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## Public Relations Ethics. Between Uncomfortable Topics and the Essence of Professionalism

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### Abstract

The article discusses public relations ethics as one of the key dimensions of the professionalization of the PR industry in Poland. The starting point is the assumption that professional public relations cannot be separated from the principles of professional ethics, such as respect, human dignity, honesty, reliability, truth, credibility, independence, sincerity, loyalty and trust. The text presents the development of public relations in Poland in the context of systemic transformation and Ryszard Ławniczak's concept of transformational public relations. It then discusses the professionalization of the industry, the establishment of the first professional organizations, ethical codes and the activity of the Public Relations Ethics Council, pointing to its institutional and interpretive limitations. Particular attention is paid to contemporary ethical challenges related to the changing media space, the development of the Internet, social media and artificial intelligence. The article also discusses the importance of the "Warsaw Principles" as a set of rules for the ethical use of AI in public relations and the establishment of the Public Relations Ethics Committee as an attempt to rebuild the institutional foundation of professional ethics.

**Keywords:** public relations ethics; PR professionalization; transformational public relations; Public Relations Ethics Council; Public Relations Ethics Committee; artificial intelligence; Warsaw Principles; social media; trust; professional standards

## Introduction

Professional ethics is usually not a popular topic. Even when an industry expresses its maturity through ethical codes and bodies responsible for ensuring respect for ethical principles, the analysis and consideration of specific situations are not simple tasks.

However, if we assume that professional PR means PR conducted in the spirit of professional ethics, it becomes necessary to define ethical principles, observe the market and social space, and appoint "guardians" of professional values.

The Standards of Professional Public Relations (2020), developed by the team led by J. Ołędzki, emphasize the fundamental values of public relations as: respect and human dignity, honesty and reliability, truth, credibility, independence, sincerity and loyalty. The above-mentioned Standards... also indicate trust as a fundamental social value, one that forms the foundation of society and guarantees its successful development.

Given values defined in this way, can anything go wrong in the public relations industry?

### 1. Transformational PR: Public Relations at the Threshold of Transformation

In such difficult and challenging socio-economic conditions, public relations activities became a natural tool for explaining, educating, building dialogue and creating space for trust and credibility in the "new times." The demand for communication that would make it possible to manage the information needs of various organizations visibly increased. Thus, we had a situation in which new socio-economic phenomena were explained using the tools of new and unfamiliar public relations activities.

This novelty and unfamiliarity with the field probably contributed to the fact that awareness of the role and tasks of PR in society grew slowly and not always in a way adequate to the description of the profession. There was a lack of properly educated personnel, as well as a lack of space for the integration and education of those entering the PR profession. The first years of the development of the public relations market in Poland therefore meant observing the behaviour of PR practitioners in other countries and transferring practices to domestic conditions.

It was then noticed that the countries of Central and Eastern Europe were beginning to use public relations as a transforming function, helpful and useful in overthrowing the socio-economic system, reshaping social awareness toward a new type of economy and promoting a specific target model of the market economy in individual countries undergoing systemic transformation (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2010, p. 21). This is how one of the original concepts of European PR was defined by Ryszard Ławniczak - as transformational public relations (Ławniczak, 2003, pp. 529-540; Deszczyński, 2020). When identifying the challenges faced by PR in the transformation of centrally planned economies into market economies, Ławniczak pointed to four challenges: a lower level of development, cultural differences, the socialist system of values and central planning (Ławniczak, 2003, p. 533).

### 2. Development of the Industry and Its Professionalization

Public relations ethics has never been the dominant area of analysis and research in the PR industry in Poland. This can be explained by the relatively "young age" of the industry, which first wanted to establish and settle itself on the market and only later to set standards.

The beginnings of PR activities in Poland are located at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s. The first several years of activity were crowned by the establishment of the first industry

association, the Polish Public Relations Association (Polskie Stowarzyszenie Public Relations, PSPR; 1994), while industry activities around ethical issues appeared two years later (PSPR Code of Ethics, 1996). It seemed that they reached maturity more than a dozen years later, which was connected with the establishment of the Public Relations Ethics Council (Rada Etyki Public Relations, REPR, 2006). From the perspective of 2024, I believe that the Polish public relations community has never managed to develop a solid foundation for PR ethics in the form of an institution that would integrate the PR services market and could be regarded as a compass of professional values (cf. Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2020).

The above-mentioned Public Relations Ethics Council, although it represented a compromise between the industry organizations present on the market at the time - the Polish Public Relations Association, the Association of Public Relations Firms and the InternetPR.pl Foundation - did not become a permanent element of industry structures. The last composition of REPR was appointed for the years 2019-2022, but already in 2020 the Public Relations Ethics Council became a body unable to undertake any activity, because PSPR withdrew its representatives.

The problems and weaknesses that were probably the cause of the stagnation and later paralysis of REPR had been visible earlier. Among the most important were certainly: the question of whom the Council may and should adjudicate on, which relates to the problem of association membership, the lack of professional certification and the lack of a professional self-government; the possibility and legitimacy of applying professional sanctions against persons and entities violating professional ethics; the lack of a clear indication of professional ethics provisions serving as the basis for REPR's activity; and the procedure, which in the context of adjudicating on such important matters, potentially affecting the future of an entity, was incomplete because it did not include an appeal procedure (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2015, pp. 34-37).

A noticeable problem was also the lack of training for REPR members, or even discussions on adjudication and on the understanding of individual provisions of professional ethics codes. Such activities could have reduced controversy around the cases being processed, controversies that appeared together with dissenting opinions of REPR members.

Documents posted on the REPR website ([repr.pl](http://repr.pl)) show dissenting opinions concerning three cases. The first of them (case: <https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/206286/oswiadczenie-repr-dotyczace-kampanii-w-trakcie-wyborow-parlamentarnych-i-tzw-czarnego-pr>; dissenting opinion by E. Hope; 2007) concerned "a campaign during parliamentary elections and so-called black PR" and referred to the issue of providing the media, and through them the public, with information unfavorable to competitors and at the same time untrue.

The second case (case: <https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/207168/stanowisko-repr-w-sprawie-e-przetargu-zorganizowanego-przez-um-poznan>; dissenting opinion by M. Kaczmarek-Śliwińska; 2011, <https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/207166/zdanie-odrebne-w-sprawie-przetargu-zorganizowanego-przez-um-poznan>) concerned a tender organized by a local government, and the reservations contained in the dissenting opinion concerned the inclusion in the tender materials of the assumed effects of activities conducted by agencies, specifically the minimum number of media publications.

The third case (<https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/207174/opinia-repr-w-sprawie-przetargu-organizowanego-przez-ibe>) concerned the same code-related issue (dissenting opinion by M. Kaczmarek-Śliwińska; 2011, <https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/207178/zdanie-odrebne-moniki-kaczmarek-sliwinskiej-w-sprawie-przetargu-organizowanego-przez-ibe>), and the tendering entity expected "at least the inspiration and bringing about the publication" of

agency materials in the indicated types of media. It is worth noting that in the above-mentioned cases the Public Relations Ethics Council did not find a violation of PR ethics principles, which was not consistent with its opinions in cases concerning other entities but of a similar nature (<https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/206301/opinia-repr-w-sprawie-przetargu-glownego-inspektoratu-pracy>; <https://repr.pl/informacje/czytaj/336243/opinia-repr-w-sprawie-zapytania-ofertowego-poznanskiiego-akademickiego-inkubatora-przedsiębiorczosci>).

Even the four cases mentioned above alone show that the Public Relations Ethics Council, through its opinions, did not provide an unequivocal signal for the market. Although these cases concern one of the provisions of PR ethics codes, they nevertheless show differences in interpretation, which is a problem both for practice and for science.

Other cases processed by REPR from 2006 onward concerned, among other things: combining the professions of journalist and PR specialist, the participation of groups in PR activities, the distribution of press materials containing untrue information, the use of names, brands, business relations, etc. in informational and promotional materials of other companies, institutions and PR agencies, falsifying statements on Internet forums, an industry ranking, the use of someone else's intellectual property, rules regarding the advertising of competing projects, manipulation of discussion groups, omission of information sources, manipulation of information, exchange of information in discussion groups, providing the media, and through them the public, with information unfavorable to competitors and at the same time untrue, tender briefs, including SIWZ, containing provisions on the minimum expected number of media publications, offering posts on forums, so-called hidden advertising and misleading public opinion, the role of public relations in market and social communication, disclosure by PR specialists of information concerning former employers or clients, and excluding selected journalists from press conferences.

At the same time, public relations, including PR ethics, became an object of interest for academics, both in the process of educating new personnel and in the research area. From the mid-1990s onward, successive universities launched specializations and study tracks within fields mainly related to management, economics or journalism. Among researchers addressing the subject of professional ethics in public relations, it is worth mentioning the works and activities of persons connected with science, practice or combining both fields: Krystyna Wojcik (Wojcik, 2015; 2020), Jerzy Olędzki (Olędzki, 2009, 2020), Ewa Hope (Hope, 2013; 2020), Michał Drożdż (Drożdż, 2020), Anna Adamus-Matuszyńska (Adamus-Matuszyńska, Maćkowska, 2020), Monika Przybysz (Przybysz, 2020, 2023), Karina Stasiuk-Krajewska (Stasiuk-Krajewska, 2011, 2020), Dariusz Tworzydło (Tworzydło, 2020; Tworzydło, Szuba, Żuchniewicz, 2020), Jacek Barlik (Barlik, 2020, 2023), Łukasz Przybysz (Przybysz, 2015; 2020a), Mira Poręba (Poręba, 2012), Waldemar Rydzak and Jacek Trębecki (Trębecki, Rydzak & Verhoeven, 2020), Monika Kaczmarek-Śliwińska (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2010a; 2010b; 2014a; 2014b; 2015; 2016; 2020, 2023), and Piotr Czarnowski and Grzegorz Szczepański (Czarnowski & Szczepański, 2020).

### **3. PR Ethics - Contemporary Challenges**

One of the key ethical challenges of the public relations profession is the media space, which over the last thirty years should be described as a changing media space.

These changes are directly related to the supplementation of the previous media triad - press, radio and television - by the Internet. F.P. Seitel, only a few years after the Internet was incorporated into PR activities, remarked that "today public relations changes the Internet, and the Internet changes the way public relations is conducted" (Seitel, 2003, p.

331). He also added that the use of the network in PR activities would grow mainly for three reasons (Seitel, 2003, p. 333): [1] the need for information felt by consumers, [2] real-time activities and [3] the need to individualize messages. It was precisely in this initial period of Internet use that attempts were made to predict the effects of the new medium, as well as to define and compare rules concerning known media with those concerning the medium only just being recognized (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2021).

The greatest change and opportunity in the work of PR professionals became the area of owned online channels, which enabled organizations to distribute content according to their expectations in a practically unlimited way. At that time, the ethical challenge for PR was online communication mimicry and online communication mimesis (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2013). Artificial and fabricated online environments, as well as inauthentic and hidden identities, were identified as an area of abuse in PR ethics, and the indicated subject of such practices was the unsuspecting Internet user (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2013).

A dozen or so years later, in the first years of the twenty-first century, the changing media space experienced another transformation connected with the explosion of social media. In this case as well, elements appeared that were linked with questions about PR ethics, among which it is worth mentioning: the transformation of the previous media recipient into a sender-recipient, the decreasing role of journalists, the growing role of opinion leaders, and the high interactivity of communication combined with significant emotional engagement (Kaczmarek-Śliwińska, 2013).

#### **4. Artificial Intelligence (AI)**

The next - and for the moment the latest - ethical challenge is artificial intelligence, which has naturally penetrated the area of public relations as well.

The subject of artificial intelligence, the effects of its operation or the possibilities of its application in public relations is not a consequence of the introduction of the ChatGPT language model at the end of 2022 (GPT-3.5 model). At this point, it is worth mentioning research findings, studies and reports prepared by: MSL (2018): *Powered by AI: Communications and Marketing in the Algorithm Age*, J. Valin (Chartered Institute of Public Relations, CIPR; 2018): *Humans still needed: An analysis of skills and tools in public relations*, J. Valin and A. Gregory (CIPR; 2020): *Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR*, and the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR; 2023): *Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools and the impact on public relations (PR) practice*.

Autumn 2022 became the moment when not only the discussion on AI opened, but also the implementation of tools using artificial intelligence began. Along with the development of tools, the public relations industry closely observed the effects and consequences of the new situation, which resulted in numerous reports, analyses and recommendations.

A key document referring to the principles of using artificial intelligence in PR became the principles of using artificial intelligence in PR developed by The International Communications Consultancy Organisation - ICCO. They were adopted by ICCO member associations during the ICCO Global Summit, held in October 2023 in Warsaw. Work on their creation was led by Christina Forsgård, serving as ICCO Ethics Chair. These principles, published as the "Warsaw Principles," were adopted by the Association of Public Relations Firms in May 2024 (<https://zfpr.pl/zfpr-wdrza-warsaw-principles/>).

The development of principles for the use of artificial intelligence technologies in PR became necessary because AI, like any new technology, may be used in the area of destructive communication. It therefore became important to recall the principles of

professional ethics, which, on the one hand, is certainly a signal to the PR industry to use artificial intelligence professionally, and, on the other hand, constitutes a signal to the market about the responsibility and awareness of PR specialists. The task of the "Warsaw Principles" is therefore to build trust, transparency and assurance that artificial intelligence can be used ethically and in accordance with the social interest.

The principles included in the "Warsaw Principles" cover ten areas important for public relations activity, as follows:

1. Transparency, disclosure and authenticity: Public relations professionals should always openly inform when content has been prepared using generative artificial intelligence, because it may distort the public's perception of reality. It is crucial to inform each time AI-generated content is used, especially because we live in times of deepfakes.

2. Reliability, fact-checking and combating disinformation: Public relations professionals should ensure the reliability, credibility and verification of content created using AI before disseminating it. It is recommended to use AI-based tools to check facts and expose disinformation and misinformation; however, it should be remembered that many widely available tools using generative artificial intelligence often provide inaccurate information, so it is worth checking their credibility also in sources that are not based on this technology. Due to AI's ability to quickly create and disseminate disinformation, PR professionals must exercise particular caution in order to prevent the unintentional or intentional dissemination of false information.

3. Privacy, data protection and responsible sharing: PR professionals must treat client data and confidential information about clients with the utmost care and comply with data protection regulations. They are responsible for sharing verified and non-misleading content.

4. Bias detection, mitigation and inclusivity: PR professionals should actively identify and eliminate biases that may result from content created using AI, and should also seek opportunities to use artificial intelligence in such a way that campaigns are non-exclusionary and adapted to a wider audience. It is also important to use diverse data to train AI models in order to ensure inclusivity.

5. Intellectual property, copyright compliance and media literacy: PR professionals must respect copyright and intellectual property rights whenever they use artificial intelligence, regardless of how it is used. They should promote media literacy in terms of identifying content created using AI and detecting deepfakes.

6. Human oversight, interventions and cooperation: PR professionals should ensure human oversight and the possibility of human intervention in the process of creating content using AI, and cooperate with artificial intelligence specialists in order to obtain guidance and advice.

7. Understanding context, adaptation and personalization: PR professionals must analyze the context and appropriateness of content co-created with the help of AI for different channels and target groups, and also explore the potential of artificial intelligence.

8. Responsible automation and efficiency: PR professionals should use artificial intelligence to automate repetitive tasks and increase efficiency in a way that does not violate ethical and professional standards.

9. Continuous monitoring, evaluation and feedback: PR professionals should regularly monitor and evaluate the performance and impact of content created using AI, and enable stakeholders to express opinions and report concerns.

10. Ethical professional development, education and promotion of artificial intelligence: PR professionals should continuously educate themselves and develop professionally in order to stay up to date with advances in artificial intelligence and ethical considerations. They are responsible for promoting the ethical use of artificial intelligence and good practices in the broadly understood media environment." (<https://zfpr.pl/warsaw-principles/>)

## Conclusion

More than thirty years of experience in the public relations industry should be expressed, among other things, in effectively operating bodies established to guard the ethical principles of the profession. On the one hand, their tasks should focus on the analysis and evaluation of reported cases and situations. On the other hand, this is a natural space for educating both the industry and the market, which will have the chance to better understand the role and tasks of PR.

However, not all elements are functioning. The greatest weakness of the PR industry at the present moment (June 2024) is the lack of a decision-making and effectively operating body that could explain the professionalism of public relations through values close to it. This is all the more important because, apart from the changing media space, we are socially experiencing global transformations, including the pandemic, armed conflicts, global crises such as the ecological crisis, and the intensive development of artificial intelligence. Relations based on trust and dialogue that builds understanding may support the achievement of the goals of all kinds of organizations. For this to happen, public relations ethics must become a comfortable topic for the industry, and discussion about it must not be a special occasion, but an element of everyday professional life.

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