

The Bell Pottinger public relations blunder

By [Sejamothopo Motau](#), issued by [PRISA](#)

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Recently a leading media personality in South Africa made a statement in response to complaints about the ravages of "fake news" flooding the country, saying "if it is fake news, it is not news."



Would that this were so. Unfortunately, for many people in this country and the rest of the world, news is news is news since they are unable to discriminate between real news and "news that is not news."

As if that were not bad enough, South Africa is now infested with fake public relations laced with a dollop of unadulterated racism. This has been framed around so-called "white monopoly capital". In a country that is still reeling from the legacy of institutionalised racism in the form of apartheid, this is a monster that has yet to be tamed.

Bell Pottinger, with its ill-advised public relations project for the Guptas' Oakbay company, could not have happened to this country at a worse time.

In the world of public relations, perception is reality. It is for this reason that the devastating public relations blunder by Bell Pottinger may have delivered a mortal blow to public relations agencies and millions of upstanding PR practitioners and professionals around the world.

The London-based spin company has since apologised in an attempt to ameliorate the situation. "Not good enough!" many in South Africa are screaming at the company.

Among these is the Democratic Alliance (DA), the main opposition party in the South African parliament. The party has reported the PR firm to the Public Relations and Communications Association (PRCA) in London for violating the association's Professional Charter and Code of Conduct for allegedly sowing racial division in South Africa. The party is calling for reparations from Bell Pottinger. I concur.

The party's international wing, DA Abroad, staged a picket at the Bell Pottinger offices in London in protest, and handed over a memorandum with several demands to the company. The party is calling for reparations to the people of South Africa from Bell Pottinger.

The DA has called on the PR firm to publish all communication and contracts to do with the work done for the Guptas; to declare all funds received for services rendered to the Guptas and the African National Congress; and to invest the funds in building schools or making donations to NGOs.

The Bell Pottinger saga has given the noble practice of public relations a very bad name. For most PR practitioners, high ethical standards and unquestionable professionalism were drummed into our heads. In one devastating blow, Bell Pottinger has damaged the image of PR and it will probably take decades for public relations to recover from the damage and to restore its image of trustworthiness, respectability and professionalism.

PRISA, the PRCA and other professional associations around the world, have their work cut out for them to do restoration.

I believe it is incumbent upon the Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, the international organisation for PR bodies around the world, to join the PRCA in its efforts to get Bell Pottinger to "do the right thing" by the people of South Africa and the PR profession.

As a former president of PRISA and past chairman of the Global Alliance, it is my passionate plea that these respected PR bodies will not let up until Bell Pottinger has atoned appropriately for its grossly irresponsible ways. In his apology to the world, James Henderson, the chief executive of Bell Pottinger, had this to say: "We wish to make a full, unequivocal and absolute apology to anyone impacted. These activities should never have been undertaken. We are deeply sorry that it happened."

Indeed, we in South Africa are also deeply sorry that "it happened". More than 50 million South Africans have been negatively "impacted" by the actions of this company.

A mere apology can never be good enough since an apology cannot put things right. Ironically, we have been told that Bell Pottinger has cut its ties with the Guptas' Oakbay company because they were "the target of a politically driven smear campaign in South Africa over the last few months, with a number of totally false and damaging accusations levelled at it."

All I can retort is, "Look who's talking!" Politically driven smear campaign? What was "white monopoly capital" all about? Clearly, a politically driven, monied, fake PR campaign to bedevil race relations in South Africa. Unforgivable!

The DA is right: "For an international PR agency to sow racial divisions in a country still grappling with a very painful past, for the sole benefit of a corrupt few, is simply unethical." Such behaviour may also be characterised as criminally irresponsible, in the South African context.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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