the data. The findings revealed that independent public relations firms or agencies were more likely to adopt IoT for their activities than in-house departments. It was recommended that public relations professionals should explore actively the benefits of IoT for advanced operations.

Keywords: [Communication](#), [Internet of Things](#), [Internet Relations of Things](#), [public relations](#), [smart-PR](#)

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## 1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) has existed for decades yet it is still evolving. One of the major factors responsible for the continuous evolution of public relations in modern times is the impact of technology. For a profession whose major goals include establishing and maintaining profitable relationships as well as building mutual understanding through strategic communication, its requirement for technology cannot be overemphasized. As the means and modes of communication develop, it becomes increasingly necessary for public relations professionals to evolve fresh Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) approaches to reach their relevant publics. Considering that several such publics may have already adopted new technologies and Internet-based communications, it becomes logical for public relations professionals to do the same to avoid missing out on valuable opportunities for relationship-building.

Several scholars have explored the adoption of Internet-related technologies or platforms for public relations activities (Dozier, Shen, Sweetser, & Barker, [2016](#); Scott, [2010](#); Tankosic, Ivetic, & Vucurevic, [2016](#); Wang, [2015](#)) and others have described this new development with terms such as Digital, Online or E-Public Relations (Gifford, [2010](#); Petrovici, [2014](#); Philips & Young, [2009](#); Vercic, Vercic, & Sriramesh, [2015](#)). However, there exists little or no scholarly work on the implications of the IoT for public relations. Being mindful of the proliferation of smart mobile devices and the estimation by Cisco IBSG that about 50 billion devices will be connected to the Internet by 2020 (Evans, [2011](#)), it becomes very critical for public relations professionals to begin to interrogate the possibility of accessing more valuable data from their significant publics and sharing information through the same route. This research explores the potentials of the IoT for public relations activities in Nigeria as IoT sets to redefine the future of the profession.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Public relations and the mass media

Public relations is a dynamic discipline that has been severally defined in a bid to effectively capture its essence. Baskin, Aronoff, and Lattimore ([1997](#)) observe how difficult it is to define public relations because it constantly adapts to societal needs. Nevertheless, the authors define it as a “management function that helps achieve organisational objectives, define philosophy, and facilitate organisational change” (p. 5). Another notable definition by the Public Relations

Society of America (PRSA) states that it encompasses “counselling management at all levels in the organisation with regard to policy decisions, course of action, and communication, taking into account their public ramifications and the organisation’s social or citizenship responsibilities” (Adelabu, [2008](#), p. 621).

Among the vital responsibilities of public relations is to help organizations establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships with parties that are directly or indirectly affected by their activities. The concept of relationship building presupposes the existence of a two-way communication channel that engenders message dissemination and feedback reception among the parties. In one of the most elaborate attempts at defining public relations, Rex Harlow, having evaluated about 500 definitions, concluded that the profession is essentially communication-based (Cutlip, Center, & Broom, [2000](#)). Harlow identified that public relations involves the establishment and maintenance of communication lines between an organisation and its publics, resulting in acceptance, understanding, and co-operation. Public relations also assists the management of organisations to keep up with and respond to public opinion.

According to Baran ([2002](#)), almost everyone consumes public relations messages daily because the contents of several print and broadcast media are sourced from press releases. Baran identifies 14 services that are offered by public relations professionals as publicity, communication, public affairs, government relations, community relations, minority relations, financial public relations, industry relations, press agency, promotion, media relations, issue management, propaganda, and advertising. The author observes that based on the realization by organisations that even their routine decisions are affected by public opinion with potentially tremendous implications, public relations has attained more organisational significance.

Over the years, the need to communicate with a vast number of publics necessitated the engagement of the mass media—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—for information dissemination. The mass media, though effective in reaching multitudes, were restrictive in generating the feedback necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of public relations efforts. Scott ([2010](#)) observes that the era of the dominance of the traditional media, referring to the media mentioned above, was marked by organizations investing great efforts into communicating exclusively with a few journalists to reach their vast publics. The author, however, notes that the advent of the Internet and social media platforms has enabled public relations practitioners to communicate directly with their audience.

The Internet has doubtlessly transformed the way most things are done including the research and practice of public relations (Adeyeye et al., [2019](#); Okorie & Salawu, [2017](#); Omojola, [2016](#); Philips & Young, [2009](#); Williams, Ekanem, Sobowale, & Amodu, [2017](#)). Digital or online public relations now refers to the study or practice of public relation on the cyberspace. Consequently, the Internet offers more advantages over the traditional media in terms of increased visibility of websites through search engine optimization (SEO), real-time interaction with stakeholders, retrieval of valuable data on target audience, and tangible measurement of public relations’ effectiveness, among others (Amodu, [2007](#); Amodu, Archibong, Aririguzoh, & Odiboh, [2018](#); Eray, [2016](#); Gabriel & Koh, [2016](#); Gifford, [2010](#); Herbst, [2014](#)).

Castells ([2000](#)) observes that contrary to the earlier model where there is a clear dichotomy between message creators and message consumers, consumers of Internet contents are also producers, thereby resulting in an unprecedented decentralization of information. Whereas the industrial economy was earlier operational in public relations, exemplified by mass-production and dissemination of the same message (e.g. press release) in a one-to-many model, the Internet has introduced the information economy with a many-to-many approach (Holtz, [2002](#)). Furthermore, the Internet has offered the opportunity for customized communication in public relations such that messages can be tailored to specific demography based on their needs and requirements.

Online public relations practice, also known as digital public relations, has opened new frontiers in the world of information sharing and relationship building. Gifford ([2010](#)) explains that digital public relations involves leveraging the power of online journalism network by issuing online press releases for effective enlightenment of stakeholders. The author also describes it as an opportunity to maximize the power of the Internet for a wider reach. Petrovici ([2014](#)), while justifying the need for public relations practitioners to use the Internet, states that the public's appetite for the Internet is fast growing; hence, public relations should follow suit. The author observes that during the era of traditional public relations, competition was minimal and local, since only a few people knew what others were doing. In the era of online public relations, however, there is unprecedented exposure such that clients do not need to source for agencies locally.

Baran ([2002](#)) identifies technological advancement as a major factor responsible for shaping the character of public relations over the years, with the four other factors being middle-class growth, organisational growth, improved research tools, and professionalization. The author states that advances in communication technology have improved the efficiency and effectiveness of reaching a larger and more specific audience. Despite the huge potentials of online public relations, there still exist greater possibilities of growth thanks to the ever-evolving world of technology.

Online public relations has focused mainly on exploring a variety of Internet-based channels to send more information to relevant publics and obtain feedback. These channels include emails, websites, e-press releases, and blogs, among several others. However, these channels thrive predominantly on the public's willingness to pay attention to those sent materials and engage them. Grunig ([2009](#)) observes that several public relations practitioners follow the latest trends without adequately exploring the potentials of such trends. The author explains that as in other trends, "the traditional media frenzy of so many practitioners has been replaced by a new social media frenzy" (p. 1). Grunig, however, points out that many practitioners simply transfer the same skillsets and techniques for the traditional media to the new media, without properly engaging the "dialogical, interactive, relational and global properties that make them perfectly suited for a strategic management paradigm of public relations" (Grunig, [2009](#), p. 6).

Considering the amount of information available online and the publics' wide variety of options, not to mention their ability to create content for sharing in their sphere of influence, public relations should necessarily begin to explore the next option. One such option that can project public relations to the next era is the IoT.

## 2.2. Conceptualisation of the Internet of Things

### Notes on contributors

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Dr. Lanre Amodu, Dr. Oladokun Omojola, Nelson Okorie, Babatunde Adeyeye and Evaristus Adesina. The authors are scholars from the Department of Mass Communication, Covenant University, Ota, Nigeria. The focus of the research is how ICT can be engaged at a more advanced level in the public relations profession. There have been several positive developments in recent times in the profession as exemplified by the adoption of Internet related channels for information dissemination and customer engagement. The adoption of the Internet of Things will further enhance the effectiveness of public relations practitioners.

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