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# Education as the Essential Part of Public Relations Ethics Codes

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## Abstract

The end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the 21st century were characterized by increase in faculties and in public relations associations. For members of PR-associations, professional activities are regulated by ethics codes. The goal of this paper is to explore which place in the ethics codes of public relations associations takes the importance of education and how different associations in different countries consider education as professional duty of PR-experts. This paper provides a qualitative analysis of the content of 13 ethical codes; 2 international and 11 national professional associations active in 7 countries: Austria, Germany, Croatia, Italy, Spain, United Kingdom and United States. The analysis had revealed that the majority of analysed codes does not consider the education as the essential duty of public relations professionals, although some of them emphasized the positive connection of education and ethical conduct.

**Keywords:** communications, public relations, ethics, codes, education, associations

**JEL classification:** I21, M14

## Introduction

Public relations are an integral part of most institutions, business corporations and the non-profit sector (Sharpe et al., 2004). Although public relations professionals are closely linked to the governance structures in the institutions, their relationship is marked by the paradox described by Manley et al. (2017), as follows: "it [public relations] is becoming increasingly recognized as a strategic management function, yet organizations remain unclear on the role of the practitioner" (p. 57). In order to understand better the role and the function of professionals in public relations, it is necessary to take into account their competence to carry out their activity, or in other words, to consider the education that should enable them to work (ethically).

There exists, so to say, a threefold life of education in public relations. The first is education of public relations professionals through schools, courses and university programs. At the end of the twentieth century, until the present day, there was a real expansion in academic education in public relations, because it became more and more, systematically, an integral part of study programs and courses, as well as special faculties (Ahmad et al., 2008; Sriramesh et al., 2009). The second life of education in public relations is the manifestation of the acquired knowledge in the daily work of PRs, what is the special matter of concern of Commission on Public Relations Education and The European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA). This paper, however, is concerned with the "third life" of education that could be considered as the duty of education of PR-professionals.

The place that has actually become the meeting point of different obligations and duties of professionals in public relations are the ethics codes of (inter)national associations that gather them. The importance of these associations and their codes of ethics for the affirmation of the profession of public relations is undeniable (Yang et al., 2014; Yang et al. 2016), since "the ethics codes of professional associations in one country represent the core values of the profession and are deemed to demonstrate the normative direction of the public relations profession in that country" (Kim et al., 2014: 239) This research seeks to promote understanding of education not only as a requirement for the work of professionals in public relations but also as a requirement for their ethical conduct.

The aim of this paper is to show how are some national and international ethical codes of PRs treating the value of education, which will in this case be considered as a part of professional competencies. The research has taken into account 13 ethical codes of 11 national and 2 international associations for public relations. Using the method of qualitative content analysis of these codes, the aim was to show which place the term of education in the broader sense is occupying in these ethical codes, since they are the "standards and guidelines that are designed by a professional public relations association to guide and examine expected ethical and professional norms among members ((Kim et al., 2014: 239)

The research is focused at four questions: What are the concepts for competence/ education, used by codes?; Is there a more significant difference in the treatment of education/competence in "older" and "younger" associations?; Is the imperative of education more present in the codes of European countries or in the United States?; How education is treated by national as well as by international associations?; How is the value of education treated in ethic codes of those associations that cooperate with the educational institution? Yang et al. (2016), when making great analysis of public relations ethic codes, took into consider the competence as the value, and could argue "Public relations professionals become experts from training and continued professional development. They learn new skills, and keep up to date on changes in the field." (p. 157). Also great study from Kim et al. (2014), is mentioning the competence, but as Yang et al. does not put the focus at education as special value. Our study, however, emphasis the value of education as a part of principle of competence and in that sense could offer some additional remarks.

## Methodology

The research has taken into account 13 ethic codes of PR-associations: 11 national and 2 international. National PR-associations codes are taken from the following countries (in alphabetical order): **Austria** (Code of Conduct of the Austrian Public Relations Association - *PRVA Code*), **Croatia** (Croatian Public Relations Association Code of Ethics - *CPRA Code*), **Germany** (The German Communication Code - *DRPR Code*), **Italy** (Two codes: Italian Public Relations Federation Code of Professional Conduct - *FERPI Code*; and Professional Principles and Codes of Conduct for Public Relations in Italy - *Assorel Code*), **Spain** (Two codes: Association of Communication Managers Code of Ethics - *Dircom Code*; and Association of Communication and Public Relations Consultancy Companies Code of Ethics - *ADECEC Code*), **United Kingdom** (Two codes: PRCA Professional Charter - *PRCA Code*; and Chartered Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct - *CIPR Code*), **USA** (Two codes: PRSA Code of Ethics - *PRSA Code*; and The PR Council Code of Ethics and Principles - *PR Council Code*). The research has also included the codes of **two international associations**: Global Protocol on Ethics in Public Relations - *GA Code* and The ICCO

Stockholm Charter - ICCO Code). Each code was analysed by the end of November 2017.

The research matrix was made, according to the traditional methodological guidelines for the qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff, 1980), and each code was analysed under four basic criteria, shaped to describe the principle of competence (Kolic Stanic, 2018): the competence (in narrow sense), the education, the skills and continued improvement.

## Results

The research results will be divided into two parts. The first part contains the list of the most frequently used terms when it comes to the value of education of professionals in public relations, and the second part will show how national and international association's codes of ethics are ranked in terms of the obtained results.

To find out in what sense the codes of ethics hold the value of education of professionals in public relations, the content analysis has found, at the whole sample of 13 codes, 24 different concepts, related to this professional value (Table 1).

The matter of the *principle of competence* is explained in more detail by the following 7 terms: *competence, professionalism, expertise, abilities, capability, capacity and qualifications*. The second concept, *education* (in the narrow sense), is covered by the following 8 terms related to the duties of professionals in public relations to be educated: *education, knowledge, research, training, studying, teaching, science and discipline*. Furthermore, analysed codes have showed the deficit in the duty of *presenting the PR-skills*, since only two terms were found *skills and experience*. However, seven concepts related to *duty of continued improvement* of PR-professionals have been found, which are shaped in the next 7 demands: *following professional trends, improvement professional standards, improvement education and research, improvement professional personal development, closing professional skills gaps, remain up-to-date with the association's guidance or practice papers and improvement professional accreditation*.

Table 1

The Principle of Competence and Four Main Concepts

Competence	Education	Skills	Continued improvement
Competence	Education	Skills	Follow professional trends
Professionalism	Knowledge	Experience	Improvement professional standards
Expertise	Research		Improvement education and research
Abilities	Training		Improvement professional personal development
Capability	Studying		Closing professional skills gaps
Capacity	Teaching		Remain up-to-date with the association's guidance or practice papers
Qualifications	Science		Improvement professional accreditation
	Discipline		

Source: Authors' work

Ranking the codes can be achieved in two ways. The first is to show which codes refer to the professional principle of competence. In that case, it has been shown that 10 of 13 analysed codes have included some form of competence. However, if

the ranking is provided by taking into consider the number of education-related terms, then it is evident that those codes that elaborate the concept of education are in the minority: only five of them, compared to the other eight.

By ranking, the codes in which the principle of competence (in broader sense) is most pronounced by different terms, or concepts, the following results have been achieved (Table 2). The codes that include the most concepts of competence (19) are United Kingdom's Chartered Institute of Public Relations Code of Conduct, and from Croatian Public Relations Association - CPRA (Hrvatska udruga za odnose s javnošću - HUOJ). They are followed by USA's PRSA (17), Global Alliance's code (16), and Germany's DRPR code (14).

Table 2  
The Value of Education in Analyzed Codes

Country	Name of associaton	Year of foundation	Collaboration with Universities	Code	Competency	Education	Skills	Continued improvement	Total
Austria	1. PR-ETHIK-RAT 2. PRVA 3. VIKOM 4. ÖPR	2008 1975 1955 1992	/	PRVA Code	1	1	0	0	2
Croatia	CPRA	1998	/	CPRA Code	5	6	3	5	19
Germany	1. DRPR 2. DPRG 3. BdP 4. GPRA 5. DeGePol	1987 1958 2003 1974 2002	/	DRPR Code	4	8	2	0	14
Italy	FERPI	1970	/	FERPI Code	0	0	0	0	0
Italy	Assorel	1982	/	Assorel Code	1	0	0	0	1
UK	CIPR	1948	The 35 universities have courses awarded with CIPR Recognition.	CIPR Code	6	2	6	5	19
UK	PRCA	1969	PRCA has 17 Partner University members.	PRCA Code	0	0	0	1	1
Spain	Dircom	1992	/	Dircom Code	0	1	0	0	1
Spain	ADECEC	1991	ADECEC has agreements with 12 universities and faculties.	ADECEC Code	0	0	0	0	0
USA	PRSA	1947	PRSA has certified programs on 42 universities. PRSSA has more than 10,000 members in more than 280 universities.	PRSA Code	3	7	3	4	17
USA	PR Council	1998	/	PR Council Code	1	0	1	0	2
International	GA	2002	GA partner is Università della Svizzera italiana (USI).	GA Code	4	9	3	0	16
International	ICCO	1986	/	ICCO Code	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Authors' work

It was surprising there are even three codes that do not include the principle of competence, neither the value of education of PR-professionals - international ICCO Code and two national: Italian FERPI and Spanish ADECEC. If we put in that group the codes where the principle of competence is mentioned just once (like other Italian - Assorel Code, Spanish Dircom - Code and UK's PRCA Code); or codes where is competence mentioned just at two places (Austrian PRVA Code that gathers four national associations, and USA's PR Council), could be significant that almost half of analysed codes do not consider the principle of competence as essential for PR-professionals.

Since some associations at their official pages have emphasized their cooperation with universities and other academic and school institutions (Table 2), it could be assumed that at these associations' codes the principle of competence and in special way the value of education will be more strongly involved. The research confirmed that assumption in the case of UK's CIPR (cooperate with 35 universities) and USA's PRSA (cooperate with 42 academic institutions), because both of their codes include the rather high number of terms of education. However, UK's PRCA,

which cooperates with 17 universities, and Spanish ADECEC that cooperates with 12 universities showed negligible space opened for the principle of competence as well as for the value of education in their codes.

Concerning the eventual differences in treating professional's education role in PR's "older", and "younger" associations, the following results are obtained. As traditions of associations grow, this does not necessarily mean the growth of concepts related to the value of education. At the very top, along with the PRSA associations, founded in 1947, and the CIPR association, founded in 1948, took the place the Croatian Association founded 1998 and International GA, founded in 2002. Since the tradition of public relations education and professionals associating is largely connected with the United States (Ahmad et al., 2008), their ethical codes could be expected to be more focused on education rather than European. However, this is confirmed just in the case of the PRSA Code, but not in the PR-Council's case. Also, it is not significant that international associations are in general more focused to the issue of education, since the international association ICCO does not hold a part connected to value of education, unlike GA code that is very concerned about professional's education. It is maybe interesting to notice, that PR-Council as well as ICCO are more oriented to PR-agencies than PRSA or GA.

## Discussion

Professional competency in public relations, with professional and other experience, certainly involves education. Research has shown that in the analyzed codes, in their use of the concept of education and within related terms, exist kind of ambiguities and inconsistencies, which opens space for further explanation in the future. Thus, in most cases, there is no similar understanding of the definition and role of the as professional value that shapes professionalism in public relations. Although it may be assumed that older public relations associations, grounded in countries with a longer professional and academic tradition in public relations, shall maybe clearly pronounce a demand for education, this has not proved to be a rule. The significant difference has not been showed also in comparing US and European codes, or at those associations that have established cooperation with universities and schools. That is, actually, kind of a proof for the nowadays mission of Commission on Public Relations Education in US and European Public Relations Education and Research Association (EUPRERA), who both tries to improve the value of education among PR-professionals. Important to mention is, also, the project of Global Alliance of Public Relations and Communications Management, which is finishing the process of establishing the global body of knowledge (GBOK) "which may be proposed as a foundation for professional credential schemes and academic curricula across the world" (Manley et al., 2017: 56).

## Conclusion

This study attempted to answer the question of which place in the ethics codes of national and international associations takes education as part of competence, to see whether it is represented to professionals in public relations as a value. Importance of education and its connection to ethical behaviour is very good pointed in GA and PRSA-Code, who both argues that by keeping informed and educated about practices in the profession ensure ethical conduct. Although the principle of competence is at some sense present in most analysed codes, one cannot totally argue that it is a universal, essential requirement. It is therefore an impression that, at least when it comes to analysed codes, education cannot be considered as a prime professional value. Since the study is limited to the codes of public relations associations in the United States and the selected European



countries, and in two international codes, the study of education as a professional value would give more answers to include professional associations in other parts of the world, to get a more complete global picture. This study is preliminary research, because it is needed to get additional explanations and reasons that address the issue of education as a professional value.

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## Appendix - Codes of Ethics

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