



AI AGENTS IN PUBLIC RELATIONS

Ethical Standard Advisory (ESA) #22

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



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ISSUE

Artificial intelligence (AI) agents are autonomous or semi-autonomous software systems that use artificial intelligence to pursue goals and complete tasks on behalf of users, often with capabilities such as reasoning, planning, memory, tool use, and adaptation. These systems may monitor media, generate and distribute content, engage stakeholders, coordinate workflows, trigger responses, or supervise other agents across communications functions.

Unlike other AI technologies, AI agents may act independently at scale, simulate human identity or intent, adapt messaging in real time without direct human approval, and influence public discourse without clear attribution. These systems may function as active participants and introduce distinct ethical risks.

This raises a fundamental ethical concern: **when communication and actions are initiated or shaped by an AI agent, how do practitioners ensure transparency and accountability?**

If not governed carefully, AI agents can obscure authorship, scale misleading or inaccurate information, and erode trust in the communication process. Public relations professionals must ensure these tools are used in ways consistent with the PRSA Code of Ethics and governed by human ethical judgment.

ENVIRONMENT

Public relations has entered an agentic environment in which communications work is increasingly distributed across systems rather than performed by individual human practitioners. According to a 2025 MuckRack survey, 59% of PR practitioners say AI and automation will grow in importance for them over the next five years. AI agents are already being used in areas such as:

- Conversational tools (e.g., chatbots, virtual spokespersons)
- Autonomous content generation (e.g., releases, posts, responses, crisis narratives)
- Media monitoring and sentiment analysis systems
- Automated engagement and response (e.g., commenting, replying, amplification)
- Strategic decision-support and workflow coordination systems (message stress testing, synthetic audiences, executive trust modeling)

This environment differs from prior digital shifts in several important ways. AI systems are beginning to initiate and shape communication. They can operate at scale, integrate across platforms, and produce outputs that appear credible even when they are incomplete or incorrect. The use of agents (self-built or purchased) throughout organizations is likely to increase significantly in coming years, with Gartner predicting by 2028, 33% of enterprise software applications will include agentic AI, up from less than 1% in 2024.

As noted in Ethical Standard Advisory #20, high-speed, open communication environments increase the risk of unverified or misleading information. AI agents amplify these risks through autonomy, scale, and opacity.

BACKGROUND

Existing PRSA Ethical Standards Advisories address many of the ethics risks amplified by AI agents:

- **ESA #4:** Responsibility to report unethical conduct
- **ESA #7:** Front groups and undisclosed sponsorship
- **ESA #8:** Deceptive online practices and misleading identities
- **ESA #16:** Plagiarism and misuse of intellectual property
- **ESA #20:** Ethics in fast-moving, unfiltered digital environments
- **ESA #21:** Misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation

Who is responsible for communication when an AI agent acts autonomously?

AI systems are tools, not ethical actors. Public relations professionals are accountable for how the AI tools they use are designed, deployed, and supervised.

RELEVANT SECTIONS OF THE PRSA CODE OF ETHICS

Code Provisions

- **Free Flow of Information:** Practitioners must protect the accuracy and integrity of information. AI agents must not be used to generate, amplify, or distribute false, misleading, or distorted content.
- **Disclosure of Information:** AI agents must not conceal their identity, sponsorship, or intent.
- **Safeguarding Confidences:** AI agents must not expose confidential, proprietary, or personal information. Systems with memory and integration capabilities increase the risk of unintended disclosure, particularly in networked environments.
- **Expertise:** Practitioners must understand AI capabilities and limitations.
- **Independence:** Professional judgment must not be delegated entirely to automated systems. Practitioners remain responsible for evaluating all AI outputs.
- **Fairness:** AI systems must not reinforce bias or exploit vulnerable audiences.

AI AGENT–SPECIFIC ETHICAL RISKS

While ethical principles remain unchanged, AI agents introduce new practical risks that require careful consideration. Following are key risks, public relations professionals can face. The ethics of companies developing AI agents is beyond the scope of this advisory.

- **Unclear authorship:** Agents can act, recommend, or respond without a clearly identified human author.
- **Manipulative persuasion:** An agent may learn which emotional triggers, timing patterns, or audience vulnerabilities improve response rates, leading to manipulative communications strategies rather than responsible advocacy.
- **Simulated engagement:** Agents may imitate empathy, expertise, familiarity, or consensus, creating a false impression of authentic human engagement.
- **Rapid error spread:** Agents can monitor reactions, revise messages, and redeploy content rapidly, spreading error or manipulation through repeated cycles.
- **Coordinated multi-agent influence:** A team of agents may create swarms or divide functions such as monitoring, message generation, targeting, response handling, and escalation, making a campaign appear organic when it is in fact orchestrated.
- **Invisible dependence:** Organizations may become so reliant on agents for monitoring, drafting, and strategic recommendation that human practitioners cease to exercise independent judgment.
- **Reduced transparency:** As agents move from task-level to operational, team, and executive roles, it may become difficult even within an organization to explain why a message was sent, how a segment was targeted, or what data drove a decision.

EXAMPLES OF IMPROPER PRACTICES

1. **Undisclosed AI Identity:** Deploying an AI agent to interact with journalists, consumers, community members, employees or other audiences, without disclosing that the communicator is an AI system. This violates the Disclosure of Information and aligns with concerns under ESA #8 regarding deceptive identities.
2. **Hidden Influence and Manipulation:** Using AI agents for undisclosed persuasion, microtargeting, or behavioral manipulation violates Disclosure, Fairness, and Advocacy principles.
3. **Synthetic Front Groups (Automated Astroturfing):** Coordinated AI agents posing as independent individuals or organizations, and generating fake testimonials, reviews, and user-generated content. This includes using a synthetic spokesperson or cloned executive voice without clear disclosure.
4. **Lack of Human Accountability:** Failing to assign responsibility for AI-generated communications or attributing harm to “the algorithm.” This includes allowing an AI crisis-response agent to publish unverified statements in a breaking situation or relying on an executive agent to make high-stakes reputation recommendations without meaningful human review.

RECOMMENDED BEST PRACTICES

Consistent with PRSA's AI guidance, practitioners should adopt the following:

1. **Be Transparent:** Disclose the use of AI agents when it materially affects communication, particularly in direct interactions with stakeholders.
2. **Maintain Human Oversight:** Establish “human-in-the-loop” governance for all AI agent outputs and decisions and always independently verify AI-generated information before dissemination.
3. **Monitor for Bias and Fairness:** Evaluate AI outputs for bias and discrimination.
4. **Avoid Deceptive Practices:** Do not use AI agents to impersonate individuals, simulate consensus, or conceal sponsorship.
5. **Build AI Literacy and Governance:** Organizations should invest in training and governance to ensure teams understand both the capabilities and limitations of AI tools, consistent with PRSA's guidance on responsible AI adoption. They should also establish clear policies between agencies, partners and clients around acceptable use and oversight.
6. **Assess and Mitigate Security Risks:** AI agents are rapidly expanding beyond cloud-based tools to operate directly on desktop and within organizational networks. These agents may access sensitive files, execute commands, interact with internal applications, or transmit data externally, creating risks that require proactive governance. Before deploying any desktop or network-level agent, consult with your IT and security teams to conduct a thorough risk assessment and ensure compliance with organizational security policies.

CONCLUSION

AI agents represent a meaningful shift in how public relations work is performed. They offer clear benefits in efficiency and scale, but they also introduce new risks that cannot be ignored.

The PRSA Code of Ethics remains the governing framework and “Promise and Pitfalls: The Ethical Use of AI for Public Relations Practitioners” is the foundational document for the use of AI in the profession.

Public relations professionals must ensure that AI agents are deployed in ways that preserve transparency, accountability, accuracy, and fairness, strengthening public trust and upholding the integrity of the profession.

Note: AI was used to help create this ESA.