ETHICAL STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

IPRA GOLD PAPER

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IMPRESSUM

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FOREWORD

Ethical communication has been the essence of IPRA since its founding in 1955. As we in 2025 celebrate our 70th anniversary I am pleased to introduce this new Gold Paper on one of the greatest ethical challenges of our time.

The relationship between ethics and public relations has undergone profound transformation over the past seven decades, influenced by societal shifts, and technological advancements. For example, in the 1950s, a push for growth meant ethical considerations were sometimes subordinate to business objectives. But by the 1970s, the formalisation of corporate social responsibility marked a pivotal shift in the ethical landscape. IPRA's first Gold Paper on standards and ethics published in 1973 reflected this shift. Subsequent Gold Papers equally addressed the key topics of the moment.

Artificial Intelligence or AI is the new challenge to ethical communication. AI coupled with rising demands for inclusivity, sustainability, and corporate accountability, defines the current PR landscape. And it is a challenging landscape. "Generative AI has enormous potential for good and evil at scale" said United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres. His remarks rightly highlight the dual-edged nature of the technology.

In this Gold Paper the authors from the academic and business worlds have a look in detail at the capacity of AI to harm privacy, truth, and creativity. They consider the degree of adoption of generative AI in communication. They look at guidelines and principles that currently address the issues, and recommend new working practices to safeguard the future of communication. These recommendations stretch beyond our Association to public relations practitioners worldwide.

Nataša Pavlović Bujas
President 2024 – 2025
International Public Relations Association

INTRODUCTION

Throughout its existence, IPRA has sought to provide intellectual leadership for the public relations profession. A key aspect of this has been the development of Codes and Guidelines aimed at establishing an ethical framework for the profession's activities. Upon joining IPRA, all members commit to upholding the Code, benefiting from the ethical environment they foster. The 2011 Code consolidated the 1961 Code of Venice, the 1965 Code of Athens, and the 2007 Code of Brussels. The IPRA Code of Conduct, last reviewed in 2020, affirms ethical standards for IPRA members and is recommended for public relations practitioners worldwide.

For the past fifty years, IPRA has supplemented its Codes and Guidelines with occasional Gold Papers. The first Gold Paper, published in 1973 by Herbert M. Lloyd, was titled Standards and Ethics of Public Relations Practice. Two more papers focused on ethics: the eighth Gold Paper, prepared in 1991 by John Budd, addressed Ethical Dilemmas in PR: A Pragmatic Examination, and the sixteenth, published in 2007, presented eight essays on Ethics in Public Relations.

From the outset, IPRA recognized that information and communication technology is a powerful tool. Social technology is capable of benefiting or harming humanity: it can bring personal, organizational, and societal good or ill. It is up to us to determine how to understand and use it, which is why ethical standards are essential to guide our behaviour.

In response to the emergence and widespread adoption of generative artificial intelligence in the 2020s, IPRA published the IPRA AI and PR Guidelines in October 2023. Additionally, it established a joint committee of academics and practitioners to outline Ethical standards and guidelines for the use of Artificial Intelligence in public relations. In July 2024, IPRA launched an AI Chapter, with Svetlana Stavreva, IPRA past president and current board member, serving as its first Chair.

This Gold Paper provides a snapshot of the situation in 2024 and outlines proposals for proactive and responsible behaviour in public relations.

The authors would like to express their appreciation and gratitude to the respondents who participated in the Delphi study and contributed numerous ideas, many of which are featured in this Gold Paper.

AI IN PR: WHERE WE STAND

Between May and July 2024, Nikolina Ljepava (American University in the Emirates, UAE) and Dejan Verčič (University of Ljubljana, Slovenia) conducted a three-wave Delphi study with 79 senior public relations practitioners from across all continents. Over 50% of the respondents had 15 or more years of experience, with 56% identifying as female and 44% as male.

The results indicated that the public relations community is in the early stages of AI adoption. Responses to the question, How widely is AI used in public relations in your country? ranged from "Negligible" and "Not so much" to "Gaining momentum" and "Widely".

In the first round of the study, respondents were asked in an open-ended question to name AI tools they had encountered. Using these responses, a closed list of tools was developed to gauge the extent of their use. The final question posed was:

Which AI tools, out of the ones listed below, have you observed being used in public relations practice in your country?
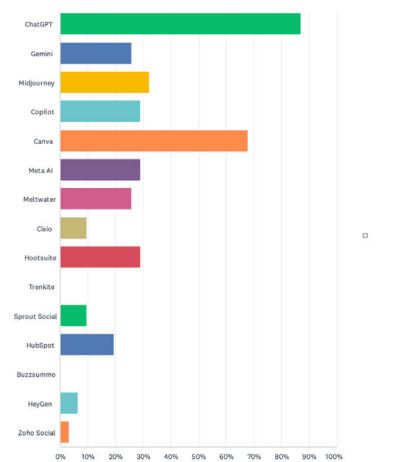
Based on the responses received, it is clear that AI tools are still in the early adoption phase within public relations. Notably, most respondents associate AI with generative AI, while predictive analytics and AI tools for analytical purposes were not widely discussed.

AI IN PR: WHERE WE STAND

However, one respondent provided a comprehensive description of AI use in public relations. Some AI tools used in public relations include:

•	AI-powered analytics tools: Tools like Google Analytics help PR professionals collect and analyse data from various sources, identify trends, and track the effectiveness of PR campaigns.

•	Speech-to-text technology: This makes it easier to transcribe interviews, capture ideas, and create content more efficiently through dictation.

•	Chatbots: These can improve customer satisfaction and increase efficiency, serving as an essential link between public relations and AI.

•	Social media automation: AI simplifies social media processes by automating content calendars, posting content, and replying to comments, saving time.

•	Content creation: Generative AI can create press releases, social media posts, headlines, interview questions, and outlines, quickly customizing them for different target audiences.

•	Media outreach: AI streamlines and automates media outreach and relationship management by helping identify and connect with the right contacts.

•	Media monitoring: AI sifts through large volumes of data to provide accurate, real-time media analytics. It can also analyse data to offer insights into public sentiment about a brand.

Common concerns raised by practitioners include the presence of generic responses and content, the risk of misinformation if content isn't carefully reviewed, a lack of critical and analytical thinking, and overdependence on AI, leading to less effort in content creation. An interesting comment from one respondent noted that AI may make people lazy. This is similar to how a personal computer, or a washing machine could be seen as making tasks easier.

A practitioner from Australia summarized the disadvantages of using AI succinctly: "*The disadvantages of using AI in PR in Australia include potential data privacy concerns, high implementation costs, and reliance on technology, which may reduce human creativity. Additionally, AI tools may lack a nuanced understanding of context and sentiment, leading to potential misinterpretations and less personalized communication*".

AI IN PR: WHERE WE STAND

After gathering responses to the open-ended question in the first round, practitioners were asked to mark a closed list to rank the following ethical concerns in public relations, from most important to least important.
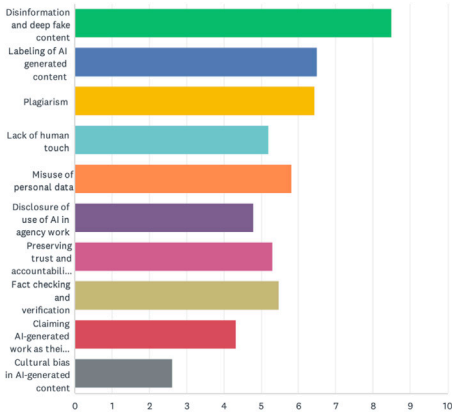
The primary concerns are disinformation and deepfake content, which are obvious issues. In contrast, there is much less concern for cultural bias in AI-generated content, a latent issue often noticed only by those directly affected by it.

One practitioner put it this way:

"AI-driven campaigns can inadvertently amplify harmful narratives or lead to unintended consequences. PR practitioners must weigh the potential harm against the benefits with every decision to use emerging technologies. The time saved could equate to increased risk and negative social impact".

Another practitioner commented on the specificity of AI and PR:

"Unlike advertising, where media is purchased with money, PR relies on semantics, specificity, emotional intelligence, and quick responses. In our lifetime, artificial intelligence will not replace public relations professionals. As AI increasingly integrates into our profession, it will have to compete with the best practitioners. The good will disappear, but the best will survive. While there may be fewer human PR professionals, those who remain will be the best, good enough to compete with AI".

Rather than competing with artificial intelligence, the authors believe the focus should be on mastering and using it effectively.

THE 2021 UNESCO AI PRINCIPLES

On 24 November 2021 UNESCO adopted a Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence. The Recommendation is regarded as the closest to a generally accepted standard. Within the Recommendation are ten core principles based on human-rights. [1]

1. Proportionality and Do No Harm
The use of AI systems must not go beyond what is necessary to achieve a legitimate aim. Risk assessment should be used to prevent harms which may result from such uses.

2. Safety and Security
Unwanted harms (safety risks) as well as vulnerabilities to attack (security risks) should be avoided and addressed by AI actors.

3. Right to Privacy and Data Protection
Privacy must be protected and promoted throughout the AI lifecycle. Adequate data protection frameworks should also be established.

4. Multi-stakeholder and Adaptive Governance and Collaboration
International law & national sovereignty must be respected in the use of data. Additionally, participation of diverse stakeholders is necessary for inclusive approaches to AI governance.

5. Responsibility and Accountability
AI systems should be auditable and traceable. There should be oversight, impact assessment, audit and due diligence mechanisms in place to avoid conflicts with human rights norms and threats to environmental wellbeing.

6. Transparency and Explainability
The ethical deployment of AI systems depends on their transparency & explainability (T&E). The level of T&E should be appropriate to the context, as there may be tensions between T&E and other principles such as privacy, safety and security.

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[1] https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics

THE 2021 UNESCO AI PRINCIPLES

7. Human Oversight and Determination

Member States should ensure that AI systems do not displace ultimate human responsibility and accountability.

8. Sustainability

AI technologies should be assessed against their impacts on 'sustainability', understood as a set of constantly evolving goals including those set out in the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

9. Awareness and Literacy

Public understanding of AI and data should be promoted through open & accessible education, civic engagement, digital skills & AI ethics training, media & information literacy.

10. Fairness and Non-Discrimination

AI actors should promote social justice, fairness, and non-discrimination while taking an inclusive approach to ensure AI's benefits are accessible to all.

The authors of this Gold Paper believe that fast-growing generative AI needs to be regulated under globally agreed principles.

THE 2023 IPRA AI AND PR GUIDELINES

In October 2023, IPRA adopted the first IPRA AI and PR Guidelines based on five articles in its long-standing code of conduct.[2]

RECALLING that public relations practitioners through their communication skills possess a unique means of influence;

RECALLING that digital channels of communication are channels where erroneous or misleading information may be widely disseminated and remain unchallenged, and therefore demand special attention from public relations practitioners to maintain trust and credibility;

RECALLING that AI content has the potential both to enhance public relations, and the potential for bias, misuse, deception, and harm;

In the use of AI content in communications public relations practitioners will implement:

1. article two of the IPRA code to act with honesty and integrity by
- determining in advance when AI content will be used for an external communication and if so, ensure these guidelines are followed.

2. article four of the IPRA code to be open and transparent by
- ensuring that AI content is disclosed as such
- ensuing that regulatory guidelines relating to AI disclosure are followed
- implementing style guidelines for the identification of such disclosures.

3. article six of the IPRA code to honour confidential information by
- establishing staff training on what constitutes confidential or copyrighted information
- avoiding entering confidential information into AI tools
- avoiding the use of AI content from copyrighted information.

THE 2023 IPRA AI AND PR GUIDELINES

4. article seven of the IPRA code to ensure truth and accuracy by

•   ensuring AI content is fact-checked by humans with relevant expertise

•   ensuring AI content is corrected by humans to remove bias.

5. article eight of the IPRA code to not disseminate misleading information by

•   exercising proper care to avoid the dissemination of misinformation

•   ensuring any inadvertent dissemination of misinformation is corrected promptly.

PROPOSED STANDARDS FOR AI AND PR

Based on the ten UNESCO AI principles and the five IPRA AI and PR Guidelines, this Gold Paper makes a recommendation for a set of AI and PR Standards.

1. First, do no harm

The use of AI in public relations is a moral enterprise. Neither AI nor content generated by its usage should do any harm to any individual, institution, or organization. Public relations practitioners simultaneously serve clients and societies.

2. Human oversight and responsibility

Public relations practitioners are humans, and as such they are responsible for AI consequences. AI should not make decisions and take actions without both human oversight and a verification of the suggested courses of action. Ignorance cannot be an excuse for harmful practice.

3. Accountability and non-discrimination

AI should not be discriminatory: it should treat everyone equally. Public relations practitioners are responsible for understanding the potential systematic biases produced when using Internet-based large data sets.

4. Explainability and transparency

Humans have a right to know and understand what AI systems do, why they do it and with what effect. All the decisions suggested by AI need to be explainable, both in terms of the logical steps and the process used. Transparency is key.

5. Right to privacy and data protection

Humans have a right to privacy and their data must be protected. International standards for respecting the right to privacy need to be fulfilled and respected. Public relations practitioners are located at the nodes of societal networks where they handle private, corporate, governmental and other data. They have a special responsibility to protect that data.

PROPOSED STANDARDS FOR AI AND PR

6. Accuracy and falsehood

It must be forbidden to use generative AI to create content that will purposely mislead. Potentially misleading content includes, but is not limited to, fake content, false context, deceptive content, and deepfakes.

7. Awareness and literacy

Public relations practitioners are uniquely equipped to promote public understanding and awareness of generative AI. Public relations practitioners should educate about the ethics of AI in the present, and the need for continuous updates of guidelines and standards in the future.

PROPOSED WORKING METHODS FOR AI AND PR

Extracting from the seven proposed AI and PR Standards, this Gold Paper recommends four working methods for AI and public relations.

1. Embrace AI early

Public relations practitioners should become early adopters of AI technologies and tools. Those who do not adapt, risk becoming obsolete. The communication industry will be among the most affected by AI, and communication professionals must evolve accordingly. While AI can enhance many aspects of communication, relationship management which lies at the core of public relations, will never be fully replaced by technology. High-tech solutions, including AI, demand a high-touch approach.

2. Maintain control over AI

Public relations practitioners must maintain control over how AI is integrated into the discipline. They should have decisive authority over the AI-generated content in communication materials and its role in shaping and executing strategies. AI should serve as a tool to enhance human-led decision-making, not replace it.

3. Upskill for ethical AI use

Public relations practitioners need to embrace AI while staying ahead of its rapid advancements. Continuous learning and upskilling, particularly in ethical AI practices, will be critical. Lifelong learning and professional certification programmes focused on ethical AI usage may become essential, as AI evolves at such a pace that professionals must adapt constantly to avoid being left behind.

4. Collaborate with the academic community

AI is advancing quickly, and academic research will be invaluable in predicting its future direction. Public relations practitioners should actively collaborate with academics to maximize the positive impacts of AI and to better anticipate future trends. In a world of increasing complexity and unpredictability, such partnerships can provide critical insights and guidance.

PROPOSED ROLE FOR IPRA IN AI AND PR

We live in hypermodern times, marked by rapid technological change, with artificial intelligence reshaping the ways we live and work. It is essential to maximize the benefits of AI while minimizing its potential harm. As AI continues to transform the landscape of public relations IPRA has a role to play in helping public relations practitioners navigate these changes. This Gold Paper proposes a focus on ten practice areas.

1. Educational resources and training
IPRA can be a gateway for comprehensive educational resources such as courses, webinars, and workshops tailored to AI technologies and their specific applications in PR. These resources could also cover the ethical challenges posed by AI, equipping public relations practitioners with the knowledge they need to stay informed about the latest developments and best practices.

2. Ethical guidelines and standards
The guidelines, standards and working methods outlined in this Gold Paper will need to be regularly reviewed and updated. The existing IPRA AI Chapter is well suited to this task.

3. Networking and collaborative opportunities
IPRA can be a gateway to conferences, forums, and online platforms for public relations practitioners to exchange ideas, share experiences, and address challenges related to AI. A meeting of minds is instrumental in fostering collective learning, problem-solving, and a consistent global adoption of responsible AI practices.

4. Case studies and best practices
IPRA can be a gateway to resources of case studies that highlight successful and ethical uses of AI in PR. These real-world examples will serve as valuable guides for practitioners seeking to implement AI solutions responsibly, demonstrating the tangible benefits of balancing innovation with ethics.

5. Advocacy and industry representation
As AI becomes more ingrained in PR practice, IPRA members around the world can advocate nationally and regionally for ethical AI practices on behalf of the profession, engaging with industry regulators and policy makers to influence the development of policies that protect the public interest. IPRA's global guidelines and standards will ensure harmonisation.

6. Ethical training and certification

IPRA can be a gateway for comprehensive educational resources such as courses, webinars, and workshops tailored to AI technologies and their specific applications in PR. These resources could also cover the ethical challenges posed by AI, equipping public relations practitioners with the knowledge they need to stay informed about the latest developments and best practices.

7. Research and reporting

To stay ahead of AI-driven trends and potential ethical concerns, the members of IPRA's AI Chapter could collate research on the impact of AI on the PR industry. Emerging trends, technological advancements, and ethical dilemmas will be essential for equipping public relations practitioners for the future.

8. Ensuring harmony between codes and guidelines

A liaison between the IPRA Board and the IPRA AI Chapter will help to ensure that developing AI guidelines, standards and working practices remain synched with IPRA's code of ethics.

9. Practical toolkits and resources

The members of IPRA's AI Chapter could develop practical toolkits, including templates, checklists, and frameworks, to assist professionals in implementing AI ethically in their daily work. These resources will provide actionable steps to ensure that AI tools are being used responsibly and effectively.

10. Public awareness campaigns

By using its network of national associations IPRA can promote awareness campaigns to educate both professionals and the general public on the ethical use of AI in PR while highlighting the dangers. These campaigns can help build public trust by demonstrating the industry's commitment to transparency and ethical practices, further cementing the role of PR as a responsible and integrity-driven profession.

CONCLUSION

In a world where AI is rapidly transforming industries, public relations has an essential role to play in ethical and effective AI adoption. By providing ethical guidelines, standards, and working practices IPRA can assist public relations practitioners to adapt to the new AI landscape and to thrive within it.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

This Gold Paper is based on a comprehensive review of the following documents.

Review of IPRA Gold Papers, Codes and Guidelines. A thorough analysis of the existing documents has been performed to understand and identify the frameworks and constructs further incorporated in this Gold Paper.

Review of over one hundred academic articles. The academic articles and research papers across the disciplines have been reviewed to understand the common points and principles that need to be included in this Gold Paper.

Review of 25 professional and international organization's guidelines on AI. The ethical standards and guidelines of other organizations have been studied and benchmarked towards core principles described in the UNESCO AI ethics recommendation. A comparative review indicates that no organizations active in the field of public relations created a comprehensive set of ethical standards and guidelines for AI usage that is fully reflecting principles described in the UNESCO AI recommendation.

Review of a Delphi study involving 79 senior practitioners from all continents. The study was done from May to July 2024.

Upon completion of the work on the initial version of this Gold Paper, it has been reviewed by the IPRA AI Chapter. Following the review and inclusion of the initial suggestions provided by the Chapter, this Gold Paper has been further reviewed by the IPRA Board. The final text of this Gold Paper is a consensus between its authors and IPRA.

A HISTORY OF IPRA GOLD PAPERS

1.   Standards and ethics of Public Relations practice, Herbert M. Lloyd (1973)

2.   Public Relations education worldwide, Prof. Albert Oeckl (1976)

3.   A report on Public Relations research, J. Carroll Bateman (1979)

4.   A model for Public Relations education for professional practice (1982)

5.   The communicative society: a new era in human society, Prof .T. Stonier (1985)

6.   Public Relations and propaganda: values compared, Prof. Tim Traverse-Healy (1988)

7.   Public Relations education: recommendations and standards (1990)

8.   Ethical dilemmas in Public Relations: a pragmatic examination, John R Budd (1991)

9.   Green communication in the age of sustainable development, E. Bruce Harrison (1993)

10.   Quality customer satisfaction Public Relations, seven essays (1994)

11.   Public Relations evaluation: professional accountability, a collaboration (1994)

12.   The evolution of Public Relations education and the influence of globalisation (1997)

13.   Challenges in communication, E. Denig, A. Weisink (2000)

14.   Challenges of Corporate Social Responsibility, The Philip Morris Institute (2002)

15.   First Five: PR's top issues as seen by the leaders of five of the world's foremost agencies (2005)

16.   Ethics in Public Relations, eight essays (2007)

17.   Public Relations and collaboration (2008)

18.   The changing face of executive reputation, Bant Breen & Enric Ordeix (2019)

19.   Ethical standards and guidelines for the use of artificial intelligence in public relations, a collaboration (2024).

BACKGROUND TO IPRA

IPRA, the International Public Relations Association, was established in 1955, and is the leading global network for PR professionals in their personal capacity. IPRA aims to advance trusted communication and the ethical practice of public relations. We do this through networking, our code of conduct and intellectual leadership of the profession. IPRA is the organiser of public relations' annual global competition, the Golden World Awards for Excellence (GWA). IPRA's services enable PR professionals to collaborate and be recognised. Members create content via our Thought Leadership essays, social media and our consultative status with the United Nations. GWA winners demonstrate PR excellence. IPRA welcomes all those who share our aims and who wish to be part of the IPRA worldwide fellowship.
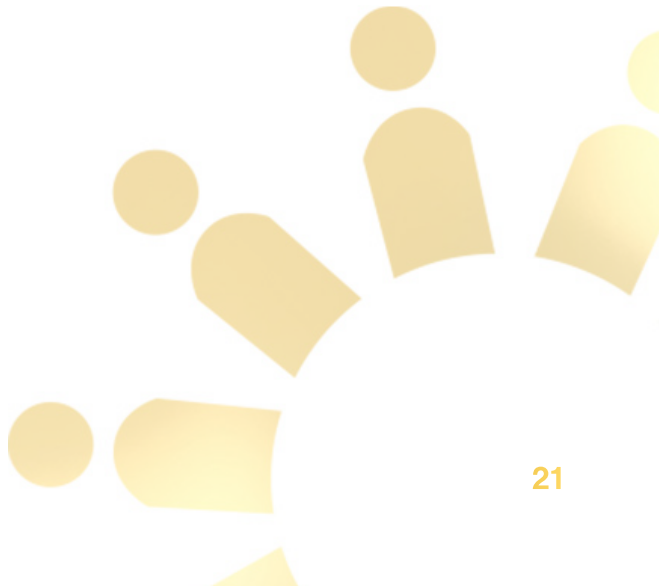
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