

DIGITAL PR COMMUNICATION AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY: CHALLENGES OF TRANSPARENCY, PRIVACY, AND PUBLIC TRUST IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract

This article analyzes the ethical foundations of digital PR communication by examining transparency, privacy protection, and the maintenance of public trust in the online environment. As organizations increasingly rely on digital platforms, the boundaries of professional responsibility expand, requiring PR practitioners to ensure authenticity, protect user data, and prevent manipulative communication practices. The study highlights the role of transparent sponsorship disclosure, responsible data handling, algorithmic accountability, and inclusive messaging as core components of ethical digital PR.

Keywords: Digital PR, transparency, privacy, public trust, ethical communication, data protection, online environment.

Introduction

Digital transformation has reshaped the field of public relations, creating unprecedented opportunities for communication, engagement, and brand visibility. At the same time, it has introduced complex ethical dilemmas that challenge traditional PR principles. The online environment – characterized by vast data circulation, algorithm-driven content distribution, and high-speed information flows – requires PR professionals to adopt a new ethical framework rooted in transparency, privacy protection, and trust-building. As digital platforms increasingly mediate public discourse, the moral and professional responsibilities of PR practitioners have expanded, making ethical digital communication a central concern in contemporary media ecosystems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Transparency stands at the core of ethical digital PR communication. In online spaces, audiences expect clarity regarding the source, purpose, and authenticity of information. Unlike traditional media, digital platforms allow for rapid content generation and dissemination, enabling both legitimate and manipulative communication practices. Hidden sponsorships, covert advertising, manipulated narratives, and influencer partnerships without disclosure can undermine credibility and distort public perception. Ethical PR, therefore, requires clear labeling of sponsored content, disclosure of organizational interests, and avoidance of deceptive messaging. Transparent digital communication not only prevents misinformation but also fosters long-term reputation stability by strengthening the relationship between organizations and their audiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Another major ethical dimension in digital PR is privacy. With the rise of data-driven communication strategies, PR practitioners increasingly rely on personal data for segmentation, behavioral targeting, and audience analysis. Although data analytics enhances message precision and engagement, it also raises concerns about surveillance, consent, and misuse of personal information. Ethical digital PR must respect individual privacy rights, comply with data-protection regulations such as GDPR, and practice informed consent when collecting and using data. The unauthorized harvesting of user information, intrusive tracking techniques, and the use of AI-driven profiling without transparency not only violate ethical norms but also expose organizations to reputational and legal risks. As digital users become more aware of data exploitation, privacy protection becomes a key determinant of public trust.

Public trust itself is both the goal and the outcome of ethical digital PR communication. In the digital age, trust is fragile; it can be strengthened through honest engagement or destroyed within minutes by misinformation, unethical practices, or unresponsiveness. Social media platforms amplify this dynamic by making public reactions instant and highly visible. To maintain trust, PR professionals must commit to timely communication, accountability, and accuracy. During crises, transparent updates and acknowledgment of responsibility are far more effective than silence or denial. Building trust also involves fostering dialogue rather than one-way messaging, encouraging participation, and demonstrating a genuine commitment to public interests. The ethical alignment between what organizations say and what they do becomes a critical factor in sustaining digital trust. The digital environment also heightens the risk of manipulation, raising ethical challenges that go beyond traditional PR debates. Algorithmic amplification can artificially boost certain narratives, while bots, deepfakes, and synthetic media can distort reality and mislead audiences. PR practitioners must distance themselves from manipulative practices, avoid the use of deceptive digital tools, and contribute to media literacy by encouraging audiences to critically evaluate online content. Ethical responsibility demands

that communication professionals uphold truthfulness in an environment where disinformation is widespread and technologically sophisticated.

Another ethical concern is inclusivity. Digital PR communication must ensure fair representation and avoid bias in messaging, imagery, and audience targeting. Algorithms can unintentionally reinforce stereotypes or exclude marginalized groups; hence PR professionals must be conscious of diversity and inclusivity when designing campaigns. Ethical digital PR aligns communication values with broader social responsibilities, recognizing the importance of equal access, representation, and respect for cultural differences.

Furthermore, AI technologies increasingly used in PR — such as automated content generation, sentiment analysis, and predictive analytics — bring new ethical implications. While AI can improve efficiency and precision, it also raises concerns about transparency, fairness, and accountability. Ethical PR requires human oversight of AI systems, disclosure of automated communication when relevant, and careful evaluation of how algorithms shape public perception. Overreliance on AI without ethical safeguards risks reinforcing bias, reducing authenticity, and eroding public trust.

CONCLUSION

Ethical responsibility has become a defining requirement for digital PR communication as online media environments continue to evolve. Transparency in messaging, honesty in sponsorship disclosure, and accountability for the accuracy of shared information form the basis of public trust. Privacy protection, including lawful and respectful handling of user data, is essential as data-driven strategies grow more sophisticated. Ethical PR also demands that practitioners avoid manipulative digital tools, confront misinformation, and ensure inclusivity in communication outputs. As artificial intelligence and algorithm-driven systems play a larger role in PR practices, stronger ethical frameworks and human oversight are needed to prevent bias and protect credibility. Ultimately, organizations that uphold ethical standards in digital communication strengthen their reputations, foster long-term trust, and contribute to a more reliable and responsible online information ecosystem.

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