

Have PR companies killed objectivity?

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18 Oct 2012

A call from a public relations company is every editor's nightmare. Gone are the days when an invite would be sent to your desk and that would be the only communication from a PR agency. These days, an invite (on email or hardcopy) is followed by a phone call seeking confirmation as to whether you will attend the event or you will send a reporter.

If you confirm attendance, the agency will ask for the contact of the person so they can follow up with them. Often, the PR agents also offer transport (what they call facilitation) for journalists to attend their events.

The last few years has seen a growth in the number of players in the PR sector. According to the Public Relations Society of Kenya (PRSK), Kenya has about 40 registered PR firms that operate at different levels of capacity and offer a diverse range of services to clients within Kenya and the East African Region. The growing number of players in the market means fierce competition and tactful strategies to get media attention.

Being objective

As a journalist, one of the things you swear by is objectivity. It means being fair and presenting all sides of a story without taking sides. It means being a blank slate free of bias, the presence of full understanding, honest, just and free from improper influence.

Objectivity is something that many scholars have argued does not exist as journalists are human beings with emotions and biases. Plus, there are very many factors that affect and influence how journalists report.

One of those factors that is now affecting the practice of journalism especially in Kenya is PR. A recent PR Index showed that technology and telecom companies receive the highest media coverage. A closer look will tell you that the leading telecom and PR companies have hired PR firms to handle their media relations.

Could there be a direct link between media coverage of brands and the intervention of a PR firm? When a PR firm pays for transport and meals will a journalist still be expected to report objectively? Where exactly does a journalist draw the line?

Pushing content

A few years back, the only interaction a journalist had with a PR agent was when they sent a hard copy invite to an event to the news desk. That has changed drastically. PR agents now arrange interviews, advise a journalist about the story angle and even arrange for photos to be taken.

Some agents even go ahead as to write "really shinning" articles, send it as an uncommissioned pitch and entice editors through their sheer quality/appeal. PR agents have turned into content peddlers literally!

Before, PR agents treated media as homogenous, now they have segmented them in such a way they know what media uses what content. Apart from identifying the media platform, PR agents have gone ahead and created relationships with reports and their editors. Some of them even use advertising as a carrot to entice editors to offer coverage in return to advertising. This makes it easy for them to push their content and ensure their clients interests are well taken care of.

While PR agents play an important and crucial role, what does this mean to the quality of news reporting in Kenya? Is there anything like objectivity? We are seeing PR agents slowly creeping into the turf of the journalist. PR agents are setting the agenda by thinking and doing the work of the journalists. While there needs to be a cordial relationship between journalists and PR agents, the line is almost non-existent.

This trend is worrying as it not only affects the credibility of the practice of journalism but it has an impact on readership or viewership of media. Consumers are very enlightened and can smell a story with a PR agenda from a mile away. Because of this, they are turning to other sources of news for their information needs. This has also led to the growth of alternative sources of news by independent journalists and bloggers.

While PR agents will have no apologies to make, the challenge is on journalists to save the credibility of their reports by ensuring they embrace objectivity.

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