

# Ethics as the Strategy for Public Relations Associations

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## Abstract

The main goal of the paper is to analyse the objectives declared by the twenty professional associations of public relations, from the perspective of ethics. To answer in which way PR-associations consider ethics as one of the objectives of their work, the research used the qualitative content analysis of the official web-sites of twenty different professional (inter)national associations in Europe and US. The research showed that the majority of the associations emphasized the ethical dimension of their efforts, although it is not unanimously shared, since some of them express it in a very vague way. Nevertheless, the majority of analysed professional associations are aware of the importance of ethics in public relations and of their own strategic role in the field of public relations ethics.

**Keywords:** communication, public relations, ethics, associations, strategy

**JEL classification:** M14, D8

## Introduction

Public relations can be considered as a young profession, which in the second half of the twentieth century and early 21st century is constantly trying to confirm its maturity, or in other words, to show its independence in relation to other media and business professions. In this context, the development of public relations ethics is an integral part of professionalizing public relations (Browning, 2018), or as Fitch (2016: p. 2) argues: "public relations history as an evolutionary and linear development towards an ethical profession". A key step towards professionalization of public relations is the fact that professionals have joined (Yang et al., 2014), because they recognize that they differ from other (such as journalism or marketing). The roots of PR-associations go to United States in 1936 (Browning 2018), and today there are dozens of national and international associations of public relations practitioners around the world (Yang et al., 2014).

There are three mechanisms used by professional associations to determine their professional status (Noordegraaf, 2011: p. 470). The first, he argues, is a cognitive mechanism, involving: schooling, education, training, knowledge, skills, conferences, books, journals, and magazines. The second is the normative mechanism, and it implies membership criteria, selection criteria, entry barriers, and certificates, codes of conducts, sanctions, and discipline. The third is a symbolic mechanism in which are involved: rites of passage, stories, heroes, codes of ethics, service ideals, and missions. These three mechanisms are used to "define work practices, demarcate occupational fields, regulate behaviours, symbolize professionalism and provide external cues" (p. 470). However, this study will focus specifically on so-called "ethical leverage" of the mentioned "mechanisms", to see how ethics plays a strategic role in public relations associations whose task is "to provide guiding principles for correct behaviours among members" (Tsetsura et al., 2016: p. 575).

Namely, if the strategic activities of public relations associations were compared with the enterprise strategy, then these associations could also say that they have their own strategy process for incorporating societal and member expectations, values and norms in the organization's strategy development processes and achieving its non-financial goals (Steyn et al., 2010). Since the ethics is a core principle of public relations (Vercic et al. 1996), and "no other issue is more important in PR than ethics" (Ołędzki, 2011), it could be said that ethics is in some ways a strategy for associations. There are researches that have even shown that the existence of an ethics statement in a PR-firm has the most powerful effect on ethical practice (Ki et al., 2014).

In contrast to the research that evaluated the ethical values of professional associations exclusively on a sample of ethical codes (Kim et al., 2014), the main goal of this paper is to analyse the ethical goals declared on websites or in statutes (also published on websites) of the twenty (inter)national professional associations of public relations. All associations from the research sample have ethical codes, so they can generally be considered declarative-oriented towards ethical behaviour. However, the goal of the study is to show whether the ethical principles (mission, vision, different descriptions) are present on their websites, which can be considered as the medium through which they communicate their identity to the public. Furthermore, the aim is to show whether the issue of ethics in these associations has been extended to other forms of action by these associations, for example, in the form of various projects carried out by associations.

Aiming to answer in which way PR-associations consider ethics as one of the objectives of their work, the research used the qualitative content analysis.

## Methodology

The research was conducted on a sample of 20 public relations associations from Europe (16), the United States (2) and two international associations (Table 1). The sample included only websites, since, using the words from "corporate dictionary", they have "become important impressions management tools", or "represent a constantly available source of information for an organization's publics", and nowadays they are "the most essential image building tools" (Connolly-Ahern et al., 2007: p. 1). The role of web sites is to "strengthen corporate identity" (Newland Hill et al., 2000: p. 32). However, it should be noted that almost 20 years ago it became clear that "the World Wide Web can be considered the first public relations mass media" (White et al., 1999: p. 406), and in that sense can be also considered, by the same scholars, as the first controlled mass media by public relations. The challenge of this paper was to explore how public relations associations use their websites to promote their ethical identity.

The criterion of choosing the association was to have an ethics code, either their own, either the associations have chosen some other ethical code that obliges their membership. The method by which research was conducted was a qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980). A matrix was developed, which sought to investigate whether or not the associations have some kind of ethical strategy on their websites and in what form it was stated. Parts of websites from the following areas were explored: goals, mission, vision, values, about us, or who we are. Criteria for analysis (based at Kolić Stanić, 2018) included, firstly, direct mention of the terms: ethics, code of ethics, integrity, honesty, truth; and indirectly: professional standards, quality, best practices, and excellences. The research is limited to the description of associations, their vision and mission, statutes and taking into consider is there a special place on the websites to announce breaches of the codes, and is there any

further associations efforts for making ethics issues visible on the website. Other contents, such as news or other features are not taken into consideration. The websites were explored by the end of March 2018.

Table 1

The List of Analysed Public Relations Associations

Country	Abbreviated name of association	Full name of association	Year of foundation
Austria	PR-ETHIK-RAT	Public Relations Ethic Council Austria (Österreichische Ethik-Rat für Public Relations)	2008
Austria	PRVA	Public Relations Association Austria (Public Relations Verband Austria)	1975
Austria	VIKOM	Association for Integrated Communication (Verband für integrierte Kommunikation)	1955
Austria	ÖPR	Austrian PR Quality Seal (Österreichisches PR-Gütezeichen)	1992
Croatia	CPRA	Croatian Public Relations Association (Hrvatska udruga za odnose s javnošću)	1998
Germany	DRPR	German PR Council (Deutscher Rat für Public Relations)	1987
Germany	DPRG	German Public Relations Society (Deutsche Public Relations Gesellschaft)	1958
Germany	BdP	German Federal Association of Spokespersons (Bundesverband deutscher Pressesprecher)	2003
Germany	GPRA	Society of Public Relations Agencies (Gesellschaft Public Relations Agenturen)	1974
Germany	DeGePol	German Association of Political Consultants (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Politikberatung)	2002
Italy	FERPI	Italian Public Relations Federation (Federazione Relazioni Pubbliche Italiana)	1970
Italy	Assorel	Association of Communication and Public Relations companies (Associazione imprese di comunicazione e relazioni pubbliche)	1982
UK	PRCA	Public Relations Consultants Association	1969
UK	CIPR	Chartered Institute of Public Relations	1948
Spain	Dircom	Association of Communication Managers (Asociación de Directivos de Comunicación)	1992
Spain	ADECEC	Association of Communication and Public Relations Consultancy Companies (Asociación de Empresas Consultoras en Relaciones Públicas y Comunicación)	1991
USA	PRSA	Public Relations Society of America	1947
USA	PR Council	Public Relations Council	1998
International	GA	Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management	2002
International	ICCO	International Communications Consultancy Organization	1986

Source: Authors' work

## Results

In order to answer the fundamental research question about the presence of ethics as a strategy on the public relations association's websites, the results of this research will be presented as answers to five questions.

The first question concerns direct mentioning of ethics. The ethics on the websites, in their description or goals, directly refers to 17 associations and indirectly to only 3 associations (CPRA, BdP, and GPRA). Further, to the second question: does the statutes (or some other kind of other basic documents) of PR-associations hold a goal concerned ethics, the direct "response" came from 15 associations, indirectly from 3 (ViKOM, BdP, GA) and for 2 associations it was not possible to determine the answer (GPRA and PR Council), since their statutes were unreachable. Therefore, most of the associations contain ethics in their presentations and statutes as some of the fundamental goals of their action, and it is interesting that among them 6 associations put ethics as part of their mission or vision (ViKOM, DRPR, Assorel, CIPR, Dircom, GA).

The third question could be reduced to a "common denominator" of the operationalization of the strategic ethical activity of public relations associations: does associations websites point out the presence of their committee for the ethics? Ten of twenty, or half of them, have the committees for ethics, for example they name them as: The Court of Arbitration, The Court of Honor, Professional Practices Committee, Professional Standards Panel (including Appeals Panel, Regulatory Consultant, Arbiter), Board of Ethics and Professional Standards. It is important to notice the PR-ETHIK-RAT in Austria and DRPR in Germany are the national bodies of the self-control, in charged for all active professionals (PR ETHIK-RAT has 12, and DRPR 21 members, mainly consisting professionals, academics and law-experts). However, 8 associations did not point out their committee (although 2 from them are Austrian associations, which recognize PR-ETHIK-RAT as their committee for ethics). For two associations was not possible to determine if they have some kind of a committee or not (the basic documents where unreachable).

Fourth question can be consider as one more step to operationalization ethics as a strategy. Is there a special place on the website of the association to publish breaches of the codes? Just three of twenty PR-associations have that kind of a space: UK's CIPR, but especially Austrian PR-ETHIK-RAT and German DRPR, who announces breaches of codes in much higher number of cases.

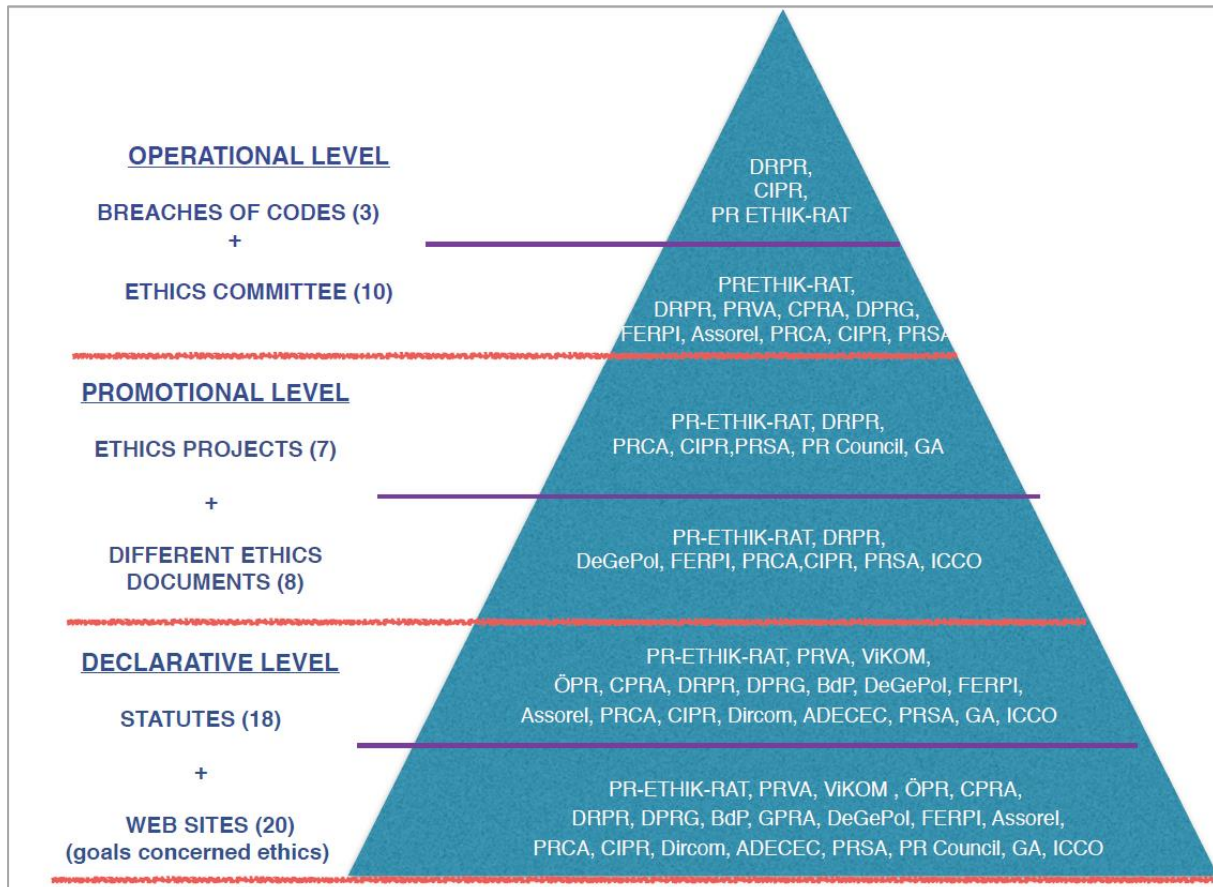
Fifth question is dedicated to the further association's efforts for the ethics. For half of them, 10 can be said that they are pointing out their efforts. Besides publishing documents on ethics, associations provide also other relevant information. Austrian PR-ETHIK-RAT gives the solutions to new questions of the field or points out some researches about ethics and PR. German DRPR, association that undoubtedly shares much more ethics documents compared to others, points out its cooperation within the project of the European PR Ethics Network (EPREN). UK's PRCA gives information on training in ethics or points out Ethical Champions; and CIPR promotes Ethics Festival, Ethics Hotline, or Compulsory Ethics module. In US field PRSA gives 18 Ethical Standards Advisories create by the Board of Ethics and Professional Standards, Ethics Case Studies, Ethics Webinar, Ethics Quiz, Ethics Articles and Blog Posts, Mobile App: Ethics App for Professional Communicators and cooperates with Ethisphere Institute and PR-Council has blog for ethics questions. On the other side, international association GA promotes its GA Ethical PR Project (including Ethical pr reports and Ethics Case Studies).

Though research avoided to directly ranking associations by taking into account their ethics as a strategy, it is necessary to point out very positive examples of the two oldest associations - US PRSA and British CIPR. Ethics on their websites is shown as

an obvious strategy, although PRSA, in spite of its pro-ethical declarations in goals and other projects, unlike the CIPR, abandoned the "punishment" of its ethical "offenders". Precisely in this area, perhaps the highest maturity - based on the numerous announcements of breaches the codes - has been shown by DRPR and PR-ETHIK RAT in Germany and Austria.

Figure 1

Ethics as the Strategy of Public Relations Associations at Three Levels



Source: Authors' work

## Discussion

The analysis has shown that ethics as the strategy of public relations associations is being implemented at three levels: declarative, promotional and operational. The first is the declarative level, and it is proved the most powerful, since all associations in some form declare that for them, the ethics is a strategic interest. However, significant differences can be seen when the ethics as a strategy goes to the next levels.

At the second level, which could be called ethical-promotional, happened rather great decreasing: just half of analysed associations showed that, apart from formalities, they also have quite original and innovative activities through which they promote ethics. At the third level, which could be called operational level, recognized by the research through the existence of ethics committees in associations, the power of ethics as a prominent strategy has weakened also by half, in contrast to declarative level. Bearing in mind that only three associations publish "verdicts" of code breaches, and then the strength of operational level is being further lowered. In addition, important is to notice that 9 associations provide special

programs of certification their members, which usually include knowing ethical principles of the profession (ÖPR, CPRA, DPRG, BdP, GPRA, Assorel, PRCA, CIPR, and PRSA).

There are, therefore, significant differences with regard to the strategic ethical action at the three levels, and it can be said that, at best, half of the association coincided with the declarative, operational and promotional action of ethics as a strategy. Although this study has, a pattern that can be considered as international, it could expand beyond Europe and the United States in order to get results that are more complete. Since the website is a very complex form of media, other areas, such as news, press releases and other content (not specifically categorized on the site), should be further analysed.

## Conclusion

In this study of the websites of some US, European and international public relations associations, the aim was to take into account the obvious ethical elements as a public relations association strategy. Of course, other methods, such as surveys and public relations professionals' interviews, could provide additional information about the topic of this research. Nevertheless, it has undoubtedly proved that ethics belongs to the public relations associations as a targeted and strategic action, but more on a declarative level than on a promotional or operational. Further professionalization of public relations would mean a stronger affirmation of ethics, from declarative and promotional to operational level.

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