Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR

The AIinPR panel and the authors are grateful for the endorsements and support from the following:

In May 2020 the Wall Street Journal reported that 64 per cent of all signups to extremist groups on Facebook were due to Facebook's own recommendation algorithms. There could hardly be a simpler case study in the question of AI and ethics, the intersection of what is technically possible and what is morally desirable. CIPR members who find an automated/AI system used by their organisation perpetrating such online harms have a professional responsibility to try and prevent it. For all PR professionals, this is a fundamental requirement of the ability to practice ethically. The question is – if you worked at Facebook, what would you do? If you're not sure, this report guide will help you work out your answer.

Alastair McCapra
Chief Executive Officer CIPR

Artificial Intelligence is quickly becoming an essential technology for public relations and organisational decision making. Like any emerging technology, AI creates new tools and opportunities to work smarter and faster, but it also comes with its own risks and ethical dilemmas – caveat emptor. Newcomers to the world of AI will take comfort knowing there's a guide for that. The Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR sets out to define the pitfalls of AI and offers up principles of professional practice to help you make the right call on any AI application. Credit to the AIinPR Panel for taking a complex concept – Ethics in AI – and distilling it into a very practical user manual for those of us active in PR and communications management.

Victor Vrsnik MCM APR Fellow-CPRS
President
Canadian Public Relations Society

There is no doubt of the profound impact of artificial intelligence on all our lives, when used in the right way it can positively change, and even save, lives. But when poorly implemented it can cause reputational harm and reinforce existing biases and divisions.

The AI in PR Ethics Guide is an essential guide for PR professionals to help understand, contextualise, and guide them through this increasingly important area, of the ethics of artificial intelligence.

Nige Wilson
ex-Microsoft AI, Founder of Awaken AI

This ethical guide is an important first step to keeping our respective members at the forefront of the AI debate. Technology and forms of AI are everywhere and support many parts of our working lives. In fact, it is estimated that by the end of this year, more people globally will have mobile phones than running water or electricity at home such is our dependency on technology. Marketing and public relations are no different. Hyper-individualised PR campaigns, ultra-analytics, interactive AI-powered ads and AI-driven newsroom technologies are set to change how we promote and consume information forever. As PR professionals we all need a broader understanding of the underlying technologies and techniques and the implications of embracing them. It's a fascinating and exciting time to work in marketing and public relations as we approach the brink of mass adoption, but we need clear ethical standards and practices to ensure artificial intelligence is used correctly.

James Delves
Head of PR and Engagement
Chartered Institute of Marketing

The ethics guide to AIinPR offers answers to questions that few other ethical guides in PR even care (or dare) to ask. They go far beyond general protestations and instead identify dilemmas, double binds, as well as ways for practitioners to resolve them. Their Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR is not just timely, but also a reminder that PR can be a discipline ahead of the times.

Professor Gregor Halff
Dean of Copenhagen Business School
Former Chair of the Global Alliance

AI continues to gain global ground as a business and communications tool, but the technology is as imperfect as its programmers – humanity. To compensate, PR professionals need to embrace their role as organizational conscience, which includes applying the ethics principles and practices offered in this guide, to their increasing use of data from technologies like AI and machine learning.

Sarah Hanel, MBA, APR
Ethics & Standards Director
Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communications Management

This guide is an important reference point for anybody wishing to gain a better understanding of the ethical implications of the use of AI in PR. Through a principle-based approach, it provides practical decision-making tools that can assist the reader in analysing ethical dilemmas that they face at work. Whilst it highlights that AI has enormous potential to be a force for good, it also stresses that it is important to establish a clear line of accountability for the humans that use it.

Guendalina Donde
Head of Research
Institute of Business Ethics

The timing of the CIPR AIinPR guidelines is perfect. We are cognisant of living in transformational times and the rise of AI is just one of those factors that is exacerbating the experiential impact on communicator's working lives. As with most technology it brings both risk and opportunity. Building a code and guideline for how to manage this technological shift is essential and the new AIinPR guide is an invaluable tool to support practice. Stepping up to this challenge and responding with clear guidance and practical tools is a strong leadership message from the CIPR and should be welcomed worldwide.

Professor Ralph Tench
Director of Research
Leeds Business School,
Leeds Beckett University, Past President of the European Public Relations Research and Education Association (EUPRERA)

This guide is sensible, well informed, and actionable. The way the authors acknowledge that principles are only the starting point and focus on giving practitioners clear understanding and solid tools to manage the practice of ethics is something I would love to see in many other professions.

Olivier Thereaux
Head of Research and Development
The Open Data Institute (ODI)

Bookmark this guide – a timely, practical and thoughtful contribution for all of us concerned about the rapidly emerging questions around artificial intelligence in communications.

David Gallagher
President
Growth and Development, International
Omnicom PR Group

Ours is a profession fundamentally focused on humans and relationships. AI has already begun to change how we undertake that work and that will only accelerate. This Guide is a roadmap for assuring the responsible, ethical adoption of AI as it becomes more and more enmeshed in the work we do.

Eliot Mizrachi
Vice President
Communications and Content
Page Society

The value of reputation depends upon the ethical conduct of everyone associated with the Public Relations Institute of Southern Africa (PRISA). Thus, we applaud and support the Artificial Intelligence in Public Relations Ethics guide that pursues excellence with exemplary performance, professionalism and ethical conduct.

Victor Sibeko
Chief Executive Officer
Public Relations Institute of South Africa

We and AI welcome the creation of the AI in Public Relations Ethics Guide, and hope it inspires other trade associations to think about how they should be leading by providing guidance to their members on ethics for AI. Communicators need to have the expertise to be able to ask tough ethical questions and represent the interests of the business by holding technical teams to account within the complex and increasingly contentious field of AI innovation. Therefore. this guide, and previous publications from the #AIinPR Panel are empowering, practical and transformational.

Tania Duarte
Co-Founder
We and AI

Ethics Guide to Artificial Intelligence in PR

Authors:
Jean Valin APR, FCPRS, Hon CIPR Fellow; Anne Gregory PhD, FRSA, Hon CIPR Fellow

> We recommend this guide is used in conjunction with the AIinPR Primers on Artificial Intelligence (AI). In these guides, concepts such as AI, machine learning, big data, media and how algorithms work are explained. Visit cipr.co.uk/ai

Introduction

Steve Jobs said: "Computers don't make mistakes, humans do." Humans do get it wrong. We can forget to factor in something to our decision making, we can have poor understanding or information which leads to mistakes. We can learn from those types of mistakes.

Machines can get it wrong because they rely on humans to get it right. They can be programmed with faulty or incomplete data, work on wrong code, or get things wrong because they are dependent on humans who are human – for example, they introduce unintentional bias or omit something important. But ethics is not only about avoiding mistakes, it's about doing the right thing for the right reasons and being determined to cause no deliberate harm.

Getting ethics right and doing the right thing is hard enough in normal life. Add in AI and machine learning and you have a recipe for decision-making fraught with perils. One that requires the mind, human minds, to focus on ethics at every turn of activity because every mistake we make will be amplified in the big data, algorithmic universe in which we now live.

We only have to think of insurance companies basing decisions on an algorithm, banks approving loans with an AI tool or, even closer to all of us in the throes of a global pandemic, our health care decisions assisted by an algorithm that may be poorly designed, to realise the potential impact on individuals and society at large.
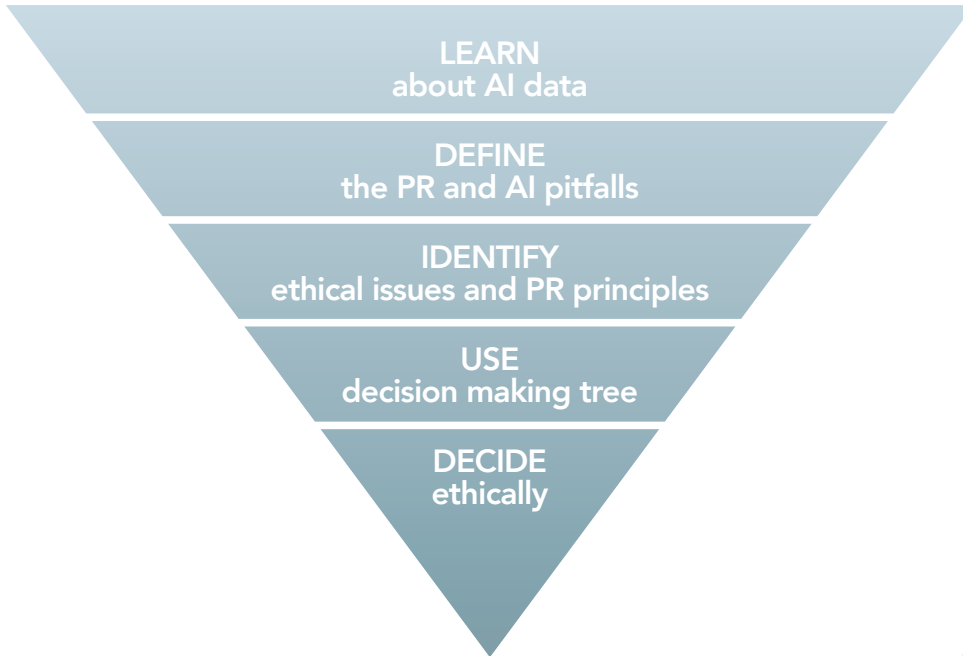
As PR practitioners, we must not make any decisions which, ultimately, may cause harm, removes other peoples' ability to make informed choices, put anyone at disadvantage, or shows bias, even if unintended. It's not just about the quality of the data, but the ethical factors we build into decision-making.

In this guide we focus on practical ethical decision making within PR activities where AI is present or has taken over. This isn't a new code of ethics for public relations. It builds on universally adopted principles of ethical practice adopted by the 80+ member organizations of the Global Alliance, of which the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS) are part. We will examine the most common types of ethical issues brought in by AI tools and processes used in public relations. As you will see, a lot of issues revolve around data, algorithms and privacy.

It not just about the quality of the data, but the ethical factors we build into decision-making.

Ethics guide to AIinPR at a glance

This is how we have structured this guide.

LEARN
about AI data

DEFINE
the PR and AI pitfalls

IDENTIFY
ethical issues and PR principles

USE
decision making tree

DECIDE
ethically

AIinPR tools and ethical risks

Learn about AI and the work of the AIinPR panel. The CIPR AIinPR panel has categorized more than 130 tools, being used in the practice of PR, that have automated features or embeded AI. Most of the tools allow automation of tasks, or low-level AI, and this presents public relations professionals with few ethical dilemmas because they replicate human tasks which we can apply ethical thinking to. For example, automated press list generation will force us to consider data protection, but no more than if we generated those lists manually.

Tools using higher level AI will pose many more ethical challenges because they do not just replicate human actions, they make decisions based on data analysis.

Potential ethical pitfalls in AI

The use of AI or automated tools used in public relations:

Uses and applications. There is potential for misuse of legitimate AI-assisted tools to misinform or disinform (misinformation: mistakes being amplified. Disinformation: false information being deliberately spread).

Huge amounts of data about individuals is already being used to 'target' them in order to persuade. This is made even more potent if combined with psychological personality profiling. Unethical emotional manipulation is possible, and it can be tempting to try to persuade others, often without them realising it. Caution, and a reminder that the first guiding principle is working in the public interest, as well as causing no harm, should be top of mind.

AI in work processes. It is possible to streamline work processes and practices significantly using AI. But that has consequences for human beings: both for the type of work they undertake, how they work with machines, and for the numbers that are employed. It is important that humans drive the machines, not the other way around.

Use of bots, chatbots and personal assistants, mobile and virtual agents. Chatbots have particular challenges. They are the most human-like of AI empowered agents. They 'listen' and they 'talk' to people who reveal all kinds of information to them which is permanently stored, aggregated with other information, and used intelligently for further 'conversations' to make their interactions more human-like and personalized. They are not neutral; they are there to assist, but also to gather data. This applies to voice and text-based bot applications.

There is potential for bias because they collect data only from those people they interact with; they are not sensitive to issues around diversity because the way algorithms work, further marginalizes minority voices; or they can be supplied with, or generate, incorrect information and have no powers of discernment to identify this.

Macro issues in public relations and use of AI

We have identified six current 'big picture' issues that public relations professionals should keep in mind. These are important because we don't just work with communication 'tools', we offer strategic advice to colleagues and senior leaders and we have a professional responsibility to society and our organizations to help them make good decisions. It's the ethical guardian role. Decisions about how our organizations use AI will have reputational and relational impacts that go far beyond our use of AI enabled tools. The context in which, and for which, they are used is of critical importance.

Social change
AI will radically change the way we live and work. Those who are able to use, take advantage of, and engage with AI will benefit. Those who are unable to do so, for whatever reason, will become disenfranchized. This means that organizations and individuals who have the resources and knowledge to capture leadership in the AI space will be the new elite, have the leading edge and hold significant power. This includes not just the big tech companies, but potentially governments, NGOs, large corporations, and traditional media who have adopted AI, as well as non-traditional media organizations. Big questions arise over the governance of these developments at the organizational, national and international levels and we need to be involved and informing and guiding those debates.

Decisions about how our organisations use AI will have reputational and relational impacts.

Change in the nature of work

Those most likely to be negatively affected by AI will be the lower skilled, those with lower educational attainment and, potentially, new entrants to work. But AI will affect all work and all professions. The overall view is that where the work is relatively routinized, even if these are complex routines, there is greater susceptibility to automation. Thus, not only repetitive tasks, but professional work such as that done by public relations professionals when advising on crises, could have significant areas given over to AI-driven processes and decision-making. However, it is also clear that professions that have a preponderance of 'human skills', such as management, social and literacy skills – public relations being one – are seen to be less at risk.

There is also a challenge in re-training the existing workforce to transition from the current, largely analogue skills base, to one that requires new digital ways of working, including the ability to code, work with machines adroitly, and place proper boundaries around human and machine work. Who drives what: machines drive humans or humans drive machines? is a big ethical question. So, there are huge issues around the structure and reward systems for the public relations workforce. Who will be employed? To do what? And what will be done with those who are not able to make the digital transformation, but may have other skills such as good judgement, an ability to 'read situations', good counselling skills?

Power

Those who are able to capitalize on the potential of AI will increase their power. They will have rich data on many individuals and groups and be able to predict their future preferences and behaviour, as well as being able to serve them faster and smarter. They will also be able to influence and manipulate them subtly and covertly, and lead them to a place where they may not have chosen to go if they have equal access to the intelligence that comes from that data. In public relations, we are in the middle of that space: we utilize the power of persuasion for a range of areas including sales, service uptake, political campaigns, behaviour change and compliance. Profiling people from their data for improved communication messaging and delivery, 'targeting', is now relatively easy, but also a subject of controversy. Recognizing the power and potential for good and bad of the tools and intelligence at our disposal is the first step in recognizing our need to use them ethically.

Algorithms

Algorithms are the engine that use data as fuel. The issues we see with algorithms are that they don't do nuance very well. They are biased almost by design (humans programme them), they have a propensity to discriminate in terms of diversity and inclusion, and how they are constructed is not transparent. Public relations professionals should be part of all AI build teams, right from the start, to pose those tough ethical questions which tech and AI specialists may not be thinking of, in our roles as guardians of integrity. To do this, public relations professionals need a robust understanding of the uses to which algorithms are to be put, how they are designed, and of data ethics and AI ethics and all that this encompasses.

Privacy control and transparency issues

There is a necessary tension between AI's voracious appetite for data, which can help reduce bias, and the principles of minimization of personal data and transparency in data processing.

There are also issues around data collection. Companies developing AI, or those commissioning an AI system, should carefully consider whether the training (of the algorithm) and full data really needs to include personal information, or whether data sets be anonymized.

Public awareness of data collection, storage, and sharing issues has risen and expectations of how data is handled have changed as a result of legislation such as the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and equivalent in other countries, and in light of infamous data breaches and uses such as that involving Facebook and Cambridge Analytica.
However, user expectations are not limited to privacy. They include:

- Control over how data is used

- Limits on the duration and nature of data storage

- Better transparency, in terms of what data is being collected, with whom it is being shared, and what it is being used for. This should include its aggregation with any other data where AI is involved.

Combining AI with data privacy can be a win-win. A proactive stance on data security is being positioned as a competitive advantage, and firms are acting on the opportunities. For example, Apple's CEO Tim Cook calls privacy a 'fundamental human right' and the company has developed a data and privacy portal intended to be a point of competitive difference.

As well as handling data ethically, it needs to be handled securely, as the consequences for poor data security can be significant in terms of reputation and trust – notwithstanding the risk of financial penalty in the event of a data breach and infringement of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) or equivalent legislation.

Finally, how systems are designed to use the data collected also needs consideration. As set out in the GDPR (and, typically, equivalent data protection laws in other regions), privacy should be built into an AI system by design. Developers, supported by public relations professionals, should document, and be transparent about, how data protection and privacy requirements are met in order build robust issue management systems and protect against organizational challenge. **Such systems should address issues such as:**

- the impact on personal privacy

- when special categories of personal data are used on a large scale

- AI processes and their purpose

- whether the process is necessary

- the proportional risk that processing involves for people's rights, including the right to privacy

- the measures selected for managing risk

- the rights of the data owner (individual) to correct errors and 'opt out' if they do not wish their data to be used in particular ways

[Find more detail on data, data cleansing and ethics in our AI in PR Primer guides.](#)

Combining AI with data privacy can be a win-win.

Bias

Incomplete or inaccurate data used to train algorithms can lead to bias, influencing high-stakes decisions, also known as high consequence systems, and potentially reinforcing existing social biases. The evidence of flaws and racial biases in facial recognition software powered by AI, led Amazon, IBM and Microsoft to withdraw such systems in June 2020

The way in which data is collected and handled can also lead to bias in the results. Human biases and even organizational biases can affect the way data is classified or what is excluded from the data set. If data is crowd-sourced, bought in from third parties, scraped, or otherwise gathered from digital applications, it may well be biased by virtue of the types of people who use online services. These people – typically the socio-economically advantaged – will commonly be over-represented in the data.

AI can also be deliberately used to amplify bias. Insurance companies purposefully discriminate in order to minimise perceived risk, as do banks when they make loans; AI systems are now being used to support underwriting decisions and mortgage applications.

It is important to set out the 'big picture' context around AI in which PR should have a voice because AI will have a huge impact on:

- how organizations shape their business (which needs communicating)

- makes its decisions (for which it will be held to account)

- exercises its power and how it behaves in the world (which affects reputation and relationships) and

- uses its resources (which affects its culture)

Ethical implications in using AI tools in Public Relations

Turning now to the use of AI enabled tools in public relations, we can see that this is increasing. For public relations functions across any sector, AI can, and is: providing profiling data on stakeholders, writing content, improving risk detection and management, predicting media trends, analysing sentiment among diverse audiences and employees, helping mitigate against possible crises via predictive analytics, and assisting with evaluation, plus many other applications which aid organization and workflow, for example with running a public relations campaign.

Using or buying AI-enabled tools

Ethical decision-making in AI starts right at the beginning at the point of purchase.
There are a number of key considerations:

- how the data powering an AI tool is being, or has been, collected, from whom/where and its date

- data privacy provisions

- how the tool was built and tested (including testing for bias)

- what the AI component actually is and what it does

- what the impacts on humans will be, including thinking through unintended consequences

- what governance system will this tool fit into or need

Ethical guides, reviews and panels

The law may not keep pace with technology, but in this space, regulation is not enough. We need an ethical framework to work out what is the right thing to do. This usually requires specific training in AI ethics. The first thing to determine is whether the tool being used is AI-enabled. A quick answer will be to find out if it has an algorithm at its core and whether it can 'learn' as it is used. Next, how do we go about considering the ethical implications of using this tool?

We need an ethical framework to work out what is the right thing to do.

A principles-based approach on ethics

We believe a principles-based approach, which takes you through an ethically guided decision-making journey, is better than a rules-based approach, which tries to cover every possible ethical issue that might arise. Knowing how you got to the decision is as important as the decision itself.

Ethical guides or reviews can help an organization set out its approach to data before it encounters thorny issues. The data ethics canvas from the UK's Open Data Institute is a superbly useful starting point to help organizations and PR practitioners identify potential ethical issues associated with a data project or activity. The canvas with readable headlines is shown below, but for the full, expandable version of this go to https://theodi.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ODI-Data-Ethics-Canvas-2019-05.pdf.

Credit: The Open Data Institute and Philpott Design

The key to ethical decision making is to identify which principles are in play. Once identified, we use a decision-making tree to guide us through a process that helps us arrive at an ethical decision. The ethical principles adopted by the Global Alliance (GA) are useful to keep in mind.

Here are the 16 principles that the GA deem universal and fundamental to the practice of public relations and communication management:

Guiding principles

1. Working in the public interest

2. Obeying laws and respect diversity and local customs

3. Freedom of speech

4. Freedom of assembly

5. Freedom of media

6. Honesty, truth and fact-based communication

7. Integrity

8. Transparency and disclosure

9. Privacy

Principles of professional practice

1. Commitment to continuous learning and training

2. Avoiding conflict of interest

3. Advocating for the profession

4. Respect and fairness in dealing with publics

5. Expertise without guarantee of results beyond capacity

6. Behaviours that enhance the profession

7. Professional conduct

So, having the issues identified and the principles in place, we are then ready to go through the decision-making process.

Decision-making

Reaching an ethical decision is about asking questions. A lot of questions.

CPRS decision-making tree

The CPRS recently developed an ethics decision-making tree.
Consult it to arrive at your decision.

START

Is it a legal issue? Might laws be broken?

YES → Let client/ management know that you believe this to be a legal issue and provide suggestions for an alternative approach.

DON'T KNOW → Seek Legal Advice

NO ↓

Does the issue contravene the spirit of the principles of the CPRS Code of Professional Standards ("the Code")?

YES → Do not proceed with project, at least until you have discussed the issue with client/ management and resolved the issue.

NO →

Do you feel prevented, or inhibited, from talking openly with client/management/ colleagues?

YES → Discuss with a designated Code of Professional Standards Advisor from CPRS College of Fellows for informal advice; then create alternative approach.

NO →

Could this issue damage your reputation or that of the organization for which you are working?

YES → Inform client/ management of your assessment of reputational risk and suggest an alternative approach. Consider sharing the Code with client/management if helpful.

NO →

Does your client/management disagree with your resolution of any issues, your alternative approach, or revised course of action?

YES → Ascertain reasoning from client/management and resolve any issues to mutual satisfaction.

NO →

Achievable or Not?

NO → If not achievable, consider removing yourself from the project.

YES →

You can proceed with the project incorporating any agreed-upon adjustments and stay alert to any developments.

To make the use of this decision-making tree come to life, we provide two examples for how it can be applied.

Ethical decision-making made real

Using LinkedIn Insight Tag
Let us walk through the CPRS Decision Tree using the LinkedIn Insight Tag.

The LinkedIn Insight tag is simply a few lines of Javascript code that can be added to any website. Once installed, the code checks for a LinkedIn user cookie for any visitor to that web property. LinkedIn will then freely share certain information about that user with the website owner. For example, who they work for, job title, location, company size/industry, etc). The data can be gathered for the site as a whole or for specific pages or groups of pages.

In addition, this information can then be used to "retarget" these users on LinkedIn itself with sponsored content. For example, all LinkedIn users who visit a specific page can be shown specific content in their personal LinkedIn feed based on the knowledge of where they have been previously on your website. Messaging can be adjusted to take this into account in order to influence a specific outcome. LinkedIn will also provide highly granular data on exactly who the sponsored content was shown to and what actions they subsequently took. For example, clicking a link or returning to the website concerned to complete an outcome such as a document download or form fill.

Define the ethical issue: Just because we can do something, should we? Installing the LinkedIn Insight tag is a trivial exercise. The wider ethical issues surround what that then allows an organization to then do with the data subsequently captured.

Might laws be broken?: The installation and use of the Insight Tag per se appears to be within the law in most countries (PIPEDA in Canada and GDPR in Europe for example) = providing of course that the use of this tracking code is clearly explained and highlighted to site users, along with explicit consent for the tracking to occur. However, even though on one level the use of the tag doesn't provide any personally identifiable information (PII), under certain circumstances, it may be possible to infer the personal identities of individual users. Would using this information (albeit derived indirectly) be ethically or indeed legally correct?

Does the issue contravene the spirit of the principles in the CPRS Code? Given the focus on honesty, transparency and confidentiality, utilising PII data for communications purposes gained in this way would certainly seem to go against both the spirit and the letter of the code of conduct.

Could it damage your reputation? In this example, if it came to light that an organization had been using the Insight Tag to identify individuals for the purposes of communication and influence, then the probability of reputational damage is not likely to be zero. Tempting as it might be to use this to gain an "edge" in influencing specific individuals and audiences, this clearly must be weighed against the ethical and reputational damage that might occur.

Can you talk openly to your colleagues or managers? A key point here is that a range of different people within an organization will almost certainly need to be consulted in order to arrive at a consensus on how (and if) this particular piece of technology can and should be deployed. Part of the challenge is getting agreement, and understanding of, the full range of issues - IT, legal, reputational, etc.

Have managers accepted your proposed course of action? Even assuming all relevant parties are involved in the decision-making process and the risks properly assessed, there may still be a temptation to use the tech in ways that the PR practitioner would find questionable. PR practitioners need to have a broad understanding of both the technology itself and how it works as well as the ethical, legal and reputational implications in order to provide the most informed and robust input to the decision-making process.

Facial Recognition: Two faced?

Now, let's take you through the decision-making process of a very controversial AI tool.

Define the ethical issue: Facial recognition is an issue at the heart of the debate about the ethical use of AI. Bias coded into systems amplifies and exaggerates issues of race and violates accepted norms for the use of surveillance in public. It is used to match images against government records such as driving licences and social media profiles.

The technology developed by Amazon, Facebook, Google, IBM and others, enables individuals to be identified from images or video. The ability to apply AI at scale to huge datasets of images of individuals is compelling.

Facial recognition has quickly found applications in security by border authorities, police and schools. These are lucrative and large markets and it has led the technology industry to react clumsily to issues as they have emerged.

AI systems are codes with the biases and their prejudices of their creators. Middle class white coders on a campus in Silicon Valley cannot foresee use cases in Blackburn, UK; Baltimore, US; or Bombay, India. Only 11% of AI developers are women- that is another form of built-in bias.

Examples of AI photo recognition gone wrong or concerns about rogue applications in the public sphere are not hard to find.

Facebook faced criticism in 2010 when it began automatically recognizing and tagging images of individuals uploaded to the platform. It has subsequently ceded control of the use of facial recognition and tagging to individual users.

Google's photo recognition algorithm rolled out in 2018 mistakenly labelled people of color as gorillas. Its response was not to fix the software but instead to prevent Google Photos from tagging images as a gorilla, chimpanzee, or monkey.

Might laws be broken? Currently, there are no laws or regulations pertaining to the use of facial recognition software. That does not mean it can be rolled out without testing, scrutiny and testing for effectiveness. That is what prompted many to issue warnings against widespread use of facial recognition all around the world.

Does the issue contravene the spirit of the principles in the CPRS Code? The global Artificial Intelligence Panel itself warned businesses in 2019 to be transparent about the application of emerging technology, after it was revealed that facial recognition technology has been used at London's Kings Cross without public knowledge. The code stresses transparency, honesty and confidentiality. Facial recognition certainly seems to break many aspects of the code.

Could it damage your reputation? Most recently the death in June 2020 of George Floyd, an African American man killed by police during an arrest in Minneapolis, Minnesota, has raised public concern that facial recognition would be used unfairly against protesters.

IBM immediately stopped selling facial recognition software for mass surveillance saying that it needed to address racial bias. It called for a dialogue on whether and how facial recognition technology should be used for law enforcement. IBM did say however that they would continue to sell to police profiling software- another AI tool fraught with, potentially, its own perils and shortcomings.

> Currently, there are no laws or regulations pertaining to the use of facial recognition software.

Amazon has also stopped selling its facial recognition software to police forces. Its Rekognition platform has previously struggled to identify the gender of individuals with darker skin. We can certainly see that in all cases described here that the reputation of these organisations has suffered. Confidence and trust in policing in particular, is extremely troubling.

Can you talk openly to your colleagues or managers? It is unclear if public relations professionals have been involved in testing facial recognition or advising on its development and deployment. Clearly more dialogue and soul searching needs to take place before this technology is rolled out at scale.

Have managers accepted your proposed course of action? AI needs greater ethical oversight and scrutiny before applications are released into the public sphere. Its application should also be communicated clearly to the public. The technology has been introduced by stealth and needs to be halted and proper scrutiny applied. Its application should also be communicated clearly and transparently to the public, including what algorithms are being used, and how they are making decisions on the person being recorded and or tracked. Another safeguard to build in is a redress process for people to make complaints/raise issues; and also to request their data (as images are data) are not collected/destroyed as they haven't explicitly consented unless the image collection/profiling has been clearly communicated in being in the interests of security by policing authorities.

If you are working in public relations for an organization developing facial recognition, get informed, speak up and be prepared to be the champion voice of the greater public interest.

These two examples show how complex the field of AI ethics is. In ethics there is often not a straight-forward answer, but the key thing is to go through a rigorous process that allows you to demonstrate how and why you have arrived at a particular conclusion. A good discipline is to use decision-making tool with a respected colleague who can test your own thinking as you go through the process and support you at the end. Really tough decisions, with a number of possible answers may have to be discussed and worked through with senior managers. But you will have done your job and acted as the ethical guardian.

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Conclusion

It has been said many times that with great power comes great responsibility. The power of AI makes it exciting or scary depending on your point of view. It is growing fast in some sectors of the economy and, although not as much in public relations applications, we need to keep an eye on how AI is designed, built, used, and ask questions to ensure that it provides benefits for everyone with a clear edge to working in the public interest above all.

The disruption related to Covid-19 has created re-invention at scale with AI and automation tools taking a front seat in many industries.

That is why the #AIinPR panel has been encouraging professionals to upskill in this area. There are many automation and AI tools available to public relations professionals, but we suspect that take-up is at the low end of the scale. It is also possible that you are currently using AI tools without knowing it.

As the two examples shown here, AI can be a force for good, but can also be fraught with dangers. Just because something can be done doesn't mean it should be done. That is the essence of ethical decisions; making thoughtful and thought-through choices. The test of a well-reflected ethical decision is one that has survived scrutiny, challenge in thought, intent and execution. Be prepared to ask yourself questions before arriving at your decision.

We trust that this guide will help you on your AIinPR journey.

Contributors

The authors are grateful to Ben Verinder, Kerry Sheehan,
Andrew Smith and Stephen Waddington for their contributions to this guide.

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