

**STAKEHOLDERS PERCEPTIONS ON EFFICACY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
OFFICERS IN GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY OF
SELECTED GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES IN MALAWI**

BY

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DECLARATION

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my brothers, Tiwonge Newa and Gomezgani Newa, for their support and encouragement throughout the study.

ABSTRACT

While the introduction of public relations officers (PROs) in government ministries in Malawi in 2011 was commended as a positive step towards improving public relations (PR) operations, there have been some growing concerns from interest groups such as Nongovernmental organizations, that PROs in government ministries are ineffective. Although there had been such allegations, there was no evidence to substantiate them. Therefore it was necessary to conduct this study to address the following research questions: What are the perceptions of internal stakeholders on the efficacy of PROs? What are the perceptions of external stakeholders on the efficacy of PROs? How do the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders compare? The study adopted a qualitative approach with a multiple case study as a research method. A sample size of 24 participants out of 58 was used. Data was generated using interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis. Findings revealed that PROs are perceived as propaganda officers serving the interests of politicians. On a positive note it was revealed that the PROs have improved media relations, stakeholder-relationship and communications management. The study recommends that PROs stay apolitical as they carry out their duties in order to gain trust from stakeholders, ministries employ qualified PROs or upgrade the unqualified ones so as to enhance their competence.

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OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF TERMS

In this thesis the following terms are operationally defined as follows:

Perception: The way you understand the true nature of something as a result of your interaction with it

Public: A group of people with ideas, interests, characteristics or aspirations that are of importance to the organization.

Public relations: The management of the information flow between an organization or an individual and the public.

Public relations officer: Someone employed by an organization to be the link between the organization and its publics in order to build mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and its publics

Stakeholders: Any group, individuals or organization that can place a claim on an organization's attention or resources, or is affected by the organization's decisions.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.0. Introduction to Chapter one

In this chapter I present the background to the study, give a statement of the problem, state the research questions, outline the scope of the study, then highlight the limitations, justification and significance of the of the study.

1.1. Background to the Study

Various scholars have defined public relations variously. According to the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations held in 1978 in Mexico, public relations was defined as the art and social science of scrutinizing or evaluating trends, predicting the consequences, counseling organizations' leaders and implementing or executing plan programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest (Hazarika, 2011). This is what is popularly referred to as the *Mexican Statement* in public relations studies.

But according to Kapanga (2011) and Mindano (2012) public relations is the management of the information flow between a company or organization or an individual to the public. This is to say that it is a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and their publics. The study has adopted this definition because, though it looks simplistic and summarized, it touches on key issues that are involved in public relations management. This study aims at studying the perceptions of stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in

government ministries in Malawi and, therefore, this definition is appropriate because it points out the significance of the relationship between the organization and its audience.

To begin with, Malawi is located in the southern part of Africa with Zambia, Mozambique and Tanzania as its neighbors. Politically, it was colonized by the British up until 1964 when it attained self-rule, with Dr. Hestings Kamuzu Banda as its president. During this time the country was under one party system of government where information flow was strictly controlled (Banda, 2013).

According to Phiri and Nyirenda (2010) during the one party system of government in Malawi (from 1964 to 1993) all government ministries and departments did not have public relations officers. The Principal Secretaries and Directors were the ones responsible for public relations particularly with regard to dissemination of information to the public. This was because the ministries and other departments had not yet grown; the media was not as hungrier for information as it is today (since all the media at that time were state owned) and the public was not as more active in seeking information as it is today. Besides, any flow of information was strictly controlled in such a way that the Principal Secretaries and Directors were only giving out information which they thought was good for public consumption (Phiri & Nyirenda, 2010).

After Malawi attained multiparty democracy in 1994 the situation started to change. Government was not as strict as it used to be when it comes to giving out information to the public (Nyirongo, 2010). This period also saw the proliferation of media houses, with the private media becoming the most reliable source of information. The media became

active in seeking information in order to pass it to the public. In the early days of multiparty democracy the Principal Secretaries and Directors remained the custodians of information and continued to be the ones handling public relations issues (Phiri & Nyirenda, 2010).

However from 2011, overwhelmed by public outcry for information and the journalists' desire for more information, ministries started employing public relations officers to help in handling public relations issues. This development has also been attributed to the fact that the ministries and government departments have now expanded their operations, such that people who used to handle public relations issues are now overwhelmed with the loads of work they have to do, hence the need to hire special people to deal with public relations.

The other reason for hiring public relations officers is that the media and the general public had been complaining that top officials in public organizations such as ministers and principal secretaries are busy people and accessing them is a big challenge (Nyirongo, 2010). Consequently, public relations officers have been employed to increase the ease of access to information by both the media and the public.

The government has also been under intense pressure from interest groups, activists and non-governmental organizations to open up in terms of giving out information to the public. They have, in the past, accused ministries of being too secretive with information. In response the government has taken heed of the advice from these interest groups by recruiting public relations officers (Phiri & Nyirenda, 2010). So in 2011 the government

introduced public relations officers in various ministries in order to take care of the interests between ministries and other stakeholders. But prior to the introduction of public relations officers there was a workshop which involved ministries and other stakeholders to brainstorm on what to expect from public relations officers in government ministries once they were employed. This was done in December 2010.

The stakeholders included representatives of different organizations that deal with ministries from time to time and officers from ministries. Some of the issues that stakeholders listed during the workshop as their expectations from public relations officers included the following: Ease stakeholders' access to ministries, make available information to the media when needed, keep records of important issues so that stakeholders can access them when needed, publish vital information to ensure it reaches stakeholders, be the hub of information, reduce bureaucracy in ministries, and remain apolitical in executing their duties (Phiri & Nyirenda, 2010).

After this workshop, ministries started hiring public relations officers. According to Banda (2013), as of January 2013, there were 18 public relations officers out of the 20 ministries that the government had at that time. Only two ministries did not have public relations officers because they had just been created. Against this background, I present the statement of problem below that has led me into doing this study.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

From 2011 government ministries and departments started hiring public relations officers (PROs), which had not been a practice in the past. Various sections of the society such as

the Civil Society applauded the idea, noting that the public would be served better in terms of information dissemination and public awareness (Banda, 2013). Recently, however, there have been growing concerns from interest groups such as non-governmental organizations, that they are skeptical of the way public relations in government ministries is managed. The most notable is a statement which was released by the Media Council of Malawi (MCM) which expressed doubts over the competence of public relations officers in ministries since many of them are not qualified public relations officers (Banda, 2013). It also said lack of proper funding for public relations activities is stifling public relations operations in government ministries.

Although there had been such allegations, there was no evidence to substantiate them. However these allegations have the potential to create public resentment towards the PROs. In such a scenario, therefore, it was necessary to conduct a study to find out the stakeholders' perceptions on the efficacy of public officers in government ministries in order to clear misconceptions. Stakeholders such as members of staff within the ministries, journalists and representatives of organizations that deal with ministries from time to time, are the ones who can give an informed opinion on the efficacy of public relations officers.

If for, instance, people have doubts over the competence of public relations officers it means that even the message the public relations officers are disseminating to the public will face rejection. In as much as we have these sentiments from some quarters of the society such as MCM, as pointed out above, they may not be a true reflection of what is actually happening on the ground since these are merely allegations, but have the

potential to create confusion. The right people to give information regarding the efficacy of public relations officers (i.e. the extent to which public relations officers meet stakeholders' expectations) are the stakeholders themselves, hence this study.

The problem with lack of information on this subject is that it can derail the confidence that the people have in the public relations officers since all that is being said now is mere speculation regarding the manner in which public relations is done in ministries. This can lead to lack of acceptance of the messages that the public receive from public relations officers. If the study proves that the reservations that some people have towards public relations officers are true, then the findings will help them to rethink the way public relations officers do their job so that they can win back the confidence of the public. However, if stakeholders are satisfied with how public relations officers carry out their duties then it will also strengthen peoples trust in the messages they get from them.

In Malawi public relations is a relatively new phenomenon. According to Mindano (2012) literature is hardly available on public relations in public organizations. This means that people who are joining the profession do not have any guidelines on how public relations should be done in the public sector. There is hardly known scholarly work in Malawi which they can use to mirror their effectiveness in terms of what they do at their places of work. This type of information can only come from stakeholders such as the people they work for and the people they work with. Stakeholders have been divided into two: internal stakeholders (members of staff from the ministries) and external stakeholders (journalists and representatives of other organizations that deal with ministries from time to time).

1.3. Research Questions

1. What are the perceptions of internal stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries?
2. What are the perceptions of external stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries?
3. How do perceptions of internal stakeholders and external stakeholders compare?

1.4. Scope of the Study

The study mainly focused on perceptions bordering on professionalism, media relations, communications management and stakeholder-relationship. These areas were chosen because they are key areas in every public relations work. I believe that looking at them gave a better understanding of how stakeholders perceive public relations officers' efficacy on the job.

Methodologically, the study was a multiple case study of two government ministries targeting public relations stakeholders. The idea was to get the sentiments on how public relations officers in government ministries carry out their job. Interviews focus group discussions and document analysis were used to collect data relating to public relations officer's efficacy on the job.

The first research question and the second research question wanted to find out perceptions of internal stakeholders and external stakeholders respectively, on the extent to which public relations officer do what stakeholders expect of them. The third research

question sought to compare the differences between the perceptions of internal stakeholders and external stakeholders since the perceptions of the two sets of stakeholders might be informed by different factors. The study took place in Lilongwe Malawi, mainly in two government ministries, with participants coming from the two government ministries, the media and other organizations as listed in the methodology chapter, under the subtitle of target population.

1.5. Limitations of the Study

It would have been better if the study was extended to many, if not all ministries. But because of time and financial constraints, the study was confined to two ministries. Despite these constraints it was hoped that the study would still yield some useful data which could be used for policy and practice. Being a case study, it is hoped that it has yielded information from the participants which is a true reflection of the situation on the ground.

1.6. Justification of the Study

It was important to do this study because has yielded useful literature which would help organizations and public relations officers in discharging their duties. At the moment there are hardly any studies that have been done on public relations as it relates to practitioners in government ministries in Malawi. This is probably because public relations is a new phenomenon in Malawi as evidenced by the fact that only one university offers studies in public relations, and that organizations just started hiring public relations officers from 2010. Several literatures suggest that not much has been

done in public relations in Malawi (Mindano, 2012; Nyirongo 2010; Kapanga, 2011). This shows that the gap is still big and would take a while before it is filled. The study will therefore go a long way in making empirical literature available to practitioners in organizations and even students in schools. As explained earlier on, it is also expected that the study will motivate other scholars to embark on similar studies in various sectors of the field in Malawi.

As things stand now there are no studies that have been done in Malawi to act as a benchmark in guiding public relations officers themselves and their managers on how public relations ought to be done in public organizations such as government ministries. This was the justification for the present study.

1.7. Significance of the Study

The study is important because it streamlines both, perceptions of internal stakeholders and external stakeholders, and gives guidance to practicing public relations professionals in the ministries on how best they can discharge their duties. They will be able to know what the stakeholders expect of them. If other stakeholders are not satisfied with how the public relations officers are doing their job, it may give information to the officers to improve on their efficacy, knowing that they are not meeting expectations of stakeholders. The study also helps in helping in shaping public relations as a profession. The field has been for a long time looked at as lacking the status of a profession because people with no knowledge in public relations just come and practice (Hainsworth 1993; Ferguson, 1987). The study looks at some of the areas that raise serious concerns in the

field. The study also contributes to the global theory of public relations in the sense that it provides the Malawian viewpoint that looks at public relations in the country's social, economic and political situation since public relations in different countries is affected by different factors.

1.8. Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that public relations serves a very important function in organizations. It is important to pay attention to every step when implementing programs. In the absence of this study, there was lack of evidence based literature on how public relations is managed in government ministries, which resulted in people speculating and eventually led to loss of trust in public relations officers. Hence it was necessary to resolve this problem by doing such a study. Poor public relations can cause irreparable damage to an organization such as loss of public trust and poor public image. As such it is important to find the best way of doing public relations, which can only be achieved if scholars are engaging in proof based studies, which in the end may help public relations practitioners as they carry out their duties. The next chapter looks at various literature that has been written both in public relations generally and on the study topic in particular.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

This chapter reviews previous literature with the aim of establishing a gap in knowledge, familiarizing myself with the topic, help me in operationalizing the terms used in this study and to see what the current major issues in public relations research are. The chapter also situates the study in the field of communication studies and explains how it relates to public relations. It also gives a review of literature on public relations and its roles. The last part of this chapter looks at issues arising from literature review i.e. gives a summary of the issues that have been discovered from the literature review and highlights the gap in literature that the study sought to address.

2.1. Situating Public Relations in the Field of Communication Studies

Communication plays a very important role in every organization and if organizations are to succeed it is imperative that it is properly managed. According to Charvatova (2006) the field of communication studies is concerned with transmission of communication from the sender to the recipient, and that such communication must make sense. Communication in the context of an organization can either be internal or external. Internal communication involves disseminating messages to the internal audience of an organization such as employees while external communication involves disseminating information to the external audience such as the general public.

This study is concerned with both internal and external communication where an organization communicates with all publics. Charvatova (2006) argues that effective communication is characteristically direct, open, respectful, responsible, and purposeful. Richmond and MacCroskey (2005) observe that communication plays a crucial role in an organization because it is the one that sustains an organization regardless of the nature of the organization. The type of communication that takes place in an organization is known as organizational communication (Richmond & MacCroskey 2005). These authors, therefore, define organizational communication as the process by which individuals stimulate meaning in the mind of other individuals in the context of a formal organization.

Communication serves several functions in an organization. Some of the functions according to Richmond and MacCroskey include informative function, where you pass information to other people so as to keep them abreast of what is happening. The other one is management function, where information is used for the smooth running of the organization. Kapanga (2011) adds another function which is persuasive function, where the organization uses communication to convince other people that what they are doing is beneficial to stakeholders. In a nutshell all, these types of communication are key to the running of organizations but what matters most is proper management of the communication process and communication systems.

For effective management of communication, organizations have special branches or departments that oversee communication issues i.e. they are custodians of communication in an organization and they make sure all relevant stakeholders are efficiently informed

(Kapanga,2011). Some organizations call these departments Communications Department while others call them Public Relations Department. Public relations is concerned with maintaining a good reputation of an organization. But to achieve this public relations practitioners use communication. In other words, all public relations roles involve communication, as a result public relations is looked at as an applied communication (Makwen, 2008). Thus this study is in the field of communication studies but specifically in the public relations branch which is an applied communication which deals with practical problem solving.

2.2. Defining Public Relations

Different authors have defined public relations differently; with others challenging that there is no single definition of public relations. According to the World Assembly of Public Relations Associations held in 1978 in Mexico, public relations was defined as the art and social science of scrutinizing or evaluating trends, predicting the consequences, counseling organizations' leaders and implementing or executing plan programs of action which will serve both the organization and the public interest (Hazarika, 2011). This is what is popularly referred to as the *Mexican Statement* in public relations circles. However, Lesly (2002) defines public relations as efforts in helping an organization and its publics adapt mutually to each other. Broom's (2009) definition is similar to Lesly's. He looks at public relations as a management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics on whom its success or failure relies.

The most important aspect in these authors' definitions is '*mutuality*' which entails that both the organization and publics must benefit from each other. But according to Galloway (2013) the latest definition was coined in 2012 by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) as "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationship between the organization and their publics" (p.148). Because of the difficulty that is associated with defining public relations Galloway (2013) argues that since it has proved to be difficult to define public relations, the term should be defined according to the context in which it is used, the people who are using it and the time it is used. It is against this background that I chose to adopt the definition that Kapanga (2011) came up with because it is more recent and agrees with the purpose of study; and this definition being, the management of the information flow between a company or organization or an individual and the public.

2.2.1. Evolution of Public Relations in Practice

Public relations has been around since time immemorial, but there are different stages of its development that are necessary to take note. Ivy Lee and Edward Barneys are considered as the pioneers of public relations. According to Bates (2006) Ivy Lee emphasized on truth, accuracy and having access to the dominant coalition (decision makers in an organization). He thus published a book called *crystallizing public opinion and propaganda* to explain some of his ideas. Bates (2006) says that Edward Barneys, who helped in developing the principles and techniques that practitioners use today, believed in openness and was very frank in his approach. Bates notes that Barneys contribution was to "humanize wealthy business men and to cast big businesses in a more

positive light” (p.10). It is Barneys and his wife that are credited for coming up with the Public Relations Council (Bates, 2006).

Public relations in practice has evolved mainly due to economic (business environment), political and social factors. Newsom, Turk & Kruckerbug, (2000) reckon that in as much as public relations has been there for a long time, it was during the period of the first world war that public relations took a new twist; many practitioners became press agents and publicists. Press agents and publicists, paid no attention to ethics and truth, they just sought favorable media coverage without resorting to paid advertising (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000). They mainly relied on manipulation of facts in order to coax the public into believing their messages. According to Williams (2010) manipulation of facts led to the emergency of crises in organizations once the public discovered that they were being fed with incorrect information.

Public relations is said to have matured after the second world war due to the economic boom. This led to the formation of several public relations bodies such as the Public Relations Society of America in 1948 (Bates, 2006). Ethical issues were the biggest challenge during this period, so the formation of these bodies was meant to bring order to the practice. It must be noted that ethical concerns in the profession remain a big challenge even today.

2.2.2. Roles of Public Relations in Organizations

According to Greener and Tanber (2002) the duties and responsibilities of a public relations officer in government are quite different from those of a public relations officer

in private organizations. In government departments the duties of a public relations officer include responding to questions from the media, writing press releases, holding press briefings, arranging conferences and writing newsletters (Greener & Tanber, 2002). This shows that the main job of a public relations officer in public organizations is to deal with media issues.

Roles and duties of a public relations officer differ from organization to organization. However, there are some roles that are common to all organizations. Prout (2002) has come up with several roles that cut across all organizations. The first one is to “formulate public relations policy” (p730). With this role, public relations is responsible for formulating and recommending public relations policies or giving its view point in making organizational decisions. In other words, it is responsible for developing the organization’s posture.

The second role is that it is responsible for organization’s publicity – It develops and issues announcements to the media, responds to inquiries from the press and places promotional messages in the media. This is what Broom (2009) calls publicity and special events role.

Thirdly, it is responsible for community relations – Prout (2002) looks at this function as performing “good neighbor activities” (p.731), while Broom (2009) calls this community relations function aimed at winning public support. Organizations may be involved in activities such as tree planting, giving donations to the community and help in fundraising for the communities.

In addition, Prout (2002) talks about “counseling management” (p. 732). What this author means by this is that public relations advises management, from a public relations point of view, on what decisions to make in a particular situation. This is to say that they explain the concept to management with the aim of agreeing on it so that it should be implemented. Managers in organizations must understand the program that the public relations personnel are trying to implement and must appreciate it (Center & Jackson, 2002). Public relations also anticipate problem situations and advises management accordingly.

Finally, public relations is also responsible for “institutional promotion” (Prout, 2002, p 733). This is to say that public relations personnel come up with programs designed to build organization’s acceptance among its key publics. The public relations officer may design public relations literature, adverts and other materials. The main aim of this function is to gain acceptance from the public. Broom (2009) calls this building public support and trust.

This study looks at the efficacy of public relations officers from a stakeholders’ perspective. I define stakeholders as per Newsom, Turk & Kruckerbug’s (2000) definition. This means individuals or a group of people affected by the organization and are interested in an organization and its activities. An organization owes its stakeholders some level of accountability. The word stakeholder, therefore, entails direct involvement with an organization through immediate and intermediate interactive communication. Stakeholders have a common bond of interest in an organization. They also have consequences for an organization and it is important, therefore, that a public relations

officer must identify and prioritize those that are particularly prominent (Newsom, Turk & Kruckerbug, 2000).

2.2.3. Public Relations in Africa

From the literature I have reviewed it shows that the majority of writers and researchers are from western countries. This shows that Africa in general and Malawi in particular is still lagging behind in as far as public relations literature is concerned. Most of the literature's principal focus is basically centered on western experience. This therefore shows that we still have a gap to fill in Africa generally and Malawi in particular.

Odedele (2007) says that at the time he was writing his book, *Public Relations and Communications Management in Africa*, there was no book dedicated specifically to African public relations. At the moment "there is no book on African public relations yet, this is the first book to be exclusively dedicated to the practice of public relations and communication management in Africa" (p.8). This lack of information on African public relations demonstrates that there is a big gap that has to be filled. I must also say that in Malawi there is currently one university (University of Malawi) that offers public relations courses. When I searched through the students' dissertations and lecturers' published works there was no thesis or research work on public relations in the public sector. This confirms what Mindano (2012) observes. He points out that public relations is a new phenomenon in Malawi as evidenced by lack of literature on it.

Concurring with Odedele and Mindano is Van-Heerden (2004). In his article *The Practice of public relations in Africa* Van-Heerden observes that very little literature has

been documented about African public relations. He even talks about the problem he faced when he was reviewing literature for his article, saying when he searched for information electronically he did not find any literature. Thus in his article, he advises that “in order to participate in the global discussion and contribute towards public relations body of knowledge.....Africa needs to determine its current position vis-à-vis global public relations literature” (p.11) This study, therefore, will go a long way in contributing literature to be used by both academicians and professionals in the public relations field.

2.2.4. Public Relations in Public Sector and Government Departments

Palaniappan and Ramachandria (2009) observe that the principal focus of public relations in the public sector is to provide information and instructions to the public. They point out the need for public relations or communications officers in the public sector to be apolitical and non-controversial as they are discharging their duties. They emphasize that the public relations and communications officers in organizations must put the interest of the people first i.e. political vagaries should never be part of their work.

As earlier explained (in the problem statement) the concern in Malawi has been the way in which politicians have interfered with the work of public relations. There are some concerns that professionalism will eventually be eroded away if public relations officers continue to work in an environment which is politically sensitive. This study, therefore, looks at the efficacy of public relations officers as seen by stakeholders. Perhaps the findings can also be useful to politicians in the sense that they would be able to see what

stakeholders are saying and eventually allow the public relations officers to work in a conducive environment.

Public relations in government ministries continually work with the media. The reason is that the media actively seek information to pass it to the public. But perhaps the most pressing reason is that government ministries or departments are run on tax payers' money and the issue of accountability is taken very seriously by not only the media but also the general public. Green and Tanbar (2002) observe that the media expects timely and tangible responses from public relations officers in the public sector. The media will, thus, always press on if they suspect that they are not given correct information. This is now where the question of meeting stakeholders' expectations comes in. It is important for public relations actors themselves to know if they are able to meet stakeholders' expectations in the course of their job delivery. This would help them to adjust accordingly. In the absence of such information they will just be doing their job without any direction. So this study will go a long way in providing such information.

Singh (2009) says that public relations in the public sector need to be efficient because their efficiency or inefficiency affect the image of the government. He, just like Greener and Tanbar (2002) observe that media relations skills are of paramount importance because he or she has to make clarifications any time there is need. Singh therefore concludes that it is the responsibility of the practitioner to respond promptly to issues of public concerns. Now if we look at the Malawian context, interest groups have observed that practitioners in the public sector are not as free as their counterparts in the private sector because of the political environment in which they are working (Nyirongo, 2010).

There are some issues that when the public relations and communications officers are asked by the media, they are reluctant to talk about or they refer them to other people. This reflects badly on the government which they are representing. Gondwe (2012) says that it is because of lack of knowledge on how to do public relations in government departments, that the practitioner will sometimes give answers that are unconvincing or will indeed refer you to other people. It is, therefore, this lack of knowledge that the study seeks to address. I hope that this study will close this gap by providing information which will help the practitioners as they are doing their job.

The study will also provide useful information to authorities in the public sector since these are the people that have been accused of interfering with the work of the public relations officer there by compromising their work. I hope that if people can have information on whether public relations officers meet the expectations of stakeholders, they can reflect on or rethink the way they interact with these officers. In the absence of such literature people who interfere with the work of public relations officers may not know that they are compromising the work of a public relations officer.

Various scholars have also agreed that public relations is a management function (Greener & Tanbar, 2002; Singh, 2009; Mindano 2012). What this means is that a public relations person is part and parcel of the organizations management, therefore he must be kept abreast of any development that is taking place in an organization. However, because the environment in government ministries is different to that in private organizations, it is difficult to ascertain whether they are indeed part of the organization's

management or not. It is therefore necessary to undertake this research because it will shed light on such areas.

Hamdan-Adnam (2009) discusses problems associated with public relations in government departments. He observes that the dilemma with public relations in public organizations is that the practitioners serve two masters at a time; the employer (government) and the public. The onus is on him to balance the two. The research will, therefore, try to find out the extent to which this kind of dilemma affects the way public relations is done in ministries from the stakeholders' point of view.

2.2.5. Criticism Against Public Relations Practice

There have been debates all over the world on whether public relations is really a profession or not. The majority of scholars claim that public relations is not yet a profession. Hornaman (2000, citing Sallot et al 1998; Fegurson 1987; Bivins, 1993; Cameron, Sallot & Lariscy, 1996; & Hainsworth 1993) claim that public relations is not yet a profession. Hornaman (2000) reports that Furguson vowed in 1987 that public relations will never attain the status of a profession, as long as people who have never done a rigorous course in public relations can join the profession and succeed. His worry was on lack of training on the part of some people who join the field. Bivins is concerned with the practitioners' failure to serve public interest and failure to adhere to ethical codes. Hainsworth talks about lack of accreditation and proper training for practitioners. He is particularly obsessed with the fact that many practitioners are coming from other fields and that those who are practicing do not appreciate the value of continuous

training. Thus Hainsworth concludes that the only people who have spent years training can be called professionals.

To them a professional is one who has spent time training and then is accredited after finishing training so that he can start practicing just like what happens in law and medicine. It has been argued that some people who lack training have ventured into the field and practiced public relations. (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000). Some have said that in the absence of licensing and standardized education procedures, it is difficult to call it a profession (Cutlip, Center & Broom, 2000). Established professions such as medicine need qualifications that can only be attained through educational minimum, certification and responsibility to both the profession and public. Reynolds (2000) observes that “society grants professional standing to those groups which contribute to the well-being of the broader society” (p.115). Fitzpatrick (2001) agrees with Reynolds by saying “because of this relationship, the professional owes the client his or her royalty” (p.203). On the same point Bivins (1993) says that if every practicing public relations professional acts in the best interest of their clients then the public interest will be served. He argues that public interest and adherence to professional code of ethics are an important aspect for the field to become a profession.

As earlier explained, public relations is a new phenomenon in Malawi, and so is the idea of public relations in public organizations. Many public and private organizations just started hiring public relations practitioners around 2010 (Nyirongo, 2010). Studies done by Mindano (2012) and Gondwe (2012) pointed out that the issue of honesty is another area that people in Malawi have accused public relations practitioners of ignoring. It has

been widely said that public relations practitioners (especially in public organizations where the environment is political, and where the organizations are subjected to greater public scrutiny, since they are run on taxpayers' money) do not regard issues of honesty as of paramount importance. To them the most important thing is to convince citizens that what they are doing is right and that honesty comes second (Kapanga, 2011). He observes that as long as they see that they will not achieve results with honesty, they would rather be dishonest. This is one of the reasons why Ferguson (1987) is said to have vowed that public relations will never attain the status of a profession. The study therefore will, after getting sentiments from stakeholders, provide useful information to bridge the gap on the efficacy of public relations officers in not only government ministries but also public organizations.

According to Mindano's (2012) study very little has been documented about the practice of public relations in developing countries generally and Malawi in particular. He observes that the "public relations field is still characterized by its search for identity, legitimacy, and professional recognition" (p.6). Nyirongo (2010) agrees with Mindano that no known studies have been conducted in public relations in public organizations in Malawi and that the status of public relations in the public organizations remains a mystery for many people. He says scholars in the field of public relations choose to do their studies in media studies rather than public relations. It is on this ground that I found this study worth doing. It is hoped that the study will close the gap on lack of information on the practice of public relations in public organizations.

I also hope that the study will be a pacesetter in the field of public relations in Malawi, particularly in public organizations in the sense that it will be a remarkable motivator to some public relations scholars to do further research in this sub-discipline of public relations which is still lagging behind. In all the literature that I have reviewed there is no study which has been done that talk about public relations in public organizations in Malawi. This research is therefore expected to bring a new dimension to the study of public relations in general and public relations in public organizations in particular.

2.3. Review of Theories related to Public Relations

This subsection gives a review of theories that are relevant to this study. Three theories were reviewed and these are The Excellency Theory, Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations and The Stakeholders Theory.

2.3.1. The Excellency Theory of Public Relations

The Excellency theory was developed from a 15 year study which was funded by the International Communication for Business Communicators (IABC) Research Foundation (Grunig, 1992). The study was done by a group of scholars led by J.E. Grunig from the University of Maryland. The theory explains the value of public relations to organizations and stakeholders. It looks at how public relations can make an organization effective. It says that the way public relations is managed will determine how it contributes to organizational effectiveness. It also points out the environment that makes the organization more effective. It states that for an organization to be effective it must behave in a manner that satisfies both the organization and the stakeholders (Grunig, 1992).

The theory touches on a number of issues but the following are the major issues as they relate directly to the study:

Firstly, the theory talks about “knowledge potential for managerial role in symmetrical public relations” (Ree, 2004, p.19). The theory says that for public relations programs to be effective public relations programs must be filled with professionals. These are people who are trained in the field and are affiliated to professional associations and read literature in the field.

Secondly, the theory also talks about “organizational context for excellence” (Ree, 2004, p.19). It says that excellent public relations is characterized by participative rather than instructive cultures or pressures from the environment. This is to say that public relations professionals must participate in decision making rather than just being told what to do.

Thirdly, the theory touches on involvement of public relations personnel in decision making. It emphasizes on the involvement of public relations personnel in strategic management i.e. having access to the dominant coalition (decision makers in an organization) (Grunig, 1992). This is aimed at making the public relations personnel aware of what is going on in the organization so that if they have something to say they can do that.

Looking at these three aspects, the theory explains the problems that have been raised in this chapter with regard to how public relations is practiced in Malawi’s government ministries. The first issue that has been raised is that public organizations are employing journalists to serve as public relations officers. The idea is that these journalists must use

their experience from the media to counter negative publicity coming from the media. But this is against what the theory is advocating for. The theory says that for an organization to be effective public relations programs must be carried out by people who have been trained in public relations, are affiliated to professional bodies and read literature in the field. So this contradiction explains why there have been much concerns regarding the way public relations is managed.

The other concern has been on the environment in which public relations professionals operate in public organizations. Some people have claimed that because of the political environment in public organizations, public relations officers are failing to discharge their duties professionally. The theory says that to achieve excellence in an organization there must be participatory rather than instructive cultures. So people's concerns in the public organizations have been on how authorities, who are political figures, play an instructive role in telling public relations officers what to do, rather than public relations officers participating in decision making.

The theory is relevant to my study because it talks about how public relations officers can achieve excellence in public relations. In the same vein my study is looking at the efficacy of public relations officers as viewed by stakeholders. In short, it helps to explain how efficient public relations officers are in government ministries if we consider their actions alongside The Excellency Theory.

2.3.2. Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations

The theory was developed by James Grunig and Todd Hunt in 1984. It has four main parts as follows: Press Agency, Public Information Model, Two Way Asymmetrical Model and Two Way Symmetrical Model. The model looks at the various forms of communication between an organization and its stakeholders. The main feature of the model is that the first three models try to achieve organizational goals through persuasion while the fourth one tries to balance organization's interests and interests of its stakeholders. Below are these four models with their key characteristics:

2.3.2.1. Press Agency

It is also known as publicity model. According to Waddington (2013) this model uses persuasion to influence the public into behaving the way the organization desires. It uses one way communication (from the organization to the public). Publicity and promotions are examples of communication that is synonymous with this model. Practitioners usually want positive publicity for their organization in the media, and use propaganda tactics. They are concerned with creating news for their organizations. Truth and accuracy is not important in this model.

As revealed by the findings of this study in the findings chapter, practitioners in Malawi government ministries are mainly concerned with getting attention from the media which is in line with what Grunig and Hunt (1984) had said about Press Agency i.e. securing media coverage is the primary focus of Press Agency. According to Theaker (2008) practitioners under this model do not value understanding but persuasion as a means to keep hold of the audience. This theory therefore sheds more light on what model public

relations officers in government ministries in Malawi practice, as can be seen later on in the discussion of the findings chapter.

2.3.2.2. Public Information Model

This model uses one way communication such as press releases and brochures to convey information. Usually the public relations officer is looked at as a ‘journalist in residence’ who values accuracy but still dictates what to communicate to the public (Waddington, 2013). The purpose is to inform rather than publicity.

In Malawi public relations officers in government are said to be inadequate in public relations training since many of them have been recruited from the media (Banda, 2013). The fact that many public relations officers in government ministries are journalists by training shows the belief that the ministry has in the Public Information Model. The model talks about the public relations officer as a ‘journalist in residence’. The model, therefore, helps to explain what the various stakeholders feel about having journalists as public relations officers.

2.3.2.3. Two Way Asymmetrical Model

This model employs two way communication. While it believes in persuasion, it also uses social science research such as surveys to increase the effect of their persuasive messages (Theaker, 2008). Although it makes use of feedback, practitioners are much more interested in adjusting the public’s behavior to the organization’s interests. The goal is to influence audience attitude rather than change organization’s practices

In the case of public relations in government ministries in Malawi, there are cases where practitioners use this model, where sometimes they ask for the views of the public on their programs, though not always. Usually they combine the four models in order to achieve what they think is in the interest of the organization.

2.3.2.4. Two Way Symmetrical Model

It uses two way communication to negotiate with the public, resolve conflict and promote mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its public (Lindeborge , 1994). It also uses social science methods to get feedback from the audience. It uses two way communication rather than persuasion. The Two Way Symmetrical Model posits that everyone is equal and therefore values feedback from the audience. According to Waddington (2013) this model has been accepted as a formal definition of the best practice of communication between the organization and its stakeholders as it is a very ethical model. Feedback is used to improve organization's practices.

Though this is a very important model in contemporary public relations, the findings (in the later chapters) have indicated that public relations in government ministries in Malawi do not prefer this model and they do not value feedback that much. Their focus is changing people's behavior through persuasion.

The theory is relevant to my study because it helps to explain the type of public relations that is practiced in government ministries in Malawi. The theory gives four models of public relations and the implications of practicing each one of the model. In short it helps

to explain the inefficiencies of public relations in government ministries in Malawi based on the type of model which they have adopted.

2.3.3. The Stakeholder's Theory

The theory was developed by Edward R. Freeman in 1984. The theory identifies stakeholders of an organization and looks at how organizations can make use of their views or interests in order to help them achieve their goals. Freeman (1984) says stakeholders are “any group who can affect or is affected by the actions, decision, policies or goals of the organization” (p.25). The major issue in the definition of stakeholders is that they rely on the organization to fulfill their own goals while at the same time the organization also relies on them to fulfill its goals. This means that there is a reciprocal relationship between the two groups where they both depend on each another.

The theory has four major tenets. According to Freeman (1984) the first major issue is that every organization has relationships with many groups affecting or affected by its decision. The second issue is that the interests of all legitimate stakeholders are valuable to the organization, and the third one is that organizations must analyze the different individuals and groups who influence or are influenced by the organization.

Grunig and Repper (1992) observe that communication with stakeholders helps to develop stable relationship between an organization and stakeholders which in return would help the organization achieve its goals. It is on this basis that the study sought the views of stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in government

ministries. According to Johnson and Scholes (2002) it is important for an organization to take note of the stakeholders' interests and needs if the organization is to be successful. In order to achieve this he suggests that an organization does stakeholder mapping. Stakeholder mapping means identifying stakeholders' expectations and power and use them to effectively deal with their problems.

While government ministries in Malawi recognize the importance of stakeholders, as evidenced by the fact that they had called them to a stakeholders' workshop in 2010 prior to the introduction of public relations officers, whether they use the views given by these stakeholders in order to improve their operations remains debatable. However, generally speaking, the data that I gathered points to the fact that stakeholders' views are often not taken into account when public relations officers are making their decisions in ministries. The theory, therefore, helps to explain why some public relations programs in the ministries have failed despite the fact that stakeholders' views were sought.

The relevance of the theory to my study is that it helps to explain the importance of managing the interests of stakeholder. It helps to explain whether some of the challenges that public relations officers meet in government ministries are down to lack of proper management of stakeholders' opinion or not. Generally speaking, the theory helps me explain how the relationship between government ministries and their stakeholders should be, if the organizations are to be efficient.

2.4. Previous Research in Public Relations

Under this section various studies have been evaluated in order to establish the gap in literature which this study sought to fill.

2.4.1. Public Relations Education

Various scholars such as Williams (2010) and Coombs (2001) have talked about the value of public relations education. Williams (2010) observes that public relations education is very important if the practitioners are to make meaningful contribution to the practice. In her study where he was looking at the value of public relations education in shaping the practice of public relations in Zambia, she expresses surprise at how the field has been saturated by people who have never had an opportunity to do formal training. She argues that lack of formal training is negatively affecting the practice of public relations. Her findings are also corroborated by a report of the Commission of Public Relations in the United States of America which says that many public relations practitioners just learn their job through lengthy experience without necessarily attending formal education (Turks, 2006).

In East Africa, while Muthigani's (2010) study in Kenya did not find education as a factor that compromises public relations efficiency, in Tanzania, Abdul (2011) found out that 83 percent of the people who were practicing public relations (both in private and public organizations were not qualified in the field). He observed that many communications or public relations officers have other educational backgrounds such as marketing, advertising and business administration. He said this that lack of requisite qualifications in public relations or communication is negatively affecting public

relations operations since practitioners do not understand most of the issues. This is also one of the things that have raised concerns in Malawi i.e. that government is employing journalists or teachers instead of qualified public relations officers because their aim is to use journalists to promote positive publicity.

In the early development of public relations in America, public relations professionals used to be trained in mass communication. According to Coombs (2001) this was acceptable at that time because public relations was about writing news and passing them to the media who would then convey it to the public. However today things have changed; there is more to public relations than just writing news for the media. Hence it is important to have people who are well versed with both public relations theory and practice. In his study, Hallahan (2001) argues that if public relations concentrate on their interaction with the media, it is likely to fail in the long run. He observes that media relations are short term so there is need to focus on long term relationships with not only the media but all stakeholders including the public. He observes that people who are well versed in theory are the ones that can holistically look at public relations issues, other than focusing on publicity alone.

Concurring with Hallahan, Makwen (2008) whose study was looking at the role of education in establishing a reliable public relations system found out that all communication programs that did not involve trained public relations specialists did not do well because practitioners were only focusing on one area which they understood better, forgetting other areas. He therefore argued that for all public relations programs to be successful, there is need to have trained personnel. I totally agree with Hallahan and

Makwen because if in your practice of public relations you concentrate on one area alone such as media relations, you are likely to neglect the other important aspects hence you would fail. One of the concerns in the Malawi case is that most government ministries have employed journalists from the media, who have not fully done public relations. The ministries' logic behind the recruitment of journalists as public relations officers is for them to use their experience as journalists to help counter negative publicity that the organizations may suffer since public organizations are prone to scrutiny from the general public. This is in disagreement with what Makweni (2008), Hallahan (2001) and Lepper (2001) are advocating for i.e. that public relations need not concentrate on media relations alone but other functions too, and that to achieve this there is need to have formally trained practitioners who understand the field. What ought to be understood is that media relations is just one of the public relations functions and not public relations itself. So the question, therefore, would be how efficient are these public relations officers in light of the concerns that they lack proper knowledge of the field since they come from a media background? Are they able to meet the expectations of stakeholders?

2.4.2. Public Relations Credibility and Public Trust

Various scholars such as Kazoleas and Teven (2013) and Mulenga (2012) have indicated that organizations must carefully monitor the relationship which they have with their stakeholders if they want to gain credibility and public trust. In Zambia, Mulenga (2012) did a study which was looking at public opinion on issues of credibility and trust towards public relations officers. He discovered that once public trust has been betrayed by an organization, it will take a long time for the people to trust that organization again. In his

study 80 percent of the organizations said they had been involved in crises in the past and did not tell the truth to the public regarding what really happened for them to run into those crises. In the end, all of them said they had lost public trust. In short what the findings of his study are saying is that for organizations to earn credibility and trust from stakeholders they must always tell the truth.

Agreeing with Mulenga, Young (2006), as cited in Kazoleas and Teven (2013) says for an organization to earn credibility it must make sure it sustains the trust that the public has in it for a longer period of time. He explained that trust has the potential to “evolve from an amalgam of simple exploratory emotions enabling the decisions to take low level risks to something including emotions of the relationship sustaining and enjoying types” (Young, 2006 as cited by Kazoleas & Teven, 2013, p.28). What this means is that once trust between the organization and its audience is broken it will sour the relationship and will be hard for the organization to win it back. In the statement of the problem of my study I have indicated that the major issue surrounding public relations in government ministries in Malawi was that some interest groups such as Nongovernmental organizations had openly said that they are skeptical with the way public relations is managed in government ministries because many public relations officers are not qualified in public relations. While what they were saying could be true to some extent, there was no evidence to substantiate them. However, their statements had the potential to create resentment towards public relations officers. The study, therefore, has brought to light the perceptions of stakeholders who deal with government ministries from time to time. Such information on perceptions of stakeholders is expected to guide public

relations practitioners on whether the people they deal with trust them or not. I expect that public relations officers will improve on areas that indicate that stakeholders do not trust them.

Mindano (2012) who did his study on boundary spanning and the dominant coalition discovered that if an organization has hurt its audience in the way it handles public relations work, it becomes very difficult to mend that relationship once the trust is broken. He also discovered that many public relations officers, though they gain credibility from the audience, use unethical means in their practice such as dishonesty and lies. He, therefore, concluded that credibility which is based on dishonesty cannot sustain the organization because truth will eventually catch up with the organization.

All these studies are talking about the importance of earning organizational credibility using acceptable public relations practices. My study on the other hand focuses on how stakeholders perceive public relations officers in terms of efficacy and one of the areas the study touches on is on whether stakeholders trust public relations officers in government ministries or not. One criticism of public relations officers in Malawi (that has been widely talked about in the media) has been that public relations officers hardly tell the truth to the public; as such the issue of credibility is highly compromised. As I explained earlier, public relations studies in Malawi (though very little has been done since the profession is still searching for its identity) have focused on public relations in the private sector. While these studies talk about credibility in the private sector, they have not said much on public relations credibility in the public sector. This study will, therefore, bridge the gap on how credible public relations is in the government sector.

The value of public relations and third party approval is very important in modern day public relations because it shows that organizations, while implementing their programs, also take into account the views of the third party, which in the context of this study are the stakeholders.

The need for public relations officers to gain public trust and credibility cannot be overemphasized, though the volume of studies on this topic in the public sector has not been inspiring. Having said that, it is only through truth and honesty that organizations can gain long lasting credibility and public trust. In Zambia, Mulenga (2012) after conducting interviews with 30 participants discovered that participants did not trust public relations officers because they perceived them as people who serve the interests of their employers. Mulenga, therefore, concluded that more studies need to be done on effective public relations. It is against this background that my study sought to find out stakeholders perceptions on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries in Malawi.

In a nutshell, it is clear that all organizations need to strive for trust and credibility if they are to be successful.

2.4.3. Public Relations Efficacy

While the concept of public relations efficacy is not new in public relations, previous studies such as Kafere (2011) and Chawe (2012) have focused their attention on the efficacy of programs that were previously implemented, to see if they achieved desirable results i.e. they simply evaluate the efficacy of a particular program. Still, other studies

such as Michaelson, Wright and Stacks (2012) have focused on coming up with a generic model which organizations can use to evaluate the effectiveness of public relations programs. This is to say that Michaelson, Wright and Stacks's main concern was to find a generic model which could be used to make public relations campaigns effective.

In another study, Henderson (2005) was also concerned with auditing public relations programs to see if they were effective or not. She suggested the steps to take in evaluating public relations programs. However she did not include an evaluation of public relations personnel as a starting point in evaluating the effectiveness of public relations programs. In my study the area that I was concerned with was to look at the efficacy of public relations practitioners, and not necessarily the programs which they implement as it has been the case in other studies. While people are looking at public relations programs, it is important to also look at the efficacy of the people that implement such programs. Sometimes the programs fail not because the idea was bad but may be because the personnel implementing such programs did not have enough knowledge on how to manage them.

In his study, Kafere (2011) was simply concerned with evaluating the efficacy of a public relations program which the Tuberculosis Control Program in Malawi had initiated to sensitize people to go for testing. His focus was on the success of the program and not the personnel that implemented the program. Similarly, Chawe (2012) was also concerned with evaluating the efficacy of a public relations program on voluntary male medical circumcision which was implemented by the Ministry of Health.

While I found all these studies useful to my own study (as they highlight what has been the focus of research in the past), I also found them leaving out the main players in the practice of public relations, who are public relations officers. The focus of my study, therefore, was to find out stakeholders perceptions on the efficacy of public relations officers. I agree that it is important to evaluate how effective a particular program has been, but it is equally necessary that we also look at the efficacy of the people implementing public relations programs. The reason being that sometimes we say that a program had failed to achieve desirable results, but may be the root cause are the people who implemented it. Therefore, I find my area of focus lacking in previous studies.

2.4.4. The Value of Stakeholder Opinion in Public Relations

According to Mayer (2005) stakeholders are “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organizations purpose” (p. 3). In the context of my study and in the context of government ministries in Malawi, stakeholders include Nongovernmental organizations, donors, the media, members of staff within the ministries and community based organizations. Various studies such as Mulenga (2012), Mindano (2012) and Male (2007) have talked about the importance of stakeholders to the success of every organization. In Zambia Mulenga (2012) did a study which found out that effectiveness of any public relations program is dependent on how aware the organization is about its environmental publics (stakeholders) such as nongovernmental organizations, the media and the community. He also suggested that more studies must be done to emphasize the importance of stakeholders to an organization.

In a similar study in Botswana, Male (2007) wanted to find out the value of stakeholders to the effective running of the organization. She did a survey with 120 public relations practitioners, out of which 91percent said organizations cannot run properly without the input of stakeholders. She, therefore, concluded that there must be frequent exchange of information between stakeholders and organizations for them to sustain the relationship. Such is the value of stakeholder contribution that it can either make or break an organization if not properly managed.

Mayer (2005) says public opinion in public relations is very important because it helps organizations to weigh how much support or opposition the decisions made by an organization have. He adds that knowing stakeholder interests and needs is important because in a heterogeneous society you have people with differing and diverse desires against limited organization's resources. He adds that balancing such desires and interests will help an organization in the sense that it will be making decisions from a consolidated point of view.

While these studies have talked about the importance of stakeholder opinion to an organization, another study done by Mindano (2012) in Malawi indicates that the practice is not followed. In his study he wanted to find out the extent to which public relations officers use their positions as boundary spanners to influence decisions in organizations. One of the areas he touched on was whether public relations practitioners engage stakeholders in order to get their opinion. The study revealed that government agencies do not engage stakeholders on key issues affecting the organizations. He, however,

pointed out that stakeholders have claims that can positively influence the direction of the organizations and must, therefore, have their opinion and interests known to the public.

While these studies focused on getting views from public relations practitioners to see how they look at the value of stakeholders to organizations, my study focuses on getting views from stakeholders. My study has taken a different angle in the sense that it looks for the perceptions of stakeholders and not just the perception of public relations officers (which has been the case in the above cited studies). I find these studies important to my own study because they have already established the value of stakeholder opinion in organizations, and what my study has done is to look at what their opinion is on the efficacy of public relations officers.

Another thing that I found out as I was reviewing previous studies was that many studies (as cited above) on public relations stakeholders have focused their attention on consultations with the general public i.e. their focus has been on the relationship between organizations and the general public. However, the uniqueness of my study is that it focuses on a specific group of people who were identified by government ministries themselves as their key stakeholders.

2.4.5. Ethics in Public Relations

Public relations has been significantly expanding worldwide due to democratization in many countries which has eventually led to greater accountability for organizations. The proliferation of media houses has also meant greater demand for information. However, public relations officers have been accused as of acting like spin doctors, bent at

distorting information to suit the interests of their organizations (Bivins, 1993). In his study, Gondwe (2012) says that practitioners have also been looked at with suspicion because of the history from which public relations originates (i.e. it has roots in Press Agency which does not value truth and honesty).

In the United States of America (USA) Devin (2007) discovered that public relations was viewed as truth that is consistent with the interests and wishes of the organizations. In other words, participants in his study viewed public relations as an activity that does not serve the interest of the public but the organization. His study mentions fake promotions, fake social media news and endorsement of unpopular decisions as tactics which are used to gain public support. While this study was done in USA, we can also say that the same applies to Malawi as can be evidenced by the findings of Kapanga's (2011) study. His study found out that the public feels that public relations officers are dishonest and work to please their employers only. This revelation points to the magnitude of the problem that is there, in as far as public relations is concerned.

One interesting finding in Mindano's (2012) study is that public relations officers have resorted to unethical means because organizations do not take public relations as a priority. The study further says that if public relations is seen as not contributing to organizations' outcomes, the organization will definitely do away with it. The study, therefore, concludes that for practitioners to remain relevant to the organization, they resort to unethical practices.

In contrast, Bowen (2007) says many public relations officers have complained that public relations codes of ethics are ambiguous as such it is very difficult to consistently use them. Other studies such as Kapanga (2011) have pointed to lack of regulatory bodies as a reason why public relations officers flout the codes of ethics. Chawe's (2012) study points to lack of adequate public relations theory as a reason why public relations officers resort to unethical means.

A report by the commission of public relations agree with the findings from Chawe (2012) by indicating that although public relations training does not force students to be ethical, formal training can define and educate them on the importance of ethics (Commission on Public Relations, 2006). The report, in its recommendations, therefore says no public relations officer should be allowed to practice if he or she is not committed to ethical principles.

Looking at all these studies, the importance of being ethical in public relations cannot be overemphasized. The emphasis of all the studies above and the reports is that it is important for public relations officers to be ethical as they discharge their duties. So my study will touch on whether practitioners in government ministries are ethical or not, and what the implications of their actions are.

2.9. Summary of Key Issues Arising from Literature Review

The table below presents a summary of major issues that emerged from the literature review.

Table 2.1: Summary of Issues Arising From Literature Review

Sections reviewed in the chapter	Key issues from the review of the literature
Situating public relations in Communication Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PR belongs to the field of communication, (Applied Communication) which is the study of communication as it relates to practical problem solving.
Defining public Relations and emerging issues in public relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The section has defined PR and given its roles • History of PR has been given, tracing it back to the period of First World War. • Some scholars have argued that PR will never attain the status of a profession as long as people with no training are allowed to practice. • PR in the government sector is in dilemma of serving two masters at a time; the employer (government) and the public.
Review of Relevant theories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three theories have been reviewed namely the Excellency Theory, Grunig's Four Models of PR and the The Stakeholder's Theory
Previous Research in Public Relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Previous studies focused on evaluating effectiveness of particular PR programs that were previously implemented. My study focuses on the personnel that conduct PR activities as seen by stakeholders. • Previous studies reveal that PR in Malawi is still searching for its identity and professional recognition • PR in Malawi is establishing itself now and that many organizations are realizing the need to hire public relations officers hence the need to have evidence-based studies that can help them understand PR • In Malawi, very little is known about PR in government sector generally and government ministries in particular.

2.10 Conclusion

The chapter has looked at several areas that are relevant to the topic. It has been established that there is a big gap in knowledge as evidenced by lack of empirical studies especially on public relations in the public sector. The gap is not only in terms of content but also in terms of context as most of the literature is about public relations in Europe and America. Africa in general and Malawi in particular is still lagging behind.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.0. Introduction

In this chapter I explain the research paradigm, approach, method, sampling and data generation techniques. I also highlight the steps that were taken to address trustworthiness and ethical considerations in the study.

3.1. Philosophical Paradigm

In this study I adopted the relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology (relativist-interpretivist paradigm). Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) look at a philosophical paradigm as constituting “a way of looking at the world and interpreting what is studied...” (p. 20). In other words, it is the way the one conducting the research thinks about knowledge creation. A philosophical paradigm can be looked at from two angles namely ontology and epistemology. Blaike (1993) defines ontology as the “study of being” (p.20) i.e. the nature of reality, while epistemology is defined by Hatch and Cunliffe (2006) as knowing how to know i.e. how knowledge is generated.

The relativist-interpretivist paradigm holds that knowledge is relative to the one who claims to know, varies and is contextual as such interpretivists work with others in order to understand their points of view (Hatch and Cunliffe (2006). It is in the same vein that I decided to work with other people (participants) in order to draw meaning and interpret their experiences hence my adoption of the relativist- interpretivist stand. I generated data from participants with the aim of knowing how stakeholders in government

ministries perceive, interpret and understand issues pertaining to public relations, as they affect them. To understand their perceptions on the efficacy of public relations officers, I could not separate myself from the object of investigation because I had to interpret participants' perceptions and give meaning. In order to understand their perceptions there was need to have sufficient dialogue between myself as a research and study participants.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003) interpretivism considers that there are multiple realities, meaning is constructed through people's experiences and this results in differing interpretations. I acknowledge that people's perceptions towards issues are different and are based on their experiences or expectations. Since I was looking for these perceptions, I considered relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology as the best philosophical leaning of my study.

3.2. Research Approach

In this study I used the qualitative research approach in consistency with the chosen philosophical paradigm as explained above. Various scholars and authors have written widely on the value of qualitative research. Potter (1996) observes that the strength of qualitative research is that it gives "an enormously useful variety of means for examining how humans make sense out of their own world" (p.12). This is in line with what I did (i.e. used multiple means of investigation such as interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis). Conger (1998) and Alvesson (1996) argue that the value of qualitative research lies in its flexibility to follow and uncover ideas that one did not expect. Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) talk about a relatively small number of participants

that are studied. They observe that this small number allows the researcher to get in-depth information or rich data. I was therefore convinced that the qualitative approach is the best way in understanding the phenomena under study. Working with a small number of participants allowed me to get rich data with detailed descriptions of their experiences which cannot be captured using quantitative approach. This detailed description allowed me to understand how stakeholders look at how public relations officers in government ministries carry out their job in light of the issues highlighted in the statement of the problem. Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) say that “qualitative research focuses on multiplicity of meanings, perspectives, understandings and interpretations of the varied circumstances of the participants and issues under study” (p.12). It is in these meanings, understandings and perspectives that I was interested to find out hence the qualitative approach.

3.3. Research Method

Again, in line with the chosen paradigm and approach as explained above, I adopted case study as a research method. This was a multiple case study of two ministries, out of the eighteen ministries that the Malawi government had at the time when I was doing this study. Various authors have defined case study variously. Merriam (1998) looks at a case study as “an intensive and holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomena or social unit” (p.27). But according to Yin (2009) a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in-depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used” (p.18). In simple

terms we can say that a case study is a method of doing research that gives the researcher an opportunity to do in-depth investigation of events or phenomena in its real life setting. These definitions support the reason why in my study I did a case study; it is because I wanted to do an in-depth investigation on stakeholders' perceptions on the efficacy of public relations officers.

Baxter and Jack (2008) have given several situations that would prompt the researcher to do a case study as a method of doing research. One of the reasons is the nature of the research questions i.e. when you want to answer the *how* or *why* questions. In my research these are the questions that I was trying to answer. Because of this reason a case study was deemed the most appropriate method to use.

Hodkins and Hodkins (2001) observe that a case study is grounded in "lived reality" (p.3). What the two authors are saying is that a case study focuses on experiences of the individuals, groups or organizations. In my study some of the issues I was looking at are the experiences of stakeholders in relation to public relations officers' job delivery. Other research methods such as survey cannot bring out these experiences because they focus precisely on a particular phenomenon. This, therefore, justifies the reason why I used a case study. Hodkins and Hodkins (2001) say that case study facilitates the exploration of the unexpected and unusual. This is to say that it can unearth other issues that the researcher did not expect.

This case study is a multiple case study. According to Mills, Durepos and Wiebo (2010) a multiple case study is a study in which several cases are chosen to develop a more in-

depth understanding of the phenomena than a single case can provide. The cases could be two, three, four, five, six and so on as the researcher may feel are necessary. These scholars observe that the advantage of a multiple case is that the evidence is more compelling than a single case. According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) "the cases may be similar or not, they are chosen because it is believed that understanding them would lead to a better understanding or theorizing of the larger collection of cases" (p.35). In the same vein I decided to do a multiple case study rather than a single case study because it would help to understand other cases that have not been studied. Secondly, the findings from a multiple case study would be more reliable. In short I opted for a multiple case study because studying more than one government ministry would lead to a better understanding of a larger collection of ministries than a single ministry would do.

3.4. Sampling

For the purpose of this study I chose to use non-probability sampling in the name of purposive sampling. According to Kothari (2004) purposive sampling "involves purposive or deliberate selection of particular universe" (p.15). Marshal (1996) says that with purposive sampling the researcher "actively selects the most productive sample to answer the research questions" (p.523). In my study I chose participants who I hoped had the information to answer my research questions. Therefore my sampling method was determined by the desire to get rich data. For this reason I chose purposive sampling because I was looking for participants who could provide me with such information.

3.5. Target Population

In the background to the study I have said that before public relations was introduced in government ministries there was a stakeholders' meeting which took place in all the ministries which discussed issues that they (stakeholders) would expect from the public relations officers once they were employed. Therefore, my target population is based on the list of attendants to this workshop which included members of staff from the ministries, journalists and representatives of organizations (as indicated in the table below) that deal with government ministries from time to time. The most important thing to understand is that this study is anchored on a specific background, and that background is rooted in stakeholders that attended the workshop that brainstormed the issues they would expect from public relations officers. I believe that these are the people who have the necessary background to how public relations was introduced in the ministries because they were involved right from the beginning, and that they also interact with the public relations officers regularly. I know that there are other stakeholders but this study has not included them because they are not part of the background on which this study is anchored. Stakeholders here are divided into two: internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. By internal stakeholders I am referring to members of staff within the ministries, and by external stakeholders I am referring to people outside the ministries such as journalists and representatives of other organizations. Based on the list of attendants to the workshop explained above, the target population in the two ministries is 58. The tables below give details of the target population:

Table 3.2: Target Population in the First Ministry

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS - representatives of these organizations	INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS - officers from within the ministry
1. Farmers Union of Malawi	Deputy Director of Administration
2. Tobacco Control Commission	Administration officer
3. Chitedze Research Station	Human Resources Officer
4. Admarc	Agriculture Development and marketing officer
5. Farmers World	Agricultural Extension Services Officer
6. Vizara Rubber Plantations	Technical services officer
7. Agrimal Malawi Limited	Zone Manager (Lower Shire)
8. Clark Cotton Malawi	Zone Manager (Kasungu)
9. Development Broadcasting Unit	Farm Input Subsidy Program Coordinator
10. Malawi Rural Development Fund	Principal Agriculture officer
11. Alert	Development and Regulations officer
12. Nation Publications Limited	Planning and Research Officer
13. Malawi Broadcasting Corporation	Common Services officer
14. Zodiak Broadcasting Station	Projects Coordinator
15. Capital fm	Public Relations officer*

Table 3.3: Target Population in the Second Ministry

EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS – (Representatives from these organizations)	INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS – (Officers from the ministry)
1. Malawi Institute of Management	Deputy Director of Administration
2. Teachers Union of Malawi	Deputy Director for Primary Education
3. Malawi Examinations Board	Administration officer
4. Private Schools Association of Malawi	Division Manager (South East Education Division)
5. Joyce Banda Foundation	Division Manager (Central East Education Division)
6. Centre for Quality Based Education	Division Manager (North Education Division)
7. Centre for Girls Education	Technical services officer
8. University of Malawi	District Education Manager (Lilongwe)
9. Malawi Institute of Education	Projects Coordinator
10. Domasi Institute for Education	Private schools Coordinator
11. Technical Institute for Vocational Training	Common Services officer
12. Education for the Less Privileged Coalition	Public Relations officer*
13. Capital FM	
14. Malawi Institute for journalism (radio)	
15. Blantyre Newspapers Limited	
16. Malawi Broadcasting Corporation	

Table 4.3: Summary of the Target Population in the Two Ministries

MINISTRY	NUMBER OF INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS (officers from within ministries)	NUMBER OF EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS (Journalists and representatives of other organizations)	Total
Ministry 1	15	15	30
Ministry 2	12	16	28
Total	27	31	58

3.6 Sample Size

I used a sample size of 24 participants for this study from a population of 58 participants. According to authors such as Morse (2000), Nastasi et al (2004) and Comic et al (2003) there is no exact way of determining sample size in qualitative research. However, Morse (2000) observes that sample size must be guided by the “quality of data, the scope of the study, the nature of the topic and the number of interviews per participant” (p.3). On the other hand Nastasi et al (2004) and Comic et al (2003) advise that sample size in qualitative research must be driven by the research questions, time frame of your study and resources available. It was on Nastasi et al and Comic et al’s advice that I based my sample size i.e. a sample size that would answer my research questions adequately while at the same time taking into account the time frame of my study and resources available.

Since each ministry has its own stakeholders, I picked 12 participants per ministry (6 internal stakeholders and 6 external stakeholders). This gives me a total of 24 participants

across the two ministries. With this sample size I was able to yield more in-depth data since it is relatively small. Mac Cracken (2000) and Thomson (2011) observe that a bigger sample size will result in shallow investigations which will not give thick data which the researcher might be looking for.

3.7. Data Generation Techniques

Data was generated principally using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions and complementarily using document analysis. With semi-structured interviews I had key questions and issues that I wanted to find out from the participants but the questions were not standardized. According to Corbeta (2003) the researcher uses his judgment to decide on the wording of the questions and issues to be covered. However, I was also able to ask additional questions to the ones that I had planned depending on the direction which the interview was taking. Gray (2004) observes that interviews are useful in collecting data because the researcher has a chance to probe for more information. Considering the fact that I did a case study, where my concern was to get rich data, I found these techniques more useful in collecting such data because I was able to seek clarification where necessary. Documents such as job descriptions for public relations officers and correspondence between stakeholders and ministries such as memos were also used as data sources.

I conducted 6 interviews per ministry, where 3 participants were internal stakeholders and another three were external stakeholders. This means that in the two ministries I had conducted 12 interviews. I also conducted one focus group discussion per ministry

comprising 6 participants, where 3 were internal stakeholders and another 3 were external stakeholders. This means that I had conducted focus group discussions with 12 participants. This gives me 24 participants in total in the two ministries.

3.8. Data Analysis

I recorded the interviews and focus group discussions and then later on I transcribed them. The transcripts were studied in order to see the emerging categories or themes in the data from individual transcripts. The transcripts were read and then divided into meaningful units of analysis by way of highlighting bits of data that I thought were helpful in answering the research questions. I then assigned these chunks of data with words or phrases. I did this to all the transcripts until all the data was coded. Since the data analysis is an iterative process, I continued going back and forth trying to refine the codes and see if I had left out anything that could be important to the study. Later on I grouped the data with similar codes together. After going through these codes several times I then grouped them into themes.

The data was grouped into themes as follows: professionalism, outside interference, media relations, improved communications management, propaganda and distortion of facts, lack of involvement in decisions made by management, indicative achievements and challenges. In my analysis direct quotes or indentations have been used in order to support the findings.

3.9 Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness in research entails making sure that “the entire research process is truthful, careful and rigorous enough to qualify to make the claims that it does” Jwan and Ong’ondo (2011, citing Bassey 1999, p.129). Trustworthiness can be portrayed in terms of credibility (internal validity), transferability (external validity), dependability (reliability) and confirmability (objectivity) (Shenton, 2004). In my work I ensured trustworthiness in the following ways:

3.9.1 Credibility

Shenton (2004) says that credibility is the extent to which the findings are congruent with reality i.e. does the study really reports what actually happened. In order to achieve this I used triangulation in my work. This is the use of different methods, data generation techniques and data sources (Shenton, 2004; Jwan and Ong’ondo, 2011). In my study I used different data generation techniques such as interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis. I also used different sources of data such as public relations officers, managers in ministries and journalists just to mention a few. I also did site triangulation which Shenton (2004) says is sampling people in different organizations to achieve diversity of opinions or different perspectives. Already my study is a case study with two different ministries involved so the participants helped increase variety of opinions.

The other thing that I did to achieve credibility is what Shenton (2004) calls iterative questioning. This is to say that I was able to return to matters previously raised by the participant by rephrasing the questions in order to see if there are deliberate lies.

I also employed what in Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) referred to as member checking. By this I could give the participants interview transcripts to see if they have any observations to make.

Finally, I conducted a pilot study in one of the ministries with 11 participants. According to Given (2008) although pilot studies were traditionally associated with quantitative research, they have also gained ground in qualitative research. In my study the reasons for conducting the pilot study were as follows: to be conversant with the institutional regulations, to gain research experience prior to the main study and to be conversant with logistical problems. The pilot study revealed a number of fundamental issues connected to the process of carrying out the main study as follows: there was need to obtain formal permission from the management at ministry's level i.e. apart from the research permit from the National Commission for Science and Technology, written permission from the relevant officials from the ministries was required. It was also revealed that doing focus group discussions with some top management officials in ministries was going to be a problem, so they had to be considered for interviews only. I did not find any need to add or change any questions in the interview guide because they were able to address all the research questions adequately. In addition the experience of conducting interviews in the pilot study was also important because it helped me to develop better interviewing skills before I actually embarked on the main study.

3.9.2 Transferability

Shenton (2004) citing Merriam (1998) says this is the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied (generalized) to other situations or cases. Although many scholars

especially in quantitative circles have treated the issue of generalization with utmost suspicion, I tried to achieve it by using multiple cases. According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011,) citing Yin (2003) multiple cases can enhance transferability as contexts of different cases are likely to differ in some way. On this point Stake (1994) says although each case may be unique, it is also an example within a broader group as such the idea of transferability should not be rejected out-rightly. In the same vein, mine is a collection of two cases which I hope enhanced transferability, taking Stake's observation in mind.

3.9.3 Dependability

Shenton (2004) says this is the extent to which the study would yield similar results if it was repeated in the same contexts, same methods and same participants. As per Shenton's advice I have reported the entire process in detail in order to allow future researchers to understand the procedures clearly so that they must be able to arrive at similar results if they are to repeat the study.

3.9.4 Confirmability

This is the degree to which the researcher biases may affect the findings or the degree to which the researcher is neutral in his study (Jwan and Ong'ondo, 2011, citing Yin, 2003). To achieve this I also tried as much as possible to remain neutral in my study.

3.10 Ethics

According to Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) ethics are the moral principles that guide research from its inception, through to its completion and publication of results (p.147). I ensured the following in my study:

3.10.1 Anonymity

I ensured that names of all participants were not mentioned in the study. I also tried to the best of my ability not to give any clues that might lead the readers of my work to know the participants.

3.10.2 Confidentiality

Jwan and Ong'ondo (2011) say that if a participant tells you something in confidence, then they mean that you do not have to report that information, it is just for your knowledge. In my work I have made sure that such information remains confidential. I also assured them that even if that information is reported their identity shall remain unknown.

3.10.3 Plagiarism

I have made sure that all the material in my work is properly acknowledged if they do not originate my thinking.

3.10.4 Privacy

I did not force people to take part in this study, because apart from being unethical, I was also conscious of the fact that forcing participants could compromise the data that they could give out i.e. others may lie, exaggerate or hide some issues.

3.10.5 Deception

I did not deceive the participant as to the purpose and nature of this study. I explained everything to them so that I get informed consent. I also got necessary permission from all relevant authorities such as the National Commission for Science and Technology in Malawi which is the regulatory body for research activities.

3.11 Conclusion

The chapter has explained in detail the various steps that I undertook to systematically plan and generate data, from the philosophical paradigm to research approach, research method to ethical concerns. I believe that by employing these steps I managed to come out with useful data which helped me in answering the research questions. The next chapter presents the findings from the main study.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS FROM CASE ONE

4.0. Introduction

This chapter presents findings of interviews and focus group discussions conducted, and additional information from document analysis. Since this was a multiple case study of two ministries, this chapter presents findings from the first case and then the next chapter presents findings from the second case. Besides, for each case, I start with presenting data from internal stakeholders first, and then that from external stakeholders. In addition, the findings have been divided into two; perceptions expressing efficacy and perceptions expressing inefficiency. The research questions once again are: what are the perceptions of internal stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officer in government ministries? What are the perceptions of external stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries? How do the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders differ? The findings have been presented below.

4.1 Perceptions of Internal Stakeholders

In this section I present findings on perceptions of internal stakeholders. Their perceptions are divided into two; perceptions expressing efficacy of public relations officers and perceptions expressing inefficiency of public relations officers. In the next section I present findings on perceptions of external stakeholders.

4.1.1 Perceptions Expressing Efficacy of PROs

Presented below are perceptions of internal stakeholders expressing efficacy of public relations officers.

4.1.1.1 Good Communications Management Skills

One of the areas that this study sought to find out was how efficient is communication managed in ministries? The findings indicate that overall, communication management has improved since public relations was introduced in the ministry. The consensus among internal participants was that the flow of information now is far much better than it used to be when there was no public relations officer in this ministry.

One interviewee said the public relations officer has helped to bridge the information gap between members of staff within the ministry itself. She said in the past members of staff could not even know what was going on in the organization, only to learn from the media. She said now the ministry's members of staff are the first to know about what is happening in the ministry before the news goes public.

The PRO keeps us abreast of all new developments taking place within the ministry. We are communicated to before the public out there know about it.

Another interviewee said that the public relations officer has brought sense into the communication system within the ministry. He observed that in the years that the ministry was operating without the public relations officer there was no communication strategy in the ministry. He said this meant that anybody could do public relations job. He pointed out that people like the directors, deputy directors and other senior officers were the ones speaking to the public and the media. According to this interviewee, this brought confusion because some sensitive issues were being relayed to the public without due regard to its consequences. In other words, the public relations officer has brought

credibility into the communication system in the sense that no one can just speak to the media without his knowledge.

Another participant from the focus group discussions, who is also part of management in the ministry, said the public relations officer has brought a sense of trust among employees in the ministry. He said frequent, clear and open communication in the ministry has brought a sense of transparency and accountability. This has thus reduced resentments among employees. He observed that:

I have been around this ministry for a long time and have seen several transitions in the process. What I can say now is that employees feel that there is greater accountability and transparency in our ministry this time. Tensions and resentments that arise from lack of communication among staff members is now a thing of the past, thanks to the good job done by our PRO.

He continued to say that because of this kind of trust employees are able to work together more effectively.

On another note this participant also observed that the public relations officer has improved record keeping. He said in the past some vital information had been lost due to the fact that there was no one to take care of it. But now that they have the public relations officer, everything is on record because he feels duty bound to keep such information. According to this participant, the culture of record keeping helps many officers to refer to such information whenever there is need to do so. This, therefore, has simplified the work of many members of staff.

4.1.1.2 Job Alertness and Promptness

Job alertness can be looked at as the ability to recognize what is happening around someone, so that he should be able to make an appropriate response (Mindano, 2012). On the other hand promptness on the job means the ability to respond to issues without delay. In public relations the two issues (job alertness and promptness) cannot be separated because when one is aware of what is happening around him (even if he has the right responses), if he delays to react to those issues, his reaction may fail to produce desirable results. As such the two issues cannot be looked at in isolation.

When asked if public relations officers are able to know what is going on around them and respond accordingly many participants said public relations officers are able to know what is going on around them but they do not immediately respond because they are afraid that some issues might be sensitive and may not please their bosses. As such, they said, they wait for management to authorize them before they act on them. One interviewee continued to say that by the time the public relations officer gets authorization from management, the situation is already out of hand. He gave an example of wrong stories that have been published in the media before, which he said the public relations officer failed to immediately correct but wait for management to sanction a press release on it.

Another interviewee said in government people work on the principle of authorization and that the public relations officer is no exception to this. She said even if the public relations officer himself recognizes that the situation is getting out of hand he may not be free to act on it without first consulting the authority. She said there is little autonomy on

the part of the public relations officer. The public relations officer himself was tongue tied to talk about his independence when it comes to doing his job only saying:

In every organization you operate by the rules that are laid down by your management and any deviation from them may constitute insubordination.

Another participant from focus group discussion said he works closely with the public relations officer and that even if the public relations officer wants to respond to an issue he has to wait for authorization. As such issues of promptness are significantly compromised although he is very alert on his job even if job alertness is there.

4.1.1.3 Improved Media Relations

Media relations simply mean the relationship that the public relations officer has with the media fraternity such as journalists and editors. Almost all internal stakeholders from this ministry suggested that media relations between the ministry and the media have greatly improved since the public relations officer was recruited in 2011. One participant told me that:

The flow of information from the ministry to the media has greatly improved because, unlike in the past when we did not have the PRO, the PRO is able to clarify misconceptions now. He is always available for members from the media, and because of this the relationship has grown from strength to strength.

Another interviewee also said the improvement in media relations can be clearly seen when one compares how the ministry was operating without the public relations officer from the period of one party system up to 2011 when the public relations officer was employed for the first time.

To say the truth I have been in this ministry for a long time, about twenty two years. I have seen everything that is there to see in the ministry. The coming of the PRO some three years ago has helped us to contain the media. Since the PRO is someone that understands the media it is very easy to deal with them. I am saying this because in the past the relationship between the media and the ministry was cat and mouse. This is not the case now. He frequently holds meetings or press conferences, as they call them, to update them on issues that are cropping up.

Another participant added that

I, as one of the members of the management team, have seen that the PRO is really helping this ministry in handling media related issues. Actually because the PRO reports to me I have firsthand knowledge of what he is doing well and what he is failing. As a matter of fact before he goes public on a particular issue, he informs me as his boss so am always aware of his undertakings. He has managed well things like press releases, conferences, media contacts. By the way it's not always that the PRO will be speaking to the media. Sometimes it requires technical people to talk to the media, so he organizes our technical people and they talk to media people. So generally speaking, I on behalf of the ministry am very much impressed with his job when it comes to dealing with the media.

This shows that overall internal stakeholders are impressed with the way the public relations officer handle media relations in this ministry. Most of them pointed to an improved relationship between the media and the ministry, which they said was not the case before public relations was introduced in the ministry.

4.1.1.4 New Communication Platforms

Participants said that the public relations officer has introduced new communication platforms which have helped the ministry to increase its communication reach with stakeholders. They observed that traditionally communication has been disseminated through conventional means such as radios and television but the public relations officer has introduced other means such as mobile cinema which helps farmers to see new

technologies on videos. This was said to be a brain child of the public relations officer.

One participant said:

The PRO proposed several things to us which I think make a lot of sense. For example he proposed that we introduce mobile cinema so that farmers in rural areas should be able to get our message on new farming technologies. This has helped us to reach out to many people in the rural areas who may not have radios or television

Another participant from focus group discussion said the public relations officer has also increased communication reach through the introduction of face book and twitter pages, although others have blamed these pages as being inactive. He said many people who do not like using traditional media such as radios, newspapers and television as a source of news are able to use social media as source of news. He said the only thing that perhaps the public relations officer needs to be doing is to update it regularly because sometimes he takes time before updating it.

Concurring with his colleagues another participant said that leaflets containing information on important issues are also distributed to the public. He said this has also helped the ministry to increase its reach. He said sometimes the public relations officer just goes to a place and distribute leaflets which he said has helped in information dissemination among several target audience.

4.1.1.5 Indicative Achievements

In every job efficacy can be proved by achievements that one has registered over a period of time. In this ministry, I also sought the achievements that the public relations officer has so far accomplished. Therefore, one of the areas in my study was to ask for indicative achievements. When asked about this, some participants said the public relations officer

had achieved many things one of which is that he has improved the relationship between the ministry and other external stakeholders. One participant observed that one of the things the public relations officer did to improve this relationship was to eliminate monotonous formalities that were there when external stakeholders wanted to get information from the ministry. He said since his office is specially made to manage information flow, external stakeholders do not find it a problem now to get information from the ministry unlike in the past where they had to pass through various offices before reaching the right office. The participant added that this has reduced frustration on the part of the external stakeholders.

Another interviewee said the public relations officer has helped to improve the image of the ministry which he said was in a bad shape before he was employed. He said:

On a positive note, our PRO has helped to improve the image of our ministry which was in tatters before he came. Every day the ministry was in the news for wrong reasons. Sometimes the bad news emanated from the fact that there was a misunderstanding on a particular issue and journalists could just pick it up and report in the papers. But now he is there to clarify misunderstandings.

Concurring with the above observation, another participant said the public relations officer has improved the ministry's visibility in the media. He said their visibility is about positive news and not negative ones.

One from focus group discussions said another achievement could be measured in terms of the degree of collaboration that the ministry has with other organizations in implementing some social and/or developmental projects. He noted that the public relations officer has approached many organizations which are now partners with the

ministry in implementing projects such as modern farming methods and the fertilizer subsidy program (where farmers are sold fertilizer at a subsidized price). He noted:

I consider his ability to rope in partners in development projects as one of his major achievements.

He added that the public relations officer has also managed to tame the media. This interviewee noted that his ability to befriend himself with the media is what has made the ministry have positive publicity in the media. He said journalists are free to contact him at any time as such the ministry has become a “darling of the media” as opposed to being an enemy.

4.1.2 Perceptions Expressing Inefficiency of the PRO

Under this section, I now present perceptions of internal stakeholders expressing inefficiency of public relations officers.

4.1.2.1 Lack of Proper Training

The findings pointed to lack of proper training and education for the public relations officer as one of the factors that negatively affects effectiveness of public relations officers. Just like in the pilot study it was revealed that the public relations officer in this ministry is not qualified in public relations, as such he does not understand basic public relations issues such as accuracy, objectivity and truth.

One interviewee observed that qualified practitioners run away from the public sector for private sector because they are better remunerated in the private sector. As such the ministry does not have any option but to recruit from what is available to them. He explained:

For us it is a very big challenge in the ministry because we compete with the private sector which has more financial resources than us. All trained PROs are attracted with the greener pastures that our colleagues in the private sector can offer. We cannot compete with them on that front. Therefore you do not expect the PRO in a government ministry to be as efficient as that who works in a private organisation. The one in the public sector is perhaps not qualified enough otherwise he would have gone to the private sector.

Another interviewee concurred with him saying it has now become a norm in government to employ people who are not qualified because the qualified ones (even if they are available) the ministry will not manage to hold on to them. He said salary wise, the ministry does not pay well so public relations officers do not prefer working with ministries

The documents which I also used as a source of data also revealed this. In one memo from management of the ministry addressed to the Malawi Government Treasury Office, it was argued that public relations section in the ministry was failing to grow because public relations personnel, which the ministry can afford, are not as skilled as the personnel which the private sector recruit. The memorandum was a call by the ministry to the treasury office to increase funding so that the ministry can also compete with the private sector.

On how this lack of training affects the efficacy of public relations officer, one respondent said:

Failure by the PRO to understand some basic public relations issues like the importance of truth and objectivity has led to the ministry to put its image at risk. Most seriously is the fact that he cannot come up with plans to move the ministry forward, public relations wise. The only thing where

I feel he succeeds in talking to the media because that is the education he received.

However, the public relations officer himself said he tries to be professional in his job but was of the opinion that people that receive information from the ministry have a negative attitude towards information coming from the ministry. He observed that people think that the public relations officer can never be objective or truthful. He said that:

It is not fair for the people to say that the PRO is not objective or truthful because in as far as we are concerned he is very ethical, the only problem is our clients out there lack trust.

Another interviewee who is part of ministry's management, while agreeing with other participants that the public relations officer's lack of adequate qualifications compromises his efficiency, also said people must change their attitude towards ministries. He said:

Since the dawn of multiparty democracy the ministries have gone through massive reformation. I can agree with you that in the past nobody would present information to the public that would antagonize the executive arm of the government. But things have changed nowadays. People are free to pursue their job within their professional dictates, so too is our public relations officer. Of course I can say somehow that in other cases the PRO is not that professional depending on the circumstances.

Overall we can say that many internal stakeholders felt that lack of adequate training for the public relations officer is compromising efficacy of their work, though some participants also felt it is important to look at the positive contribution that the public relations officer has brought.

4.1.2.2 Lack of Involvement in Decisions Made by Management

Internal stakeholders felt that the public relations officer is not involved in the decisions that management makes. They said this makes it difficult for him to carry out his job because sometimes he is confronted with issues he does not know. One participant from focus group discussion observed that:

The public relations officer is not involved in major decisions that the ministry makes. You find that management has agreed to do something but the public relations officer is not aware of that. So when journalists are coming to him, they confront him with questions and then he gives answers that are not in line with what management has resolved. Sometimes he tells them that he has to consult first. Such responses, in the eyes of journalists, shows that he is incompetent, when as a matter of fact it is management which has not involved him in their decision. As someone that speaks on behalf of the government, we expect him to be told everything.

While on the same issue other participants said the public relations officer is not involved in decision making because members of management feel that he is not at par with them in as far as knowledge is concerned. One participant had this to say:

Management feels that the public relations officer is too junior to sit with them during meetings, even more so to involve him in decision making. Here we are talking about a person like the Director of Administration, for example, who has a PHD. How do you think he is going to entertain a suggestion coming from the public relations officer who has a mere diploma? It can just work!

From their sentiments, it can be clearly seen that participants felt lack of involvement of public relations officer in decision making is negatively affecting their job delivery. Many participants blamed this on management's lack of understanding of the importance of having a public relations officer.

4.1.2.3 Outside Interference

Participants said that there is a great deal of interference on the public relations job. This type of interference is coming from what one interviewee termed “outsiders”. By “outsiders” he meant people like civil society organizations, the media and politicians among other interest groups. He said:

Political interference is there in the sense that sometimes politicians dictate what the public relations officer has to do. In other words, the PRO cannot do something that is, in the eyes of government, politically undesirable even if it is in the best interest of the public. The other type interference comes from people such as members of the civil society who always want to have their way, and want their voice to be heard. If you do something contrary to their expectations then they will be on your neck.

In the focus group discussion that I conducted all internal stakeholders agreed that there is indeed interference on the job of the public relations officer. They all agreed that the influence was from both internal and external forces. One participant blamed the external forces such as journalists and the civil society for merely criticizing the public relations officer without giving any advice. He pointed out that the public relations officer may not always do the right things but criticism from external stakeholders must come with solutions.

Another interviewee said one of the reasons why the public relations officer fail to do his job effectively in other cases is because of conflicting information that is coming from external stakeholders. He said different stakeholders have different agenda’s to fulfill so they always talk about an issue which favors them. As such the public relations officer has divided attention, and effectively compromising his efficacy. He observed that interference comes in various forms. It ranges from being told not to speak to the media

on a particular issue, to being told what to say to the media on a particular issue. It was also revealed that sometimes they are even told never to deal with certain media houses which are black listed as “confrontational media”. Even the public relations officer attested to this by saying:

I was once told to stop speaking to a certain media house. I was also told to stop giving them adverts because the media house in question was critical of our ministry. Of course the media house was hurt, but if you look at a bigger picture even our audience was also hurt because this media house is one of the biggest in the country and therefore, very reliable source of information.

Two things came out from the data that I got from internal stakeholder. The first was that public relations officers faces interference from government officials and politicians who usually want to dictate what the public relations officer has to do. The second issue is that the public relations officer also faces interference from interest groups such as Nongovernmental organizations and the media, who have their own agendas that are on the warpath with the agendas of the ministry.

4.1.2.4 Challenges

In every organization there are challenges that employees face as they are executing their duties. The public relations officer in this ministry is no exception to this. One of the challenges that were shared by almost all interviewees was the lack of adequate financial resources. It was observed that the public relations section operates on a thin budget. As such, most projects that the public relations officer initiates stall due to lack of funding. The participants gave me an example of a newsletter that the public relations officer

wanted to be produced every six month but was only produced once since 2012 due to lack of funds.

Another participant said lack of autonomy for the public relations officer is also making it difficult for him to make important decisions in good time. He noted:

You will find that something has happened and the PRO is failing to act on it because he is waiting for someone who is perhaps abroad to give him a go ahead. This lack of independence is also a challenge for him because he cannot act on his own.

He said if the public relations officer was given some room for autonomy he would have been far much efficient. In addition to this he said that because of lack of independence there is lack of royalty to the job. He noted that the public relations officer feels other people are doing the job for him, so he is not very royal to it because most of what he does is simply to implement directives from management, he cannot use his discretion to determine how he would carry out a particular task. He added that:

This lack of independence leads to demonization. Even if the public relations officer has done a good job, he does not take responsibility because he feels that it is not him who has done the job but people who gave him instructions.

However, another interviewee who is privy to management said there was no way the public relations officer would be allowed to do his entire work single handedly. He said there was need for him to be provided with direction since what is going on in the ministry is national business. He observed that if the public relations officer is given too much independence he may make a very serious mistake which might even put the whole nation into disrepute. He added that what management does is simply to monitor and give direction where there is need.

Another participant from focus group discussion was of the opinion that if the public relations officer is given too much autonomy he may start feeling that his job is equal to that of his immediate supervisors as such management tries to reduce his autonomy but at the same time try to give him some degree of independence. He said too much autonomy may lead to carelessness.

4.2 Perceptions of External Stakeholders

After looking at perception of internal stakeholders, this section presents findings from external stakeholders. It starts with perceptions expressing efficacy of public relations officers then those expressing their inefficiency. Most of the issues are similar to what internal stakeholders said, but a few are different.

4.2.1 Perceptions Expressing Efficacy of PROs

This section presents perceptions of external stakeholders expressing efficacy of the public relations officer. After this, the next section presents perceptions of external stakeholders expressing inefficiency of public relations officer.

4.2.1.1 Good Communications Management Skills

Just like internal stakeholders, external stakeholders also felt that the public relations officer has improved communication management in this ministry. They were also of the opinion that the public relations officer has also improved the flow of communication between them (external stakeholders) and the ministry. One interviewee said since public relations was introduced, information flow from the ministry to the media has improved a great deal. He alluded to the fact that in the past there was no key person singularly charged with the responsibility to handle communication issues. He noted:

I, as a journalist, who interacts with the PRO on regular basis to gather news, can say, without any favor, that in terms of information flow the PRO has really helped us because now we have someone to whom we can rush to get information. There are other things that he gets them wrong but not communication management.

Another participant from focus group discussion said he was also satisfied with the way communication is managed in the ministry with regards to external publics.

Our organization is an umbrella body for all the farmers in the country. I, on behalf of all the people that we represent can assure you that as much as the public relations officer has his own flaws, we appreciate the way he handles communication issues. He always updates us on important issues, he seeks input from us. I thought this is excellent. What we don't know is whether he is able to use this feedback or not.

On the other hand another respondent said while he appreciates that there has been an improvement in the flow of information across stakeholders; he felt that the public relations officer has his own people to whom he communicates what he wants. He observed that the public relations officer has special people and organizations that he trusts and makes sure that he communicates with them almost on everything. He continued to say that some organizations have been branded by the ministry as “trouble shooters” such that they are not communicated to on some important issues.

Another participant said in an interview that she was generally happy with the way the public relations officer does communication management, but noted that the public relations officer is at times very selective in terms of information dissemination. Her argument was that the public relations officer suppresses all information which he thinks has the potential to put government into disrepute even if public interest demands that he releases it.

4.2.1.2 Job Alertness and Promptness

As explained earlier job alertness can be looked at as the ability to recognize what is happening around someone, so that he should be able to make an appropriate response (Mindano, 2012). On the other hand promptness on the job means the ability to respond to issues without delay.

External stakeholders were also of the opinion that the public relations officer is very much alert on the job but not necessarily prompt in responding to issues. One participant said:

He is very vigilant; they assess what is happening in their ministries from time to time. I have said that the primary job of a PRO is to talk to the media. This being the case they are watchful, looking at what is happening and how to respond to it. He analyses news trends in the media in order to know the issues that are making news. So they are well alert.

He however said they are not very prompt in responding to situations because of the political nature of the environment in which they work. He said because the ministry is part of the government, public relations officers are subjected to a higher degree of scrutiny and operate on instructions from their boss. He observed that sometimes the bosses take time to advise them and as they are waiting for instructions from their boss the situation will have gone out of hand. He said the solution to this would be to allow public relations officers to have some independence so that they use their discretion to respond to issues.

Another participant said she had interacted several times with the public relations officer in the ministry and she had seen that he is with no doubt very much alert on the job. She said in the meetings that she has attended the public relations officer has demonstrated

that he is able to recognize what is going on in and outside the ministry but fails to take action promptly because he waits for direction from management. She said this compromises his work efficacy because public relations demand that practitioners be prompt in responding to issues.

Although all participants, even in the focus group discussion, had agreed that the public relations officer was alert on his job, one respondent said he did not think the public relations officer was alert because if that was the case he would also be prompt in responding to issues. He reasoned that it cannot happen that the public relations officer should be waiting for direction from his bosses every time there is an issue. He argued that someone who does not take action on a situation which is getting out of hand does not recognize what is happening. He added that when there is something which is going wrong the public relations officer must make sure that he informs management and advise them on what to do.

4.2.1.3 Improved Media Relations

Several participants agreed that the coming of public relations officers into the ministry has helped the flow of information from the ministry to the media. However they also pointed out some flaws. One participant said in as much as public relations officers have improved the flow of information from the ministry to the media, there remains a culture of secrecy where by the public relations officer does not want to divulge information on controversial topics even if that information is for the good of the public. He said the public relations officer is always in defense of the ministry even on issues that are wrong. When it was put to this participant as to why he wants the public relations officer to stop

defending the government when his job is to protect the image of the government, this participant said:

Yes I agree with you. But the question perhaps is to moderate your secrecy with information. To what extent can the PRO go in hiding information? The PRO must balance between people's need to have the information and his job to protect the government. What you must consider is the greater good. Is it better to hide this information than to have it known? What do people want? So all these questions must be answered by the PRO before making that decision. However, I must say openly that the relationship between us, as media practitioners, and the ministry is better than it used to be when there was no public relations officer.

Another interviewee also concurred with other participants by saying that what he sees now between the media and the ministry is an improved relationship between the media and the ministry. He said the ministry no longer looks at journalists as antagonists but rather allies in development. This is also the kind of sentiments that were expressed by some participants from within the ministry. But he was also quick to point out that the relationship is still on the way to healing as the public relations officer who is charged with the responsibility to talk to the media has not completely opened up, because the ministry is still coming from a background where information was always hidden. He said there was need for the public relations officer to understand the Communications Act which guarantees the freedom of the media in accessing public information, which also protects the public relations officer from unfair criticism when he reveals information which is in the interest of the public.

In the focus group discussion both parties (internal stakeholders and external stakeholders) agreed that the relationship between the media and the ministry has the potential to either make or break the ministry if not properly managed. One participant

from the media fraternity said the public relations officer has shown greater enthusiasm to work with them over the past two years. He said:

I agree with my friends that the relationship between journalists and the ministry through the office of the public relations officer is showing positive signs. In the 1990s up to late 2000s journalists could not even think of getting information from the ministry. Everything was hidden and no one could dare say that he needed information from the ministry but now it's a completely different story

Another participant said the public relations officer has succeeded in giving publicity to the ministry through the media, a thing which he said has helped the ministry to gain support from various stakeholders. He said in return the media have also helped the ministry to get its message to the public.

4.2.1.4 Indicative Achievements

External stakeholders also had their own opinion in so far as the achievements of public relations officer are concerned. One of the achievements that were shared by many participants was that the public relations officer has helped people from outside the ministry to access services from the ministry through the public relations office. They said this has been made possible because the public relations officer is the hub of information in the ministry and that people just go straight to him if they need any assistance. They observed that before public relations office was established there was no office which was specially made to handle communication issues as such accessibility to vital information was a problem.

Just like internal stakeholder, external stakeholders also said the relationship between the ministry and external stakeholders has improved. They said most of the

misunderstandings in the past were due to the fact that there were no proper channels of communication. They said public relations officer has opened the way to different avenues of communication which has promoted understanding between the two parties. They noted the public relations officer has given structure to the ministries as such there is a proper way of channeling information down to consumers of it.

Another achievement they talked about was increased community participation in decision making. They noted that public relations officers are able to go to the communities and conduct debates with the public on some issues before a decision is made. According to them this has increased people's trust in the decisions being made and policies being implemented by the ministry.

4.2.2 Perceptions Expressing Inefficiency of the PRO

Under this subsection I present perceptions of external stakeholders expressing inefficiency of the public relations officer.

4.2.2.1 Lack of Proper Training

External stakeholders also shared similar sentiments just like internal stakeholders. One interviewee said professionalism is one of the biggest challenges facing public relations in government ministries. He said the ministry has failed to promote professionalism because they do not employ qualified personnel to do public relations job. He said they employ cheap labor because they are running away from costs arising from qualified personnel, which in the end compromises the quality of the output. He added that lack of proper training can easily be manifested in some of the work of the public relations officer. He gave an example of their failure to gauge public opinion correctly. He said:

You will find that the public is saying one thing and he is doing another thing. All this boils down to lack proper training and education. I can also add that the public relations officer does not value research in his work. He does not find out what people are saying before he implements something

However another external stakeholder said in as much as the public relations officers in government ministries generally lack proper training and education, they have tried to rise above this deficiency. He said people must look at where the ministries are coming from. He said unlike in the past, now they are able to get information from the ministry at any time, which according to him is a great improvement. He said he chooses to look at a bigger picture than just concentrate on the type of education that the public relations officers have.

Asked whether the public relations officers are ethical in carrying out their duties, this participant said he was not impressed with the way public relations officers handle some issues. He explained:

For example, some of the messages coming out from the ministry are not a true reflection of what is actually happening on the ground. Sometimes we have meetings with the ministry and we agree on what is supposed to be done, but later on you find that what the PRO is telling the news men is the opposite of what you agreed so you wonder what type of PR they are doing. But we just choose to look at the good side of what they are doing?

Another external stakeholder said that ethics are the biggest challenge for the public relations officer. She said they defend unpopular causes which make the general public lose trust in them. She said such things show that they do not care about their professionalism. She said all this is happening because there is a culture of conservativeness that is passed on from generation to generation in the ministry. She said

even if the ministry has to employ a trained public relations officer this culture will still be passed on to him.

To substantiate his claim, this participant showed me a letter which she had written to the ministry where she expressed her worry over the conduct of the public relations officer in this ministry. In the letter she said her organization was worried because of the way the public relations officer has misrepresented the resolutions which the ministry and other stakeholders had agreed during one meeting. She said the issues that were discussed had been distorted; as such the public was questioning the integrity of the organizations that made the resolutions. In part the letter read:

In this regard we want to disassociate ourselves from the resolutions which do not represent what we agreed during the meeting.

All this shows that lack of public relations training for public relations officer is negatively affecting the efficacy of his performance. Participants felt that the public relations officer is failing to understand basic public relations issues such as honesty and truth, which he would have known if he had adequate training.

4.2.2.2 Outside Interference

External stakeholders had their own opinion on the question of interference. They had unanimously agreed with what internal stakeholders had said that indeed some people interfere with the public relations officers job. However, what they differed was that these external stakeholders did not agree that they are also part of the people that interfere with the public relations officer's job.

One interviewee said that the public relations officer is not free to carry out his job in the ministry because there is interference from management which is coming from government authorities. Asked what type of interference he was talking about, he said it ranges from dictating what he has to do, to giving preferential treatment to some organizations that are seen to be supporting the ideologies of the government.

We have seen some organizations that are given special treatment by the public relations officer because they support government on everything. We have also seen them ignore organizations that are critical of the government. An organization like ours is never invited to meetings with the ministry these days because we are seen to be critical of them. All these things which the PRO does are instructions from government authorities

When I put it to him that public relations officers are also complaining that organizations like theirs also interfere with their job, this respondent said he was not aware that some people were talking about that. But said he did not think by providing checks and balances to the ministries they were interfering with the public relations officer's job. He, however, said he was going to take up the issue with the ministry to see how they could handle communication between the two parties.

In the focus group discussion this was a heated debate between internal and external stakeholders. However, the consensus was that there was indeed interference coming from both within the ministry and outside the ministry. One participant accused journalists of exerting unnecessary pressure on public relations officers by way of writing fake stories about the ministry. However, another participant said public relations officers must accept to be subjected to scrutiny because they operate on taxpayers' money and that the public must know how their money is being used.

Another participant said at one time the public relations officer gave a media blackout (stopped giving stories) to some media houses because they were seen to be critical of the government. He said this shows lack of knowledge for the profession because without giving out information the media shall always speculate.

4.2.2.3 Challenges

External stakeholders also had their own opinion on what they felt were the challenges of the public relations officer. Some of them are similar to those expressed by internal stakeholders while others are not. One of the challenges that featured highly among many participants was that the public relations officer is forced by the ministry to defend unpopular decisions made by the government even when they know that they are not consistent with the wishes of the people. They said it was time the public relations officer rose above party politics and tell the ministry that defending unpopular causes will just make the ministry even more unpopular among people.

Another challenge related to this one was that the public relations officer is under influence from management to please the government of the day. One participant said:

The PRO is not a free man. He is under unwarranted influence from top ministry officials to please the government of the day. He always takes instructions from them, if he dares deviate from their instructions it is taken as noncompliance or disobedience and this can lead to dismissal. We are not saying that he should not take instructions from his bosses, no! But he should be able to kindly tell them that what you are telling me to do is not only against my profession but also the wishes of the people, or what you are telling me is wrong therefore I am not doing it.

Another challenge as observed by some interviewees was failure to respond to crisis situations in real time. They said the ministry needed to have a crisis management plan in

place so that any time there is a crisis situation they must be able to respond to it immediately. They said, however, that the public relations officer does not have a crisis management plan in place. According to them the public relations officer responds to issues too late which they said demonstrates lack of proper training and skills.

4.3 Comparisons Between Perceptions of Internal and External Stakeholders

One of the study's research questions was to find out how the perceptions of internal stakeholders differ from those of external stakeholders on the efficacy of the public relations officers. The reason for comparing their perceptions was upon realization that external stakeholders' (such as journalists) perception may be informed by other reasons or factors that internal stakeholder (members of staff in the ministry) may not know. Similarly, other things may be unknown to external stakeholders while internal stakeholders may be well aware of them. For this reason, I wanted the study to account for the differences and reveal what is behind such differences. I should say on the outset that the two sets of stakeholders were similar in most of their perceptions except on a few areas.

Comparisons between the perceptions of stakeholders have been made without necessarily dividing them along the lines of efficacy and inefficiency because their differences do not follow that order. For example, internal stakeholders can say that the public relations officer has helped improve media relations while external stakeholders may say he has failed to improve media relations. In this case, for internal stakeholders, their observation shows some efficacy on the part of the public relations officer while the

observation from external stakeholders shows inefficiency. Therefore, in comparing their perceptions it is not possible to divide them according to efficacy and inefficiency, as what might be efficiency to internal stakeholders might be inefficiency to external stakeholders.

4.3.1 Outside Interference

One of the differences in their perception was that in as much as both groups of stakeholders agreed that the public relations officer is under influence from government officials and politicians, internal stakeholders indicated that the influence does not only come from the government side but also from what one participant called “pressure groups” such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and the media. It was observed that some NGOs and media houses have their own agendas which antagonize the work of the public relations officers. The observation was that some NGOs are funded by donors and they want to be seen by their funders that they are working by way of antagonizing ministries.

External stakeholders never raised this issue. To them the only groups of people that interfere with the work of public relations officers are people within the ministry. This is a very important difference to note because all along external stakeholders thought that they were not part of the group of people who interfere with the work of the public relations officers. Even the statement that was released by Media Council of Malawi (as pointed out in the statement of the problem) never mentioned about external forces interfering with the work of public relations officers. But members of staff within the ministry thought that they were also part of them. This means that external stakeholders

must also make sure that they do not influence the public relations officers to do anything that is inconsistent with the best public relations practices.

4.3.2 Propaganda

The other difference in their perception is that internal stakeholders felt that the ministries have gone through transformation and that their public relations officers are objective, impartial, unprejudiced and balanced in conducting their duties. On the other hand, external stakeholders felt that although the ministries have gone through transformation, the public relations officers are not always objective, impartial and unprejudiced in carrying out their duties. They said that public relations officers are objective in some situations and are biased in others. They observed that on all issues concerning government the public relations officer will always serve the interest of the government and not that of the public.

This disparity in their perception is down to the fact that the ministry is coming from a background (before public relations officers were recruited) where all information was distorted before it was released to the public. Now it is a problem for the public relations officer to convince the public that they can disseminate reliable information. One external stakeholder attested to this by saying:

For us, we need a lot of convincing that the PRO can give credible information because we still remember what used to happen in the past. All information was distorted to suit the interest of the government, so we still lack trust to some extent.

What was clear about their perceptions was that while both groups agreed that the public relations officer has improved many things in the ministry, there is still a feeling among

external stakeholders that the public relations officer has not completely gained trust from them. They felt the public relations officer must always strive for truth and objectivity, and stop working as propaganda agents.

4.4 Conclusion

In a nut shell these are the findings from the first case. These findings will be discussed later on. The chapter has looked at the perceptions of internal stakeholders, external stakeholder, and then compared the findings from the two sets of stakeholders. The next chapter looks at the findings from the second case.

CHAPTER FIVE

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS FROM CASE TWO

5.0. Introduction

As earlier explained, to enhance comprehensibility of the data, I have presented the findings in two chapters. This chapter, therefore, presents the findings from the second case. The Findings have also been divided into two parts; findings from internal stakeholders and findings from external stakeholder. I must repeat that most of the findings in both cases are similar, with just a few differences. This shows that the cases are similar in more characteristics and features than they are different.

5.1. Perceptions of Internal stakeholders

This section first presents findings on perceptions of internal stakeholders. Another section will present perceptions of external stakeholders.

5.1.1. Perceptions expressing Efficacy of PROs

Under this section I present perceptions of internal stakeholders expressing efficacy of the public relations officer.

5.1.1.1. Improved Media Relations

As explained earlier media relations here means the relationship that the ministry has with members of the media. In this case there were several revelations that came out in the course of the interview and focus group discussion. However the revelations were not much different from what I had found out in the first case.

One of the revelations was that media relations have greatly improved since public relations was introduced in the ministry. One participant during the interview remembered how the media used to attack the ministry in early 2000s even when there was nothing wrong. According to her this was simply because the ministry did not have a link person whom the media could contact for information. She said the ministry had a culture of hiding information from the media, and this made the media to be curious. She said sometimes the media could just publish information without verifying with the ministry since the ministry was not willing to open up. This participant observed that the coming of the public relations officer into the ministries has opened the door for journalists because they have a person in the ministry who they can contact and get information.

Another participant from focus group discussion concurred with her by saying that the poor relationship between the ministry and the media in the past was due to the fact that the ministry was operating in secrecy, which attracted the interest from the media, and the fact that the ministry was hiding information made the relationship even poorer. He said the public relations officer has removed all these communication barriers thereby improving the relationship between the two parties.

Another interviewee said with the coming of the public relations officer the ministry has realized that the media is one of the most significant communication opportunities that the ministry can make use of. He said this has led to a symbiotic relationship between the ministry and the media where the media get information from the ministry and the ministry uses the media to have its communication passed on to the public. He said in

light of this fact the ministry has seen the increased number of press releases being published in the media which is a sign that the they two are working symbiotically.

However, another participant from focus group discussion said in as much as the relationship has improved between the two parties, he still felt that members of the media are still skeptical and distrustful towards the public relations officer. He still believes that the cat and mouse relationship still exists but they have simply accepted each other because either of them want to have their job done (i.e. the public relations officer must pass the message to the public through the media and the media must find stories to publish). Nonetheless, he said as compared to the past, the relationship has greatly improved.

5.1.1.2. Job Alertness and Promptness

As already explained in the first case, on job alertness I wanted to find out if public relations officers are able to know what is going around them and how they react to situations. The responses to this question showed differences in perceptions between the responses I got from internal stakeholders and those from external stakeholders.

Most internal stakeholders said that the public relations officer is always alert on his job. They said he always makes sure that he knows what is going on around the ministry in so far as public relations is concerned. One participant who is also part of management team for the ministry had this to say:

She is very much alert in my opinion. She is always on the lookout for what is happening within and outside our ministry. She monitors the media very closely to see new developments. She always reports to me new developments that am not even aware. If there is a misconception she

always moves in to correct it. She is always available to give information to the media. So if you ask me about that, I would say yes she is very much alert and I give him credit for that.

Asked if the public relations officer is also prompt in responding to situations, this interviewee said there are cases where her response is prompt and other cases where his response is not prompt. He said his response to issues depend on several factors such as resources. He said, for example, if the response to an issue demands financial support and then the ministry does not have the money then it means her reaction to the issue in question will not be prompt enough because the ministry will have to look for money elsewhere.

Another interviewee said he believed the public relations officer on his own is quite alert on his job but there are other factors that bring him down. He said the public relations officer is able to respond to misconceptions that are making rounds in the media; she is able to react to a situation before it becomes a crisis but she is betrayed by management. He said the public relations officer does not have the support of the ministry's management. He said the ministry does not put public relations as a priority area as such it is deprived of support such as money to run some projects. He observed that given the necessary support, the public relations officer would be very efficient in identifying problems in and around the ministry and responding to them before they tarnish the image of the ministry.

Agreeing with his colleagues another respondent said there are issues that the public relations officer has managed to respond promptly to them such as queries from the media, but there are also issues that she has failed to respond in time because on her own

she cannot do it. He gave an example of a case when the ministry decided to close all private schools which were operating despite the fact that they did not have the minimum requirements. She said:

There were a lot of issues that came out after the closure of the private schools, most of them untrue. The public relations officer tried to ask our bosses here at the ministry to give him money to respond to the issues in a press release but the ministry said there was no money. So she was just helpless and left the issue unattended to. The bottom line is that money is not easily released for public relations here because they are not serious with it.

In a nutshell, many participants (from within the ministry) believed that the public relations officer's alertness on the job is unquestionable; the only problem is that he does not have the necessary support to respond to some issues.

5.1.1.3. Good Communications Management Skills

One of the areas that this study wanted to explore is how communication is managed in ministries. Communication in organizations can be both internal (where the organization and its members communicate with one another), and external (where an organization communicates with members of the public). The study looks at how communication is managed in these regards. The interviews revealed that internal stakeholders were impressed with the way information is managed in the ministry. Their general observation was that since the public relations officer was brought into the ministry there has been a huge improvement in the flow of information among members of staff. One participant said members of staff are now able to get information in good time. He added:

You know in the past a memo could be written to day, but you find that members of staff are getting information may be a month later when the information in the memo had become stale. But today we get information

instantly, thanks to the good information management by the PRO. He may not be responsible for delivering memos but he gets such memos and put it on notice boards so anyone can see.

In the focus group discussion one participant said the public relations officer has improved information management by opening a special office (which they call “Information Room”) where all records are kept. He said that all new and old information is kept in one place such that it is very easy for the members of staff to get. He said this has made it very easy for everyone in the ministry to access information anytime they want. He said any new policies, programs and general information, apart from being communicated to them through other means, are also found in the information room.

Another participant during an interview said the improvement in the flow of communication is not only internal but also external. He said over the past three years he has seen the ministry engaging external stakeholders such as the media and non-governmental organizations more and more. To him this is the sign that the ministry is moving in the right direction. He said before public relations was introduced external stakeholders were looked at as outsiders who had nothing to offer but to undermine the ministry’s programs.

However, there was one observation that this participant made. He said that much as he appreciates that the public relations officer has good information management skills, he still felt that the public relations officer does not ask members of the ministry to give him feedback on how information and information channels are managed. He said there are no mechanisms by which the public relations officer could be getting feedback from members of staff on the programs that he implements. He, therefore, asked the public

relations officer to consider introducing channels that would allow her to get feedback from the members of staff. He said feedback cannot only be obtained during meetings but even using suggestion boxes.

5.1.1.4. Indicative Achievements

One of the achievements shared by all participants was that the public relations officer has improved stakeholder-relationship. They said the ministry now engages external stakeholders more than they used to in the past. It was observed that the public relations officer recognizes the importance of engaging stakeholders and has managed to lobby for more consultations with external stakeholders which have led to increased acceptance for the messages that are coming out of the ministry.

The other achievement that came out of the interviews was that the public relations officer has improved the ministry's visibility in the media. Almost all participants agreed with this one. One participant said:

Now we are able to see more and more stories being published about the ministry in the media than it was the case in the past. The stories are usually positive about the ministry, unlike in the past where many stories were negative about the ministry.

Another achievement is that the public relations officer has introduced information sharing platforms both within and outside the ministry. Newsletters, frequent engagements with the media and other means used for internal communication were all said to be among some of the ways that have boosted information sharing across all stakeholders. One member of staff said the interaction between members of staff and

management has led to increased pride and motivation among members of staff such that the dissatisfaction arising from lack of communication is no longer there.

5.1.2. Perceptions Expressing Inefficiency

Under this section I present perceptions of internal stakeholders expressing inefficiency of the public relations officer.

5.1.2.1. Lack of Proper Training

Just like in the first case, I looked at professionalism from three parameters, namely education and training, ethical issues and how these two affect the efficacy of the public relations officer. The findings were not very different from the first case in that participants agreed that the public relations officer in this ministry does not have formal training in public relations and this, therefore, affects her job delivery negatively. The participants observed that due to lack of funds the ministry fails to compete with the private sector in terms of better remuneration so all qualified public relations officers leave for greener pastures. One interviewee said:

It's not like we don't want to employ qualified personnel, we do want! But the problem is that once we employ them they also start looking for well paying jobs elsewhere and eventually they leave. Now as a ministry we have decided that the best way is to employ people who are not really qualified so that they can stay longer with us. We can then send them to school later on and tie them to a bond so that even when they finish their studies they will have to serve the ministry for a specific period before they leave

A look at an advert that was put in one of the countries daily newspapers in 2011 calling for candidates to fill the vacant position of a public relations officer in this ministry indicates that the ministry was looking for someone with a degree in education,

journalism or mass communication. This confirms what participants were raising about lack of proper training. The advert did not mention public relations qualification as a requirement.

Asked how lack of trained personnel has affected the public relations job delivery, the interviewee said it has affected the ministry in the sense that the public relations officer is not able to make judgment on some basic public relations issues. He gave an example of failure to respond to rumors in the in the public domain which may climax into a crisis for the ministry. He added that the public relations officer fails to make independent decisions because he lacks confidence due to inadequacy of her qualifications. The participant further added that the public relations officer can hardly make independent decisions because she feels everyone will not respect her decisions, owing to her lack of proper qualifications. He however, said the ministry has learnt to leave with such personnel because that is the only type of people they can afford.

Another participant from focus group discussion said the public relations officer's lack of requisite qualifications has been manifested in her lack of proper judgment over issues.

He observed that:

You will find that an issue that requires to be relayed to the public through a press conference; she communicates it using a press release. This is lack of knowledge for PR.

However, another participant in the same focus group discussion said in as much as the public relations officer has his own inadequacies, she has managed to clear the image of the ministry in the eyes of the public. He said there have been several cases that he has

managed to resolve before they went out of hand. He gave an example of the rumor that made news in the media in 2013 that the Malawi School Certificate of Education Examinations (for form four secondary school students) had leaked which he said the public relations officer managed to diffuse. He compared this to a similar rumor on the same subject which made news in the media in 2000 and led to the cancellation of the examinations.

He explained that due to absence of the public relations officer in the ministry at that time the examinations were cancelled even though there was no evidence of leakage. He said on the bigger picture the public relations officer has helped the ministry in more ways than he has failed. However another participant trashed this observation saying lack of proper qualifications cannot be said to have no impact on the way she conducts her job. He said the public relations officer had probably managed to diffuse the rumors because she has a media background so it is easy for her to convince her friends from the media on such issues. He said the public relations officer will always find it difficult to deal with other issues that are not media related.

On ethical issues many respondents said the public relations officer is ethical in most of his work. They said in terms of objectivity he is objective only than some external stakeholders do not believe that he can be objective because they still believe in the history of the ministry where objectivity never existed. They said it was time the public understood that the ministry has reformed with the introduction of the public relations as one of the indicators of reformation. Some participants said there are some people who think that the public relations officer can never tell the truth. He said such people believe

that because the public relations officer is employed by the government, all what she does is to rubber stamp what the government wants without any regard to the wishes and aspirations of the people. He added that in as much as the public relations officer may not have sufficient education the question of objectivity, truth fairness and balance does not arise in other situations i.e. she handles them well. This participant continued to say that there are people who are educated but very unethical and the public relations officer may lack education but is very ethical.

Another interviewee also agreed with the other participants saying:

Yes in my opinion I would say yes she ensure truth, fairness and balance! Am speaking as someone to whom the PRO reports. We always remind her about the need for objectivity. If she is handling a controversial thing then she must make sure that all sides of an issue are known to the public or indeed stakeholders so that they can make informed choices. That is where we put our emphasis on. You know if she is not objective we as a ministry are going to lose the trust and confidence that the people have in us. When we are promoting a program we always tell her to talk about the good side of it and the bad side of it.

Another participant in the focus group discussion, while agreeing with other participants on the ethicality of the public relations officer, said it is not always the case that the public relations officer is ethical. He said sometimes they are not objective because they want to serve the interests of the people who employed them. He noted that ethicality of the decisions that the public relations officer makes depends on the issue they are handling. For instance, if the issue concerns government, then they will do everything possible to please the government.

5.1.2.2. Outside Interference

Just like in the first case the issue of interference with the public relations officer's job was shared by almost everyone who participated in the study. Internal stakeholders indicated that the public relations officer in the ministry is under obligation to side with the government even on issues that the government has gone wrong. They said the public relations officer takes orders from government authorities such as politicians directly or indirectly. One participant observed that to assume that there is no interference in the ministry would be hugely wrong for anyone including management of the ministry. He gave an example of a case where the ministry had misappropriated funds and the media and the public came out full throttle on the ministry to account for the funds. He said instead of just accepting that some people had misappropriated funds and the ministry would take culprits to book, the public relations officer was told to tell the public that no money had been misappropriated. They only came to admit this later on after the issue had already gone out of hand. According to this participant the public relations officer cannot say something on his own because he is afraid of reprisals from government authorities.

Another participant who is part of management of the ministry, while agreeing with other participants, said in as much as the ministry values the independence of the public relations officer, it is management's job to ensure that the public relations officer receives the advice that she deserves. He said if the public relations officer was left to do the job on his own, she would become complacent and lead the ministry into chaos. He added

that people have already questioned the education of their public relations officer and it was incumbent upon the ministry to direct her to the right track.

Responding to this sentiment, another interviewee said it is the public relations officer who is supposed to give guidance to management and not vice versa. He said management on its own is not bad, but the problem is that they are getting orders from government politicians and then pass them on to the public relations officer. He said this has greatly compromised the public relations officer's efficiency since it has also become a norm for her to get orders before she does anything. To substantiate his claims, this participant showed me a memo which was written by the Principal Secretary of this ministry addressed to the Director of Administration and copied to other Directors and the public relations officer in which he informed them that the public relations officer must not be left to work alone to avoid her making mistakes which could anger the executive arm of the government.

5.1.2.3. Challenges

There are many challenges that were revealed by participants during focus group discussions and interviews. One of the challenges that was shared by almost all internal stakeholders is that fiscal constraints attached to government budget is making it difficult for the public relations officer to execute his job effectively. The public relations officer himself said:

You know any money that belongs to the government is difficult to spend. Even if you have good projects to carry out you will find that they tell you that there is no money. Working for government can be frustrating at

times, everything depends on money but you do not have money to carry out your projects.

Another interviewee noted that the ministry has its own priorities and public relations is not taken as a priority. He said that there is a belief in government that the ministry can run without public relations.

The other two participants during focus group discussions agreed with their colleagues on lack of funds for public relations programs. They also felt that public relations in general and in government ministries in particular suffer from lack of proper funding. They said that government does not take public relations in ministries as a priority that is why money is channeled towards other projects. One interviewee explained that:

Public relations, not only in government but also Non Governmental organizations, face funding challenges. Organizations think they can do without it so they don't give it proper funding. This could also be the reason why our public relations in Malawi is generally not vibrant. Until such a time when management shall accept that public relations is part and parcel of organizational management public relations future is doomed.

Another challenge as observed by one participant is that different and numerous levels of answerability or accountability affect the public relations officer negatively. One participant said that:

The public relations officer is unnecessarily accountable to many people both in the ministry and outside the ministry as such she is not a free person when she is doing her job because she knows that many people are watching her.

This observation is not new because even in the first case some participants raised it. Asked if being subjected to greater scrutiny is an advantage for the public relations officer as it would make her alert, the participants said some of the pressure under which

she is placed is unnecessary. They gave an example of government politicians whose motive in monitoring the public relations officer is simply to make sure that the agenda of the ruling party is promoted.

Another participant said the public relations officer has limited knowledge of the field because his qualifications are in a different field. It was observed that this lack of knowledge also has a bearing on how she executes her job because they only think that they are there to serve the interest of the employer and not the public. Other participants felt that the ministry must help the public relations officer to upgrade his qualifications so that he is also exposed to public relations theory. While on the same point another participant agreed with this observation, saying the public relations officer is not adequately supported by the ministry because she is not, for example, allowed to attend professional meetings with her colleagues during week days. He said this is the opposite of what happens in private sector where such meetings are taken as part of the public relations officer's job.

5.2. Perceptions of External Stakeholders

This section presents findings from external stakeholder. It begins with perceptions expressing efficacy, and then perceptions expressing inefficiency.

5.2.1. Perceptions Expressing Efficacy of PROs

Presented below are perceptions of external stakeholders expressing efficacy of the public relations officer.

5.2.1.1. Improved Media Relations

Media relations mean the relationship that the ministry has with members of the media. External stakeholders also had their own views on the issue of media relations. Some of their views were similar to those expressed by internal stakeholders while others were different from them. However, most participants' opinions agreed with those of internal stakeholders that the relationship has improved.

Almost all participants to the interview said that the relationship had indeed improved albeit with slight differences. According to one journalist, the relationship between the media and the ministry has improved despite the fact that there is room for more collaborative understanding between the two. He said ministry has now realized that the media is the necessary evil that they cannot avoid. He explained:

What I see now is that there is more interaction between us, members of the media and the ministry through the office of the public relations officer. We interact in several forums such as press conferences held by the media, during workshop and we are also able to call her when we want to get information. This is a step ahead if you compare with our relationship in the past

Another journalist said there is a big difference between what the ministry was doing before the public relations officer was employed and what is happening now. He observed that these days because they have their own spokes person they have opened up in terms of information sharing, and that they are now more of “professional friends than personal enemies”. He also said because of the open relationship that exists between the two groups the media has stopped exerting pressure on the ministry unnecessarily. He noted that pressure can only be exerted on someone if journalists feel that the public relations officer is hiding information which is in the public interest.

Another participant, however, said while he agrees that the relationship has improved between the ministry and the media, he thought that the improvement in the relationship may not only be attributed to the effort made by the public relations officer but also to other factors such as the reforms made by the civil service which has allowed some laws such as access to public information law (a law allowing public officers to make known public information) to come into force. He, therefore, said this improvement must be looked at holistically. However, on the same point another participant disagreed with him, saying one of the reforms that were made was to recruit public relations officers, therefore it could still be said that the public relations officer is responsible for this improvement.

Another interviewee said the positive relationship between the public relations officer and the media has helped the ministry to extend their reach. He said now that the ministry is using the media frequently, which has allowed them to extend their reach since their messages are able to reach people in the rural areas. He added that this has helped to increase acceptance for the programs that the ministry implement. He also said the messages are also able to reach decision makers and cooperating partners hence they have gained support for them.

5.2.1.2. Job Alertness and Promptness

Job alertness and promptness here mean how public relations officers are able to know what is going around them and how they react to situations. The responses to this question showed differences in perceptions between the responses I got from internal stakeholders and those from external stakeholders.

External stakeholders had expressed differing opinions. Those from the media said the public relations officer alertness and promptness on the job is unquestionable. To them alertness and promptness is measured by how the public relations officer is able to identify issues that have been misunderstood by the media in particular and the public in general and respond to them. This is not surprising because one thing that came out frequently in the interviews and focus group discussions was that the public relations officer has managed to improve the relationship between the media and the ministry. So it is not surprising that the participants from the media felt the public relations officer is alert and prompt in responding to issues. According to them if many issues go without being noticed then the public relations officer could be said to be not alert and prompt enough. One participant said:

If you ask me that, I would say yes in my opinion her alertness and promptness in responding to issues is undisputable. The moment she sees that there are misconceptions in the media, she immediately calls you to correct it. Sometimes she calls for a press briefing in order to clarify it. To me that is alertness and promptness.

But other stakeholders doubted the public relations ability to recognize all issues and respond to them accordingly. One participant said:

We should perhaps say that it depends on the issues that are facing the ministry. We have already said that the journalist has limited knowledge of the field because he was not trained in public relations; he is a journalist by profession. So maybe it is media issues that he does well but not necessarily everything.

Another interviewee had this to say:

I think on that you are talking about preparedness or watchfulness! She is well prepared for the job. I was surprised the other time I went into the office of the PRO and I saw a calendar of events on her wall, and I told

myself this is what we want. The other time I found her cutting some newspapers, getting articles about the ministry that have been published in the newspapers, and I told myself that is good because you keep track of issues that concern your ministry. We can therefore say that on that point they are well alert. However if you talk about responding to issue in good time, I would say it depends on the issue with which she is confronted. Sometimes it depends on availability of resources. If he needs to put an advert or a press release in the newspapers on a particular issue, he will not do so if the ministry tells him that there is no money.

Overall we can say that participants felt the public relations officer is quite alert on her job as she is able to identify issues that might affect the ministry. She is also able to respond to those issues by, for example, communicating with the media. However, in other cases her response is not prompt because she waits for her bosses to give her a go ahead before she responds.

5.2.1.3. Good Communications Management Skills

Just like internal stakeholders, some external stakeholders also thought that the public relations officer has improved communications management in the ministry. One of the issues that came out frequently was that the public relations officer has enhanced the flow of information from the ministry to external stakeholders. According to them external stakeholders do not struggle to get information from the ministry because the public relations officer always makes it available. Besides that even if he does not make it available to them, they can always go and get it. They said barriers that were there when one wants to access information are no longer there. One participant said:

On stakeholder relationship I think it has improved in the sense that accessibility to the ministries has improved. Bureaucracy has been minimized since we now have one central point which gives information to stakeholders if they need it.

Another participant from the focus group discussion agreed with this one but his only problem with the information that they get from the ministry is whether that it is credible or not. He noted:

I think that there has been an improvement in the ministry when it comes to giving out information. Before the PRO was employed in government there used to be a big problem in information dissemination. Now that we have them there has been an improvement. But the major issue is what kind of information is she putting forward? Is it credible information or not. To me giving out information in real time has no meaning if the information is not credible. So we have to encourage credibility. To me it is better we get information late as long as what we are getting is credible. But if you ask me of getting information like news in real time then I say yes there has been an improvement

Another participant, however, gave a different opinion to the ones expressed by other participants. He said the public relations officer has a problem because most of the times she does not communicate directly to them but through the media. He said the media should only be used when it has proved difficult to talk to them directly or when talking to them directly is costly. He said information which is targeting a few individuals or organization should never be communicated through the media but through other means such as letters to those individuals, in so doing the ministry would cut costs. He said only messages that are targeting the mass public should be sent through the media.

Another participant also pointed out one flaw (similar to the one that was pointed out by the one participant from within the ministry) in the way the public relations officer manages communication. She said in as much as communication flow has improved between external stakeholders and the ministry, there is still need to improve on how communication is managed. She said the public relations officer does not value feedback

from stakeholders as an element that would help him improve his effectiveness. She said she had never seen the public relations officer get feedback from external stakeholders. She was of the opinion that if their feedback could also be taken into account then the ministry would be more effective because both the public relations officer and internal stakeholders on one hand, and external stakeholders on the other hand would be on the same page.

5.2.1.4. Indicative Achievements

External stakeholders also agreed with all observations made by internal stakeholders. They, just like internal stakeholders said the public relations officer has improved the ministry's visibility in the media. They said visibility in the media is a positive development especially if the news is positive for the organization.

The other achievement is that the public relations officer has improved stakeholder-relationship in the sense that there are continuous engagements between the ministry and external stakeholders. One interviewee said:

Yes we are happy with the relationship which is there now. They engage us more than they used to do in the past. So we attribute this to the public relations officer. Credits to her for realizing that stakeholders are very important to the success of any organization.

They said public relations has indeed improved information sharing not just among members of staff within the ministry but also between the ministry and external stakeholders. They observed that in the past there were many misunderstandings between the two groups which were mainly caused by lack of communication between them. One participant said:

Now we see the ministry conducting debates with external stakeholders on issues of national importance. Some of these things may look small but they are the ones that have won public support for the ministry. We salute the PRO for introducing such steps

In a nut shell most of the achievements that were given by internal stakeholders above were also the ones that were given by external stakeholders.

5.2.2. Perceptions Expressing Inefficiency

This section presents perceptions of external stakeholders expressing inefficiency of the public relations officer.

5.2.2.1. Lack of Proper Training

Most external stakeholders expressed different views on this subject. They observed that lack of training in public relations puts the public relations officer in a situation where she behaves as if she was a journalist and not a public relations officer. Most of them said that professionalism is highly compromised in this ministry. They agreed with some internal stakeholder that the public relations officer was betrayed by her background (i.e. her media background) that is why she is not able to know what public relations demand. Besides that, the public relations officer is not always objective because she was employed by the government and her royalty is to the government and not the audience that they serve.

This is what one participant had to say during an interview:

On paper PROs are said to be very free to do whatever they feel is good not only for the ministry but also the other stakeholders. But in actual sense PROs are in chains, they do what they are told to do and not necessarily what is good for the public.

Another participant in the focus group discussion said he was happy that public relations was introduced into the ministry but was worried with the level of unreliability that the

public relations officer has demonstrated on other issues. He said if there is a policy that is controversial and unpopular in the eyes of the public, the public relations officer makes sure that the people accept it by any means. He added that to the public relations officer what matters is not the people's desire but the government interests.

Another participant from the media fraternity said the public relations officer is objective in some cases and not objective in other cases. He said if a journalist wants information from the public relations officer on a topic that is not controversial; the public relations officer will be very objective in giving out such information. He however added:

In cases where the journalist is looking for information on a topic that is controversial, chances are that the public relations officer will not be objective in giving out such information.

In a nutshell, while participants were impressed with some improvements introduced by the public relations officer, they were not happy with how she conducts some issues, and lack of education was said to be the main reason.

5.2.2.2. Outside Interference

External stakeholders expressed similar sentiments just like internal stakeholders. It was observed that since ministries are politically connected (i.e. they are headed by a minister who is a politician) it is difficult for the public relations officer to do her job properly especially when what she is handling is political in nature. One participant said in an interview:

Politically I think it is a very big challenge for PROs to do their job effectively. Why? Because ministries are politically connected. All that is coming out of their mouth is censored or edited by either themselves or politicians or their bosses. So it is really hard for them to do the job

especially when the job is involving some political elements. They would rather make their masters happy than serve the public efficiently.

Another participant in the focus group discussion said there is tremendous amount of interference on the public relations officer in the ministry because the public relations officer has many bosses to whom she has to report. He said all top bosses in the ministry and politicians from government want to find out what the public relations officer is doing and want to say something on it. He noted this makes the public relations officer feel unnecessary pressure because she feels that everyone is looking at her, as such her effectiveness is greatly compromised. He noted that most of the information that comes out of the ministry (if it is on a controversial subject) is systematically doctored to ensure that the public accepts it without any resistance.

However, another participant in the focus group discussion gave a different opinion from the ones expressed by other participants. She said that the type of interference that people put on public relations officers must be looked at from two angles; the positive side and the negative side. She said the ministry serves a large population throughout the country and perhaps outside the country, for this reason there is need to moderate what the public relations officer is giving out to the public to avoid the ministry getting into trouble with the people that it serves. Having said that, she said, the ministry must make sure that whatever they are doing must not be done in extreme to avoid compromising the work of the public relations officer. She added that politicians also need to be kept out of public relations because their interest is biased towards their political party.

5.2.2.3. *Propaganda and Distortion of Facts*

The issue of distortion of facts emerged only from the data that I collected from external stakeholders. Internal stakeholders did not believe that public relations officers were distorting information before it is past to the public. External stakeholders said that the public relations officer behaves like a propaganda officer because any information is twisted to suit the ministry's needs. One interviewee said:

I want to acknowledge that public relations has greatly improved over the last two or three years. However, I want to say that despite this improvement the public relations officer still behaves like a propaganda officer in other instances. As partners to the ministry we get a lot of information from them but when there is an issue which they think we are likely to criticize they twist that issue to the extent that you cannot criticize anymore”

Another participant added:

Sometimes we lack trust in them because we know that they cannot always tell the truth, the truth is only told when they are dealing with non-controversial issues. Otherwise you have to doubt the authenticity of some information

Agreeing with her colleagues another interviewee gave an example of the *quota system* which the former government introduced in 2011. This was a system where students who were being selected to the university were selected based on district of origin rather than on merit. The government's argument was that all districts must have equal number of students in public universities. According to this participant the system was criticized by all stakeholders because they felt it was discriminatory and deprived deserving students a chance to go to the universities. She explained that the government never listened and went on a public relations campaign justifying the system.

5.2.2.4. Challenges

External stakeholders believed that the major challenge facing the public relations officer is interference coming from some government officials. It was there general observation that the public relations officer is not free to carry out her duties because some officers from government put a lot of pressure on them to do their job in a way that favors the government of the day. Asked whether it is wrong for the public relations officer to serve the government of the day, one participant said:

It was not wrong but what is wrong is when the public relations officer go an extra mile to follow whatever he is told to do without due regard to the needs and aspiration of the people.

This observation is just the same as the one that has been discussed above which was raised by internal stakeholders (members of staff).

Another challenge that came out of the interviews was lack of opportunities for further training for public relations officer. Earlier on I reported that many interviewees said that most public relations officers in ministries are not adequately trained. However, the government does not allow them to go for further training because they are afraid that once they get trained they will leave their jobs in the ministries for greener pastures in the private sector.

Other participants noted that dealing with threats from emerging media such as social media is also a big challenge for the public relations officer. This observation was unique to external stakeholders. They observed that social media is fast at spreading helpful, yet dangerous information because of the way it presents it to the public. This, they said, can disturb the operations or dent the image of the ministry. They said the public relations

officer does not have the skills to deal with this new phenomenon. According to participants, social media is an emerging component of communication and public relations officers must have the skill to deal with it by attending refresher courses.

5.3. Comparisons Between Perceptions of Internal and External Stakeholders

This section compares the perception of internal stakeholders and external stakeholder. Just like in the first case, I found two main areas in which the perceptions of internal stakeholders were different from those of external stakeholders. These areas are propaganda and communications management, as presented below.

5.3.1. Communications Management

Both sets of stakeholders had agreed that the public relations officer has improved the flow of communication in the ministry. However, there was one area where they differed. While internal stakeholders felt that the public relations officer is open to external stakeholders, external stakeholders felt that public relations officers are not always open. They said they have maintained a culture of secrecy where they hide information in some cases. One participant said

I still think that the PROs have not completely opened up. A culture of secrecy which has been there for a long time still exists even today. So they really have to open up if they things have to change.

Another participant in the focus group discussion added:

Yes there is an improvement on information dissemination but still they hide information which they think would cause trouble if they send it out, even if that information is needed by the public.

Another participant from the media said that the public relations officer has her own preferred journalists whom she gives information. He observed that some journalists who usually expose malpractices in the ministry have been blacklisted because they are looked at as trouble makers.

5.3.2. Propaganda

Another difference between perceptions of internal stakeholders and external stakeholders is that external stakeholders said that the public relations officer work like a propaganda officer as they distort information which they feel would face resentment from the public. They said some information is twisted to suit the interests of the ministries. Internal stakeholders said public relations officers are objective and do not distort information. One external stakeholder said:

I want to acknowledge that public relations has greatly improved over the last two or three years. However, I want to say that despite this improvement the public relations officer still behaves like a propaganda officer in other instances. As partners to the ministry we get a lot of information from them but when there is an issue which they think we are likely to criticize they twist that issue to the extent that you cannot criticize anymore

Another interviewee said sometimes external stakeholders lack trust in the public relations officers because they know that they cannot always tell the truth. He added that the truth is only told when they are dealing with non-controversial issues. He continued to say:

We do not completely trust the information that we get from PROs because they don't always tell the truth. When they know that the issue they are bringing out would face resistance, they twist information so that the general public accepts it. So every time they are telling us something, we have to take it with a pinch of salt.

However, internal stakeholders felt ministries have gone through a lot of transformation and issues of propaganda are a thing of the past. One internal stakeholder said:

Ministries have changed and we do not expect anyone to doubt the information they get from the ministry. To say that the public relations officer distorts information is unfair to her.

If we consider the stands from the two sets of stakeholder, we can see that there is still a lot that the ministry has to do in order to convince external stakeholders that the public relations officer is not a propaganda officer, otherwise they will always have reservations towards what they get from the ministry.

5.4. Conclusion

This chapter has presented the findings of the study. The themes that emerged from the data include: lack of proper training, good communication management skills, job alertness and promptness, outside interference, improved media relations, new communication platforms, propaganda and distortion of facts, indicative achievements and challenges. The findings have revealed the perceptions of both sets of stakeholders (internal and external stakeholders). Many of them are similar and a few of them are different. The next chapter discusses these findings.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

6.0. Introduction

As earlier explained in the introduction to chapter 4, there are two main ways of presenting and discussing findings from a qualitative study. The first one is to report key findings under each main theme or category in one chapter followed by another chapter on discussion of findings. The second one combines presentation of the findings and discussion of the findings in one chapter. In my study I follow the first method i.e. present the findings in chapters 4 and 5 and then discuss them in this chapter (chapter 6). As such this chapter presents a summary of key findings in a table form, discusses the findings as presented in chapters 4 and 5, gives a conclusion, presents recommendations and then suggests areas of further research.

6.1. Summary of Findings

The table below presents a summary of the main findings of the study.

Table 6.1: Summary of Main Findings Based on Research Questions

<p>What are the perceptions of stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries?</p> <p>Perceptions expressing efficacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PROs have helped improved communications management. Communication within the ministry is timely, frequent and direct • PROs have helped improve the relationship between the ministry and external stakeholders. • Media relations have improved. The ministry no longer looks at the media as enemies but partners in development <p>Perceptions expressing inefficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of proper training is negatively affecting the way the PROs deliver their duties e.g. failure to deal with ethical dilemmas. • Outside interference from interest groups such as NGOs, media and politicians is negatively affecting PROs job delivery • There is lack of involvement of PROs in management's decision making • Indicative achievements include: Improved ministries' positive visibility in the media. Introduction of information sharing platforms e.g. newsletter. • Challenges include: Lack of proper funding for public relations programs Numerous levels of answerability and accountability
<p>What are the perceptions of external stakeholders on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries?</p> <p>Perceptions expressing efficacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PROs have helped improve communications management. Communication with external stakeholders is timely and frequent • PROs have helped improved media relations. Journalists are able to get information from the ministry any time <p>Perceptions expressing inefficiency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outside interference : Top government officials and politicians is negatively affecting public relations officers, job delivery • Propaganda and distortion of facts: PROs work like propaganda officers whereby they distort information to suit the interest of ministries and politicians • Lack of proper training: Lack of proper public relations training makes it difficult for PROs to understand some issues such as the importance of truth and objectivity • Indicative achievements include: Improved ministries' positive visibility in the media Introduction of information sharing platforms e.g. newsletter. • Challenges include: Lack of proper funding for public relations programs. Lack of opportunities to upgrade their qualifications. The emergency of social media which spreads false news sometimes
<p>How do the perceptions of internal and external stakeholders compare?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Outside interference: While external stakeholders mention politicians and top government officials only as people who interfere with the work of the public relations officer, internal stakeholders said external stakeholders such as Non-governmental organizations and the media also interfere with the work of the PROs because they promote agendas that are antagonistic to the ministries. ▪ Propaganda and distortion of facts: While internal stakeholders did not say that PROs distort information, external stakeholders said PROs work like propaganda officers and distort information to suit the interests of politicians and government

6.2. Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to the literature review and theories reviewed earlier on. The discussion has been divided into two parts; perceptions on efficacy of public relations officers and perceptions on inefficiency of public relations officers. Under each sub-heading differences or similarities have also been highlighted.

6.2.1. Perceptions Expressing Efficacy of Public Relations Officer

This section discusses perceptions of both internal stakeholders and external stakeholders, highlighting any differences or similarities. I must point out that under this topic what were revealed were more of the similarities than differences. But under perceptions expressing inefficiency of public relations officers it is where differences were revealed.

6.2.1.1. Media Relations

Both internal and external stakeholders indicated that media relations have improved. Media relations simply mean the relationship that the public relations officer has with the media fraternity such as journalists and editors. Some previous studies such as Kapanga (2011) and Male (2007) found out that public relations officers in public institutions look at the media as their enemies as such their handling of media relations is not good enough. However, the findings of this study indicate otherwise. Almost all internal stakeholders and all external stakeholders said that media relations have greatly improved since the public relations officers were recruited in 2011. This revelation is not surprising because one of the accusations that have been leveled against public relations officers in the past is that many public relations officers have been recruited from the media (Cutlip,

Center & Broom, 2000); Hornaman, 2000; and Nyirongo, 2010). This means that public relations officers use their experience as journalists to improve their relationship with practicing journalist.

Another issue was that the public relations officers have helped to improve the image of the ministries which was said to have been in a bad shape before they were employed. Public relations officers are also said to have improved positive visibility in the media. According to Broom (2009) one of the primary duties of the public relations officer in every organization is to promote the image of that organizations through publicity and promotional messages. The findings of my study confirm that the public relations officers' actions on media relations are consistent with what Broom (2009) advocated for.

According to Munthari (2012) the general public in Malawi generally measures the success of a public relations officer through what they see in the media. If the organization which the public relations officer works for is seen in newspapers and heard on radios more often, then people will conclude that the public relations officer is successful in so far as his job is concerned. His observation is confirmed in this study by what the participants said about the achievements of the public relations officers. To them if the organization is being positively covered in the media then that is an achievement of the public relations officer. At the same time even if the organization is visible in the media, as long as the visibility is not positive (i.e. if visibility is about negative stories about an organization), people will not take that as an achievement. This is evidenced by the fact that participants were comparing what they used to see in the media before the

public relations officers were employed to what they are seeing in the media today when the ministry has the public relations officer.

6.2.1.2. Communications Management

One of the areas that this study sought to find out was how efficient is communication managed in ministries. The findings indicate that overall, communications management has improved since public relations was introduced in the ministry. Perceptions of both sets of stakeholders were just similar on this one. The consensus among participants was that the flow of information now is far much better than it was when there were no public relations officers. It was also revealed that the public relations officers have helped to bridge the information gap between members of staff within the ministry itself. Participants said that public relations officers have brought sense into the communication system within the ministry in that nobody can just do public relations work such as speaking to the media like it used to be in the past. It was also noted by participants in that there is now frequent and clear communication in the ministry which has brought a sense of transparency and accountability.

These findings are similar to those of Mindano's (2012) study, where he was studying the role of public relations officers as boundary spanners. He said public relations officers have helped improve communications management in statutory corporations. This is not surprising because in public relations, communications management is considered as the primary responsibility of the public relations officers as such every public relations officer tries hard to get it right.

What came out clearly from participants was that despite other challenges, the public relations officer has helped to improve communications management in the ministry. External stakeholders are impressed with the way information is managed in the ministries since the public relations officer updates them on a regular basis. Internal stakeholders are also happy because information is made available to them before it goes out to the media. This is in line with what some authors such as Richmond and MacCroskey (2005) say about the importance of communications management. They say that good communications management sustains the organization because it increases the trust that the people have in the organization. Most sentiments expressed by the participants indicate that they feel motivated and involved in the organizations' decisions when they are communicated to.

This is also in line with what The Stakeholders' Theory advocates for. The theory posits that the interests of all legitimate stakeholders are valuable to the organization and the organization must always communicate with them and get their opinion which would help to achieve their goals (Donaldson and Preston 1995). Looking at the views of participants, it can be said that while there are other problems associated with public relations in government ministries, public relations officers have improved the flow of information between ministries and stakeholders, which is in line with the stakeholders' theory. It can, therefore, be concluded that on information sharing the public relations officers are doing well.

6.2.2. Perceptions Expressing Inefficiency of Public Relations Officers

This section discusses perceptions of both internal stakeholders and external stakeholders expressing inefficiency of public relations officers, highlighting any differences or similarities.

6.2.2.1. Outside Interference

In their studies Kapanga (2011) and Mindano (2012) have indicated that there is a great deal of meddling into a public relations officer's work in the public sector. They observed that the interference is coming from political leaders in government. The two scholars were right to suggest this because even the findings of this study proved that indeed there is interference. However, there is one thing that these studies did not talk about, but my study reveals.

External stakeholders indicated that public relations officers are under pressure from government politicians to serve the interests of the ruling party. As such, they said, it is difficult for public relations officers to discharge their duties professionally. On the other hand, internal stakeholders agreed with external stakeholders' observation but they added that it is not just government politicians that put public relations officers under pressure, but also outsiders such as nongovernmental organizations and the media who have their own agendas that are antagonistic to the missions of the ministries.

The difference in their perception is that while the two groups of stakeholders agree that there is outside interference on the work of public relations officers, internal stakeholders indicated that such interference does not only come from the government side but also from what one participant called "*pressure groups*" such as Non-Governmental

Organizations (NGOs) and the media. External stakeholders did not believe they were also interfering with the public relations officers' work.

In all the studies that I reviewed, there is no revelation like this one. For example, while studies by Bates (2006), Mindano (2012), Gondwe (2012) and Kapanga (2011) indicate that politicians and government officials do interfere with the public relations officers work in public institutions, they did not mention that apart from politicians and government officials, other groups such as NGOs and the media also interfere with the public relations officers' work. In other words, external stakeholders have also been mentioned as interferers with the work of the public relations officer, a thing that they themselves did not know. This observation has not featured in any of the studies that I had reviewed. This is the case because my study involved both internal and external stakeholders, so issues which the internal stakeholders could not tell me were revealed by external stakeholders and vice versa.

6.2.2.2. Lack of Proper Training

Under this theme the major issue that was revealed was that public relations officers in the ministries are not well qualified in public relations as such they do not understand most of the basic public relations issues such as accuracy, objectivity and truth. On this issue there was no difference between the perceptions of internal stakeholders and perceptions of external stakeholders. Both sets of stake holders agreed that public relations officers are not qualified in public relations, a thing which compromises their efficacy. This is in line with what Kapanga (2011) and Mindano (2012) found out in their

studies. Both scholars talk about lack of training for public relations practitioners generally, as a factor contributing to the failure of public relations officers.

According to Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000), one of the elements that qualify someone to become a professional is training and education. This is to say that the type of education and training that someone has will affect the way he carries out his duties. In addition, according to Cutlip, Center and Broom (2000) ethical and moral obligations are also key to qualifying someone as a professional. Therefore, someone who does a particular job but without both education and training, and without regard to moral and ethical obligations may not be able to carry out his duties effectively (Ferguson, 1987). Some studies such as Mulenga (2012) have suggested that ethics, education and training cannot be looked at in isolation. They say these elements belong together and that someone cannot carry out his or her job effectively if one of them is missing.

In his study Makwen (2008) where he was looking at the role of education in establishing a reliable communication system, discovered that all public relations programs which are headed by people without relevant training had failed in one way or the other. The revelation from my study, therefore, is not surprising because other studies in the past, though they were studying other issues, have pointed out that lack of qualified public relations officers negatively affect public relations programs.

It was also pointed out that at the moment qualified public relations officers opt for the private sector where they are better remunerated. As such the ministry does not have any option but to recruit from what is available to them. I must also point out that in the

Malawi setting, the private sector is more attractive in terms of remuneration than the government sector. It is, therefore, not surprising that qualified public relations officers prefer to work in the private sector other than government.

I discovered that one thing is different from what previous studies found out. Contrary to what Chawe (2012) puts forward (i.e. that the public institutions are employing public relations officers who are not qualified so that they can easily manipulate them), the findings on this topic indicate that public institutions (ministries in particular) employ such people because they cannot afford to compete with private organizations in paying higher salaries for qualified public relations officers. This revelation has not featured in previous studies.

6.2.2.3. Lack of Involvement in Decisions Made by Management

There was one major difference in the perceptions of internal stakeholders and those of external stakeholders under this topic. Internal stakeholders felt that the public relations officers are not involved in the decisions made by management. They said this makes it difficult for them to carry out their duties because sometimes they are confronted with issues that they do not know.

On the contrary, external stakeholders expressed ignorance on lack of involvement of public relations officers in decisions made by management. As a matter of fact, external stakeholders said that all along they thought that public relations officers were part and parcel of management team, and therefore were aware of all the decisions made by management.

In my literature review I have talked about several issues that the Excellency Theory says must be followed if organizations are to achieve excellent public relations. One of the issues is that organizations must involve public relations personnel in strategic management i.e. public relations officers must be involved in decisions made by management (Grunig, 1992). This is aimed at making the public relations personnel aware of what is going on in the organization so that if they have something to say they can inform the organization's management. However, what was revealed during interaction with participants was that public relations officers in government ministries are isolated from management, as such it becomes difficult for them to communicate with external stakeholders on issues that they were not involved in formulating.

According to the Excellency Theory, which looks at how public relations can make organizations more effective, excellent public relations is characterized by participative rather than instructive cultures or pressures from the environment (Ree, 2004). This is to say that public relations professionals must participate in decision making rather than just being told what to do. If considered alongside the findings of this study, we can say that ministries have failed to create a good organizational context for excellent public relations because they do not allow public relations officers to take part in decision making.

Coming to the difference in perceptions of the two sets of stakeholders, we can say that external stakeholders did not know that public relations officers are not involved in the decisions made by the ministries' management simply because they are outsiders and do not know some of the issues that take place within the ministries. This also explains the

reason why external stakeholders have previously, solely blamed public relations officers for all the inefficiencies that are happening in the ministries. The study has revealed that while public relations officers have their own shortcomings, the ministries' management must also be blamed for not giving them a chance to participate in decision making.

6.2.2.4. Propaganda and Distortion of Facts

Under this issue there was one major difference in the perceptions of internal stakeholders and external stakeholders. External stakeholders felt that public relations officers are working as propaganda officers and were distorting facts to suit the interests of their ministries. Internal stakeholders did not think public relations officers were distorting facts.

The difference in their perception can be explained by the fact that internal stakeholders are seen as part and parcel of government ministries while some external stakeholders are seen as threats hence all controversial messages are censored before they are released to the public or external stakeholders. At the same time, the difference in their perception shows that government must still do a lot of convincing in order to gain trust from stakeholders who still believe ministries are not reliable.

According to Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations, as put forward by Grunig & Hunt (1984) this type of public relations, where practitioners distort information is usually referred to as Press Agency. The Press Agency Model of Public Relations in Grunig's Four Models of Public Relations says that public relations officers who practice Press Agency rely on manipulation of facts (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). This shows that

practitioners in government ministries practice Press Agency since participants said that public relations officers distort information. In History, Press Agency was practiced during the First World War and came under a lot of criticism because it does not value accuracy and truth. In today's public relations press Agency is generally discouraged.

What is encouraged in contemporary public relations is the Two-way Symmetrical Model which emphasizes on truth and the need to value audience opinion (Grunig & Hunt, 1984). In short public relations officers in government need to switch from Press Agency which relies on manipulation of facts to Two-way symmetrical model which emphasizes that there must be mutual understanding and respect between the organization and its stakeholders. This is the only way public relations officers will gain trust from external stakeholders.

6.3. Conclusion

The study aimed at finding out the perceptions of stakeholders on the efficacy of the public relations officers in government ministries. The study reveals that there is lack of public relations officers' involvement in managements' decisions, public relations officers are looked at as propaganda officers, there is outside interference on the work of the public relations officers and that lack of proper training is negatively affecting the work of public relations officers.

On a positive note the study findings reveal that the public relations officers have improved media relations, communications management and stakeholder relationship. This is in line with the Stakeholders Theory which, according to Grunig and Repper

(1992), points out that communication with stakeholders helps to develop stable relationship between an organization and stakeholders which, in return, help the organization achieve its goals. This is something that government ministries should encourage.

Looking at the findings, I conclude that the study has several implications on the theory and practice of public relations. Firstly, it contributes to the worldwide theory of public relations by giving a Malawian viewpoint of the practice of public relations. Many studies have been done in developed countries such as the United States of America where public relations is well established. However, in developing countries like Malawi little is known about public relations in general and public relations in public sector in particular. The study, therefore, adds another dimension to the global literature of public relations in that it reveals the inadequacies of public relations in countries where the profession is still searching for its legitimacy such as Malawi.

The study also has implications on the practice of public relations. To begin with the study has revealed several public relations problems in government ministries such as outside interference, lack of involvement in decisions made by management and distortion of information. The study shows that for public relations officers to be efficient in government ministries, these problems need to be addressed and that practitioners must change some of their practices which are making stakeholders lose trust in them.

Secondly, unlike other studies such as Mindano (2012), Mulenga (2013) and Gondwe (2012) which did not consider both internal and external stakeholders, the study has

streamlined the perceptions of both internal and external stakeholders. It has looked at both similarities and differences in their perceptions and, therefore, provides well informed guidance on how public relations ought to be done.

Overall, the findings show that in as much as public relations officers have improved ministries' public relations operations, there is still a long way to go before they convince stakeholders that they are really efficient. I mentioned in the statement of the problem that there have been many issues that have been published in the media in Malawi about public relations in government. Most issues criticized how public relations officers conduct themselves. Most of the criticism was based on unsubstantiated claims; others were just opinions of the people. While some of the criticisms were correct, other issues were completely wrong if the findings of this study are anything to go by.

I, therefore, submit that the study will go a long way in providing proof-based literature that clarifies the misconceptions that people had towards public relations in government ministries, as well as providing guidance on how public relations ought to be done in the public sector. For example, prior to this study, one of the issues that had been widely debated in the media and other forums was that government politicians were interfering with the work of the public relations officer. Although the findings of this study agree to this claim, the findings further give another version on the type of interference. It was observed that it is not only government officials and politicians that interfere with the work of the public relations officers but also some groups such as non-governmental organizations and the media just to mention a few. This serves as testimony that the

findings will help practitioners and the stakeholders alike in making the practice of public relations more efficient.

6.4. Recommendations

I recommend that public relations officers must always remain apolitical while they are carrying out their job. The study revealed that public relations officers are under influence from government politicians to serve interest of the government of the day while ignoring public interest. Public relations officers need to be independent of any political interference if they are to gain trust from the public. One of the complaints that I got from public relations officers themselves was that people are generally distrustful towards information that is coming out of the ministries, and stakeholders said they do not completely trust public relations officers because they know that their messages are biased towards the government that is in power. So until public relations remove this perception the public will always be suspicious of the information they are getting from them.

I also recommend that ministries should employ public relations officers who are qualified in the field. In addition, all practitioners who are already working in government ministries but do not have public relations training should go for further training so that they upgrade their qualifications. One of the issues that came out frequently from the interviews and focus group discussions was that the public relations officers in ministries lack proper training because many of them come from other fields such as education and journalism just to mention a few. It was also revealed that this lack

of appropriate training is affecting public relations officers' work negatively. Participants observed that when such practitioners are confronted with issues such as ethical dilemmas they really do not know what to do. In the end they make wrong decisions. This could perhaps be eliminated through exposure to public relations theory.

In addition, public relations officers must also learn how to recognize different media agendas because some media houses have agendas aimed at ruining government operations. One of the issues that were raised by internal stakeholders was that some media have their own agendas which are aimed at criticizing the operations of the ministries even if there is nothing wrong. It was further observed that some media houses belong to opposition politicians whose aim is to show the public that the government and its ministries are failing to serve the people; as such they oppose everything that the ministry is doing. Knowing media agendas, therefore, would help the public relations officers in dealing with them.

6.5. Suggestion for Further Research

Future studies should look at other sets of stakeholders who have not been included in this study. As I explained earlier, this study is anchored on a specific background with specific stakeholders; therefore it has not included all stakeholders such as the general public, so future studies may look at these types of stakeholders.

Another area for further research is to look at the differences between public relations in the public sector and public relations in private sector. According to some participants, public relations in the private sector is more efficient than it is in the public sector. So the

best way to improve it in the public sector is to look at the differences of the practice in these two sectors and then borrow from the best practices done in the private sector, which has been said to be more efficient.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Interview Guide

1. What is your perception on public relations officers regarding objectivity?
2. What is your perception of public relations officers regarding ethical issues?
3. How does the environment (political and economic) affect public relations officers job delivery?
4. How efficient are public relations officers in terms of giving out information in real time (newsjacking)?
5. How would you assess public relations officers in terms of in-bound media relations (i.e. helping people to reach them when they want and getting the information they want)?
6. How would you assess public relations officers in terms of alertness and promptness on the job?
7. Why has there been so much concern over education and competence of public relations officers in ministries?
8. To what extent do public relations officers meet your expectations in terms of information dissemination, feedback and stakeholder relationship?
9. What are the things that you think the public relations officer has achieved so far?
10. What challenges do you think public relations officers meet as they carry out their job?

Appendix 2: Focus Group Discussion Schedule

1. What is your perception on public relations officers regarding truth, honesty and objectivity?
2. How does the environment (political and economic) affect public relations officers job delivery?
3. How efficient are public relations officers in terms of giving out information in real time (newsjacking)?
4. How would you assess public relations officers in terms of helping people to reach them when they want and getting the information they want)?
5. How alert and prompt on the job?
6. Why has there been so much concern over education and competence of public relations officers in ministries?
7. Do public relations officers meet your expectations in terms of information dissemination and feedback?
8. How would you describe the relationship between you and the public relations officer?
9. What are the things that you think the public relations officer has achieved so far?
10. What challenges do you think public relations officers meet as they carry out their job?
11. What do you think should be done to improve efficiency of the public relations officer?

Appendix 3: Timeline

- 28th April to 4th May.....Collecting data for pilot study and transcribing
- 5th April to 11th April..... Analyzing data for a pilot study
- 19th May to 7th June.....Conducting Interviews and focus group discussions and transcribing data
- 9th June to 15th June.....Document analysis
- 16th Jan to 22nd June.....Familiarization with the text
- 23rd June to 14th July.....Data analysis
- 15th JulySubmitting to supervisors
- 31 August to 30 October.....Making corrections
- 7 November.....Submitting copies to the school and preparing for defense
- 13th November.....Defending the Thesis
- 14 November to 21 November.....Making corrections
- 21 November.....Submitting to supervisors

Appendix 4: Consent Form for Participants

This research is conducted in partial fulfillment for the award of a Master of Science in Communication Studies at Moi University in Kenya. I expect to have an interview with you for approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes.

I am also aware that sometimes you may feel uneasy to reveal some information which you think may jeopardize your job. I can assure you that, in line with research ethics, your identity in this study shall remain anonymous (i.e. research ethics demand that the identity of a participant in a research project remain unknown). In the event that you feel uncomfortable to participate in this study you can withdraw at any time.

However, your participation would be beneficial to the country in the sense that it will help to shape the Public Relations profession since in Malawi the profession is still searching for its identity. It will also help other scholars to understand the differences between public relations in the public sector and the private sector since at the moment very little is known about public relations in the country, in as far as evidence based literature is concerned. The study will also help me to graduate in my school as per the requirement.

If you have any problem with the way I conduct this research, you can contact the National Commission for Science and Technology, P/B B303, Lilongwe 3.

If you are willing to participate in this study sign in space provided below.

Participant signature:.....

Appendix 5: Research Permit



NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR SCIENCE & TECHNOLOGY

Lingadzi House
Robert Mugabe Crescent
P/Bag 3302
City Centre
Lilongwe

Tel: +265 1771 550
+265 1774 188
+265 1774 808
Fax: +265 1772 401
Email: director@ncst.mw
Website: <http://www.ncst.mw>

All communication should be directed to the Director General

Ref No: RTT/212

24 Apr 2014

Khumbo Newa
Mzuzu University
P/Bag 201
Luwingu
Mzuzu

Dear Khumbo Newa,

RE: STAKEHOLDERS PERCEPTIONS ON THE EFFICACY OF PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICERS IN GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES. A STUDY OF SELECTED MINISTRIES IN MALAWI

We are in receipt of your application package for research clearance in which you are requesting the National Commission for Science and Technology to carry out a study titled "Stakeholders perception on the efficacy of public relations officers in government ministries: a study of selected ministries in Malawi".

The National Committee on Research in the Social Sciences and Humanities (NCRSH) has reviewed both the merit, technical and ethical components of the research protocol which you submitted. Having considered all the necessary documentation before us, the committee hereby grants you permission to conduct this study. Nonetheless, the NCRSH will be interested in the findings of the research exercise and dissemination of the results. In case of modifications or amendments to the original protocol, implementation of such amendments should not be effective before NCRSH's approval of the same.

For further information do not hesitate to contact our office.

Yours Faithfully,

Marim Chimzima
NCRSH ADMINISTRATOR AND RESEARCH OFFICER
HEALTH, SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

Appendix 6: Letter of Authorization from Moi University