

As a number of African governments accused of human rights abuses turn to PR com

“Is ‘reputation management’ mostly

Yes



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For public relations (PR) companies and their government clients, ‘reputation management’ can be a euphemism of the worst sort. In many cases across Africa, it often means whitewashing the human rights violations of despotic regimes with fluff journalism and, just as easily, serving as personal PR agents for rulers and their corrupt family members.

But they also help governments drown out criticism, often branding dissidents, democratic opponents and critics as criminals, terrorists or extremists.

Today, with the preponderance of social media, anyone with an opinion, a smart phone and a Facebook account can present their views to an audience potentially as large as any major political campaign can attract. This has raised citizen journalism to a level of influence unknown previously. Yet, this communication revolution has also resulted in despotic governments smearing not just human rights advocates, but individuals with blogs as well as Twitter, YouTube and Facebook accounts. This undermines the power and integrity of social media.

And as PR firms help regimes ‘astroturf’ with fake social media accounts, they do more damage than just muddling legitimate criticism with false comments and tweets linking back to positive content – they also make the general public sceptical about social media.

It is no surprise that ruthless governments that deny their citizens basic freedoms would wish to whitewash their reputations. But PR professionals who spin for them should be exposed as amoral.

For instance, Qorvis Communications, a PR and lobbying firm in the United States, represents Equatorial Guinea for a reported \$55,000 a month – among other allegedly repressive governments. The firm is said to have amassed more than \$100 million by helping their clients with ‘reputation management’. By burying opposing public opinions or spinning false, positive stories of stability and economic growth on behalf of President Teodoro Obiang Nguema’s brutal regime, the firm is seriously hampering the progress of human rights in the country.

In response, Qorvis says that customers with troublesome human rights records are a very small part of its client base, and that these governments are using Qorvis as a means to be heard in the ‘court of public opinion’.

Washington Media Group, another American PR firm, was hired in 2010 by the Tunisian government. The autocracy was subsequently described in various media outlets as a “stable democracy” and a “peaceful, Islamic country with a terrific story to share with the world”. Only after the regime’s snipers began picking off protestors did Washington Media Group end its \$420,000 contract.

When a PR firm spins a dictator’s story, it does not just present a different viewpoint, as the firm might want you to believe; rather, it undermines the resources from which people can draw opinions. If a website or magazine commends the government, how is an average citizen to know for certain if the information is accurate or true?

Many firms that operate, or have done, on behalf of kleptocracies in Africa are based not only in the US

but also in the United Kingdom. They include Bell Pottinger (Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt), Brown Lloyd James (Muammar Gaddafi’s Libya) and Hill & Knowlton (Yoweri Museveni’s Uganda).

There are likely many more that continue to do this work under the cover of corporate secrecy. When firms get caught or criticised for their activities many say it is ‘limited engagement’ for only a few months or that the task only involved ‘tourism’ or ‘economic progress’.

If, for instance, a firm served the questionable government in the Democratic Republic of the Congo they would probably insist they are ‘consultants’ helping to create ‘economic opportunity’ and, no doubt, providing a ‘guiding hand’ to the current president as he improves the lot of the Congolese poor.

Yet the spin doctors most probably ignore the fact that President Joseph Kabila’s security forces killed Floribert Chebeya, arguably the DR Congo’s leading human rights defender, and likely ‘disappeared’ his driver (he is still missing). Only after an international uproar were the policemen directly responsible for the killing brought to justice. Meanwhile, political opponents routinely disappear, journalists are arrested for criticising the government and any comprehensive human rights report contains appalling anecdotes and painful analysis about a country with little judicial independence and respect for the rule of law.

PR agents do not create ‘economic opportunities’ – they alter reality so that certain deals and foreign aid can flow faster and in larger quantities – all the while being rewarded handsomely.

Africa’s spin doctors (mostly American and European) deliberately choose to represent what the Free Africa Foundation’s George Ayittey so refreshingly describes as ‘Swiss-bank socialists’, ‘crocodile liberators’, ‘quack revolutionaries’, and ‘briefcase bandits’. Ayittey – a former political prisoner from Ghana – pulls us a lot closer to the truth.

If the mainstream media adopts Ayittey’s language, the free governments of the world would be forced to face the truth and take necessary steps to tie their aid and trade deals to democratic reform for the benefit of Africa’s population.

Sunlight is the best disinfectant, and we must combat the work of firms that provide ‘reputation management’ to oppressive states by exposing their role in abetting injustice. Those firms may want to consider atoning by volunteering for the civil society groups, human rights’ defenders and economic opportunity organisations working to make Africa free and prosperous.



GIANLUIGI GUERCIA/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

panies to salvage the image of their countries, *Focus on Africa* magazine asks:

a cover-up for bad governance?"

No



Joel Frushone is the founder and president of Crescent Consultants in Washington DC

Soon after helping guide Joseph Kabila to winning the presidency in 2006 in the first multi-party elections held in the DR Congo in more than 40 years, my firm was given the opportunity to improve the country's image among international policy makers, donor nations and potential investors.

For countless reasons, including a label of 'rape capital of the world', an unheralded position near the top of Transparency International's most corrupt nations rankings and more than 4 million lives lost during years of civil war, the DR Congo badly needed to overhaul its reputation if it were to attract the development funds required to rebuild its shattered self. This work was highly coveted by numerous distinguished international PR and lobbying firms. A select few, if any, however, had the background or in-depth knowledge of the country required to succeed.

During the two and a half years I spent in the DR Congo as Kabila's campaign media and communications advisor, I developed close relationships with many people including presidential staff, personal aides and high-level ministerial officials. I also developed a keen understanding of the president's vision for his country and its population. I knew where he wanted to take the DR Congo and I was hired to help him get there.

When drafting the image campaign strategy to present to the president after the 2006 elections, not once did I question if anything I was recommending was unethical. It wasn't even a part of my thought process.

While defending past actions was certainly an element of helping the country clean up its image, it was not a focus of my work. Rather, together with key Congolese leaders, chosen by the president, we concentrated on providing influential actors with the knowledge they needed to play a better supporting role in specific areas deemed critical to helping Kabila foster and sustain reconstruction.

One way we did this was by targeting journalists across the globe and pitching them stories that highlighted positive developments happening throughout the country. And there were many. Far more, in fact, than negative stories which unfortunately crowded out the construction of a new highway or a government initiative to support subsistence farmers, for example.

In a fashion similar to how he brought a negotiated peace to the DR Congo after his father, Laurent, was assassinated and leading the nation after the position was thrust upon him in 2001, Kabila decided well before he was elected that what the country needed most urgently was infrastructure

development. So early in his first term, he launched so-called *Cinq Chantiers*, or five works zones: an innovative infrastructure; health and education; water and electricity; housing and employment programme designed to put the DR Congo on the road to recovery. Incidentally, *Cinq Chantiers* was Kabila's idea, not that of a high-powered PR firm.

Promoting the programme was one of the main objectives of my work to help repair the damaged image of the country. It was not, as some critics suggested, 'reputation laundering' or done as some sort of elaborate shell game. Bringing to the attention of individuals, groups, nations and multinational corporations positive developments like this and other similar advancements was done primarily to help attract massive investment dollars to fund the DR Congo's reconstruction projects. Billions were needed.

PR firms working for African governments can actually also serve as agents of change. Much more so than human rights groups, who are often perceived by governments as focusing on the negative and serving as watchdogs ready to bite rather than as partners for change.

In accentuating the positive, we did not shy away from war, rape, disease, death, suffering and plunder. These blights were not skeletons in a locked closet or part of history forgotten by time; they were serious contemporary issues that the government was, and still is, addressing on a daily basis. We acknowledged and discussed them openly and factually among journalists and others, put them into perspective regarding how they continued to impact current policy decisions and moved on to the positive.

Our coordinated explanation of the roots of the situation in the eastern DR Congo and the promotion of Kabila's achievements—such as ending the civil war and unifying the country, securing democratic legitimacy and strengthening diplomatic relations—was not 'reputation laundering' either. It was a presentation of fact.

There is no denying that PR firms will continue to secure lucrative contracts to help manage the image of African governments with less than stellar reputations, knowingly and purposefully covering up bad governance.

There are also some African governments that are extremely adept at managing their own reputations and do not need PR firms. They simply churn out propaganda on state-owned channels or, in many instances, control access to the domestic media and internet. This is not always the case and certainly was never part of any objective Kabila wanted me to achieve.

The image campaign work I did in the DR Congo had nothing to do with masking bad governance. It remains a serious challenge, but there was never any effort to hide what remains a major obstacle to the country reaching a fraction of its potential. It still has a long way to go on many fronts and will always need to work to improve its image. But it is also a place where both the negative and positive belong in the open if democracy is to flourish.



Democratic Republic of Congo President Joseph Kabila