

PROMISE & PITFALLS:

# The Ethical Use of AI For Public Relations Practitioners

Guidance from the PRSA Board of Ethics and Professional Standards (BEPS)



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## OVERVIEW

While artificial intelligence (AI) has been in use for decades – the term itself was coined in 1956 – the introduction of ChatGPT by OpenAI in November 2022 made generative AI tools widely available for the first time. Google Bard, Microsoft Bing, Jasper and a host of other research and content generative tools followed almost immediately. As a result, many public relations practitioners experienced feelings of excitement or being overwhelmed at the possibilities, sometimes both at the same time.

Similar tools such as Adobe Firefly, DALL-E, Midjourney and Stability AI are being used to generate digital images while other AI applications are emerging for video, audio and music. AI-powered chatbots and virtual assistants, such as Chatfuel, ManyChat and IBM Watson, are becoming popular to enhance web interactions and customer service. PR practitioners are also using AI tools like Google Analytics, Brandwatch and Tableau, to process and analyze data faster and gain valuable insights from large datasets. At the heart of these platforms is the common use of “large language models” (LLMs) that draw upon vast amounts of data from the internet and apply algorithms and machine learning to craft human-like responses to user prompts.

For PR practitioners, these technologies promise to transform the way we work, enhancing productivity by aiding in content creation for materials such as emails, news releases and presentations as well as performing research, data analysis and language translation. The use of these AI technologies allows practitioners to engage in higher-value critical thinking. Content generation tools for video and audio, like their text-based counterparts, also offer improved efficiency and potential cost savings.

The tools offer exciting possibilities. Yet, their capabilities and limitations also present potential ethical issues. While generative platforms produce output resembling human speech or realistic visuals, they inherently lack experiential cognitive ability, human understanding or judgment. The generated content is based on algorithmic patterns embedded in the tools’ programming. While often accurate, the output in some instances deviates from reality. For example, images created using platforms such as DALL-E may weave in nonsensical or unrealistic elements. Furthermore, timeliness of information can be a concern. While ChatGPT is now able to provide current information, that may not be the case for all tools.

In all cases, the ease and risk of spreading misinformation is high. Generative AI’s reliance on vast available datasets presents a substantial risk of inadvertently sharing proprietary information, trade secrets and intellectual property. Conversely, plagiarizing and infringing on copyrights, even unintentionally, is a concern, given the lack of explicit source disclosure in outputs. Another challenge lies in the biases ingrained in AI. Due to the nature of their training data – essentially an accumulation of human-generated content – these tools may reflect existing attitudes and prejudices.

PR practitioners’ innate curiosity is an advantage especially when it comes to an innovation like generative AI. To fully embrace AI’s promise and avoid potential ethical pitfalls, we must know how these tools operate. Without such knowledge, we risk omitting the essential human element the communication is meant to serve.

## CHALLENGING OUR PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

As AI technologies continue to proliferate, it is incumbent upon PR practitioners to know how and when to ethically use them. There is no better time than the present for examining ethical dilemmas and questioning how this technology can positively impact PR practice. Just as social media emerged as a different way to communicate with audiences, its use did not diminish our need to adhere to our enduring professional ethics. Their emergence did, however, cause us to revisit how our ethics are applied to the daily work of the PR profession.

When technology transforms PR practice, it's worth pausing to remind ourselves of our obligations — to our organizations and clients, their stakeholders and others. The [PRSA Code of Ethics](#) provides a clear roadmap for navigating our responsibilities. Because we help to shape and maintain reputation, communication and relationships between our organizations and the public, we are obligated to consider the impact of our actions and decisions on the greater good, as well. Without due diligence, the use of AI tools to improve a campaign's results, for example, may end up doing harm by exposing proprietary or personal data, perpetuating biases or similar unforeseen consequences.

It is a testament to the PRSA Code of Ethics that the Code remains as relevant to our world and work today as when it was written, even when innovations such as AI arise. This resilience is encapsulated in the Code's Professional Values, the bedrock principles that guide our conduct and uphold the integrity of our profession.

The Code champions values such as informed public debate (advocacy), accuracy and truth (honesty), providing the highest quality work (expertise), being objective and accountable for actions (independence), being faithful and working for the public interest (loyalty), and encouraging free expression (fairness). Additionally, when using AI tools practitioners should weigh the impact of AI outputs on stakeholders and the public, and how AI outputs protect and advance informed decision-making (free flow of information).

PRSA's Code of Ethics was developed in 1950, early in our Society's history, to enhance the professional stature of public relations. PRSA has revised the Code several times since, yet our commitment to serving the public good and, therefore, our special obligation to operate ethically has not waned. (Whitman & Guthrie, 2018). The Code serves as a foundation for ethical decision-making in the public relations profession by anticipating ethical challenges members may face in professional practice and advising on the proper conduct.

With the advent of generative AI, we turn to our tried-and-true Code of Ethics to provide guidance on preventing and managing potential ethical challenges that may arise from the improper use of AI tools. This guidance builds on the earlier work of the [PR Council](#), [Chartered Institute of Public Relations](#), [Global Alliance](#), and the [U.S. Department of Defense regarding the impact of AI on the PR profession](#).

# GENERATIVE AI: ETHICAL ISSUES AND BEST PRACTICES

A proactive and thoughtful examination of potential ethical issues with the use of AI tools helps to ensure privacy, fairness and transparency, and mitigate potential biases. In addition to PRSA’s Professional Values, at least five Code of Ethics Provisions relate to the use of generative content.

## Free Flow of Information

This Code Provision speaks to “protecting and advancing” accurate and truthful information, as it “is essential to serving the public interest and contributing to informed decision-making in a democratic society.”

How this Code Provision relates to Generative AI tools	Example(s) of improper use	Guidance on proper use
AI can streamline efforts to personalize messages and provide information and data to create meaningful insights. However, when used inappropriately or negligently, harmful or incorrect information can be disseminated.	An AI tool used by a public relations firm to automatically generate and personalize email messages is not administered/supervised/monitored by a public relations professional and spreads dated, false or damaging content.	Before using any material generated by AI tools, validate the sources of information. Check for accuracy.  Determine whether vendors or partner organizations use AI and how they are using it. For example, what kinds of prompts do they use? Consider how such uses might affect your clients and the final outcome of your projects.  To mitigate risk, avoid using material that may be plagiarized, erroneous, infringe on intellectual property rights, violate personal privacy, or discriminate.

## Competition

This principle focuses on how the encouragement of “healthy and fair competition among professionals” cultivates an ethical atmosphere and nurtures a “robust business environment.”

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AI may be used to screen resumes by searching for key terms relevant to position descriptions. While the programming is meant to be unbiased, a hiring manager must still be on the lookout for trends that reflect bias and limit diversity, equity and inclusion.	A hiring manager solely relies on AI to provide returns relevant to an advertised job without reviewing whether the pool of applicants reflects the known diverse traits in a competitive labor market.	While AI may be effective at screening applicants, it still takes human intervention to ensure a diverse pool of applicants are selected to compete for the position.

## Disclosure of Information

This Provision in our Ethics Code focuses on informed decision-making in a democratic society, the intent being to build trust with the public by revealing all information needed for responsible decision-making.

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<p>AI can easily generate content that appears to be written by different people.</p>	<p>Front groups: “Avoid the lure of AI turning your “grassroots” campaign into “astroturf.” A member implements “grass roots” letter-writing campaigns to legislators on behalf of undisclosed interest groups.</p> <p>For example, “ChatGPT, please write for me a letter from fifty different people with names similar to those located in a [region of the country or ethnic origin] to legislators in [state] about [issue].”</p> <p>The program will quickly generate content, but doing so may misrepresent actual public sentiment and is dishonest.</p>	<p>How to properly use AI for letter writing campaigns to legislators:</p> <p>Use as a grammar checker or editor to review original content from clearly identified, genuine constituents from disclosed interest groups prior to sending to the legislator.</p> <p><i>Note of caution: using biased information in the development of products created by large language models exacerbates the spread of misinformation because the generative AI is learning the bias.</i></p>
<p>AI tools offer a robust means to process and analyze vast amounts of financial data, which enhances the transparency of financial reporting. As AI becomes more prevalent in financial analysis, professionals in investor relations or corporate communications will find it more challenging to misrepresent or fabricate results. However, it’s essential to note that not utilizing AI’s insights doesn’t inherently imply deception.</p>	<p>Lying by omission: “A practitioner for a corporation knowingly fails to release financial information, giving a misleading impression of the corporation’s performance.”</p> <p>For example, failing to use the financial information the AI provides.</p>	<p>How to properly use AI to release financial information:</p> <p>AI tools that are being applied to analyze financial data and trends provide a degree of certainty in the credibility of that financial information (although there always remains a margin for error). This makes it difficult for a practitioner to claim plausible deniability when failing to accurately represent corporate performance. AI, for this provision, should make PR practitioners more accountable. The quality of the AI tool and the data its analyzing are also important factors to consider.</p>

How this Code Provision relates to Generative AI tools	Example(s) of improper use	Guidance on proper use
<p>The Code calls for PRSA members to act in the public interest, advocate for media literacy, and correct misinformation and disinformation when discovered.</p>	<p>“A member discovers inaccurate information disseminated via a website or media kit and does not correct the information.”</p> <p>For example, bad actors are increasingly using generative AI to create content with the intent of spreading disinformation.</p>	<p>Use AI to correct and stop the spread of mis- and disinformation.</p> <p>If a practitioner spots disinformation, the principle of correcting the information/ record still applies. While the proliferation of disinformation has created challenges for fact-checkers, some organizations are training AI to spot and help correct the record.</p> <p>Practitioners should encourage and support AI fact-checking efforts. Moving toward fully automated fact-checking is likely the only way to compete with AI-generated falsehoods.</p> <p>Also, members should support the development of AI fact-checking and its ability to proactively correct the record.</p>
<p>AI can flood websites, social media accounts, chat boards and other digital platforms by creating fake accounts.</p>	<p>“A member deceives the public by employing people to pose as volunteers to speak at public hearings and participate in grassroots campaigns.”</p> <p>For example, an army of chatbots, fake accounts, or imposters are created, claiming to be authentic.</p>	<p>Use AI to stop the spread of digital imposters:</p> <p>As in the previous example, practitioners need to be bold. We must hold to our core value of honesty and be willing to identify and openly admonish those who pretend to be something they are not.</p> <p>We must also encourage and work with AI developers in the work to counter increasingly realistic deepfakes and imposters. As generative AI becomes more refined at creating deepfakes, AI allies will need to be one step ahead to protect truthful information.</p>

## Safeguarding Confidences

The intent of this Ethics Code Provision is “To protect the privacy rights of clients, organizations and individuals by safeguarding confidential information.”

How this Code Provision relates to Generative AI tools	Example(s) of improper use	Guidance on proper use
<p>Publicly accessible or “open” AI tools are increasingly being used by businesses, which increases the risk of individuals uploading sensitive, proprietary, or confidential data such as personal health information and trade secrets. Once AI has data, AI may have it forever and the data can be used in countless ways.</p>	<p>An employee accidentally leaks sensitive internal information by uploading it to an AI generative text tool.</p>	<p>Generative text tools have a number of uses, such as improving productivity and workflow, which can be highly beneficial to public relations professionals.</p> <p>Exercise caution when using such tools in managing sensitive information. An example is the use of generative text tools to create a presentation that includes client trade secrets.</p>

## Enhancing the Profession

This principle emphasizes the goal for public relations professionals to continually “strengthen the public’s trust in the profession.” Practitioners should foster “respect and credibility” for their work and “improve, adapt and expand professional practices.” AI presents risks to the PR profession’s commitment to accuracy, transparency serving the public’s interest, and other reputational threats to the profession.

How this Code Provision relates to Generative AI tools	Example(s) of improper use	Guidance on proper use
<p>AI presents risks to the PR profession’s commitment to accuracy, transparency serving the public’s interest, and other reputational threats.</p>	<p>AI writes a blog post about a medical issue and does not use credible sources.</p> <p>AI collects personal data from social media platforms about an individual’s interests and preferences and then uses this data for social media profiling and the creation of emotionally manipulative content.</p> <p>AI is used for hiring employees and algorithms discriminate against females and people of color, or based on age or religion, and other audiences.</p>	<p>Form interdisciplinary teams across the organization to guide the design, creation and deployment of AI in communication and business practices. Public relations professionals should serve as the ethical conscience throughout AI’s development and use.</p> <p>Educate employees to critically think about ethical challenges and consistently apply ethical guidelines when working with AI.</p> <p>Maintain transparency about how AI is being used, and seek input from internal and external audiences about AI practices and how its use is communicated.</p>

# COST-BENEFIT ANALYSIS FOR THE USE OF GENERATIVE AI TOOLS

Opportunity/Benefit of using Generative AI tools	Potential Risk(s)/Ethical Challenge(s)	Guidance on proper use
<p>Improve communication content, serve as personal editor, proofreader.</p>	<p>May be used intentionally or unintentionally to spread misinformation. AI may invent fake information, and is prone to “hallucination,” making up facts that have no basis in reality.</p>	<p>Always fact-check data that generative AI provides. AI chat tools can sometimes produce fabricated or inaccurate information.</p> <p>For instance, when writing press releases, be cautious because generative AI can create fictitious content, specifically fake quotes. An ethical approach to using AI means the PR practitioner is making conscious and informed choices throughout the process. Rather than letting AI solely dictate the content, use the technology as a supplementary tool, guiding it with precise prompts and rigorously editing its outputs. This ensures the final product is created with AI assistance, not purely AI authorship.</p>
<p>Gather research, frame an issue. (Likened to working with a high school intern.)</p>	<p>Potential disclosure of proprietary information to the application which could include trade secrets and intellectually protected information.</p> <p>(Unless using a closed loop, proprietary tool, users’ content is saved in the AI application and may be shared with other users.)</p>	<p>Be aware and cautious about what is submitted into an AI platform.</p> <p>Sensitive, private, and proprietary information should be separated from use in the platform.</p> <p>Good AI work requires deliberate decisions made upfront by the user. The user, not the AI platform, is responsible for making appropriate, ethical decisions.</p>
<p>Content Generation</p>	<p>Unintentional copyright infringement or plagiarism of others’ content or likeness poses potential legal liability, although it is unclear how copyright law pertains to nonhuman generated content. For example, if AI creates two identical texts, can one user sue the other for copyright infringement?</p> <p>Copyright issues in AI are two-fold. First, there is the issue of not receiving copyright where there is not enough human interaction to meet the threshold of originality as set forth in the U.S. Code.</p> <p>Second, the issue in copyright infringement is serious because AI software uses large language models (LLMs) and an amalgamation of content pulled from voluminous sources. It does not necessarily cite or inform the user of the content origin.</p> <p>Use of AI tools presents potential violation of agency agreements re: ownership of materials produced on clients’ behalf or “work made for hire.”</p> <p>The lack of disclosure by employees when using generative AI in drafting or creating content may result in these and other infringement consequences.</p>	<p>To claim ownership of work generated through AI, make sure the work is not solely generated through AI systems, but has legitimate and substantive human-created content.</p> <p>Always fact-check data generative AI provides. It is the responsibility of the user – not the AI system – to verify that content is not infringing another’s work.</p> <p>AI chat tools are proficient at fabricating information. For instance, in press releases generative AI can create phantom content, specifically fake quotes.</p> <p>Appropriate, ethical use of AI means the PR practitioner is making deliberate choices. Use of prompts and refined editing in the end product created with AI assistance, and not purely AI authorship, is appropriate.</p>



Opportunity/Benefit of using Generative AI tools	Potential Risk(s)/Ethical Challenge(s)	Guidance on proper use
<p><i>Content Generation (continued)</i></p>	<p>Unintentional bias may occur in generated content.</p>	<p>Understand that there are limits and what the limits are of the AI software and platform used.</p> <p>Utilize audits to ensure that AI programs are not creating unintentional bias or discrimination of content or reviews. An AI audit is used to evaluate AI systems to ensure they work as intended without bias or discrimination and are aligned with ethical and legal principles.</p> <p>This is especially important in AI use in employment, promotions and work evaluations.</p>
	<p>Translation into other languages may not be accurate.</p>	<p>Use caution when performing language translation using AI tools.</p> <p>For more common language pairs and straightforward sentences, ChatGPT can provide accurate and coherent translations. However, for more specialized or complex translation tasks, especially involving idiomatic expressions, technical terminology, or nuanced cultural differences, the quality of the translation might not be as high as that of a specialized translation service or a human translator.</p>
	<p>Generative AI cannot think as humans do. It is not a replacement for experience or insight. However, generative AI has the ability to process and return information based on probabilities, though not from experiences.</p> <p>Causality is also a problem for AI's process of generating content. Perhaps most importantly, human thought is rooted in a complex system of reflection and rumination. This turning over of thoughts in our mind helps to create innovative solutions to problems. AI is not yet equipped for that type of sophisticated process.</p> <p>AI is not a questioning philosopher such as Socrates, or subject to strikes of genius, such as the moment Isaac Newton saw an apple fall to the ground. As such, AI is not a replacement for human cognitive processes, especially in terms of problem-solving, which is what PR practitioners and communication professionals are hired to do.</p>	<p>Recognize the limits of the technology and acknowledge the sophistication and expertise of personal knowledge.</p> <p>AI is not a substitute for human judgment, and it cannot replicate human experience.</p> <p>AI platforms do not mull problems, have epiphanies, or moments of brilliance like humans. Rather, the generative AI model is a byproduct of human creation, and AI reflects the knowledge we've created for millennia.</p>
	<p>As generative AI advances, the platforms will update information. However, it is important to note that platform updates are limited to a finite number of resources.</p> <p>Working conditions for those inputting AI content have become a top-of-mind issue. Issues of sustainability, living wages, worker health, mental health, worker exploitation and the carbon footprint of AI platform work is an emerging problem. This results in both an issue for the frequency of updates for information, but also a larger ethical and moral issue of how the use of AI may perpetuate inequality and mistreatment of workers.</p>	<p>Verify all AI-generated information to ensure accuracy.</p> <p>Be mindful of what platforms you use and analyze if those platforms' practices align with your clients' or organization's.</p>

## REFERENCES

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