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LEGAL DIMENSIONS AND ETHICAL NORMS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS PRACTICE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Abstract. *The article examines the key legal aspects and ethical standards of PR activity in the context of the digital reality, which is undergoing dynamic transformation under the influence of technological progress, social media, and developments in the field of information security. The legal regulation of public relations is analyzed both within Ukrainian legislation and the international legal framework, particularly in relation to personal data protection, copyright compliance, information dissemination, countering fake news, and the regulation of advertising in the digital environment. Emphasis is placed on the importance of adhering to ethical principles in communication practice, such as truthfulness, transparency, avoidance of manipulation, and respect for audience privacy.*

Practical recommendations are proposed for conducting lawful PR campaigns, managing information on social media, complying with ethical standards during crisis communication, and minimizing reputational and legal risks.

The aim of the article is to identify the current challenges and prospects for legal and ethical regulation of PR activity in the digital age, especially in the context of rapid technological development, the digitalization of communications, and growing public demand for responsible public engagement.

To achieve the stated aim, the study employs methods of analysis and synthesis, a comparative legal approach, generalization and systematization, as well as logical and dialectical methods.

The research establishes that legal literacy is a critically important component of professional PR activity. It has been identified that most violations stem from insufficient knowledge of legal norms in the fields of copyright and personal data protection. It is proven that transparency in communication and ethical responsibility enhance public trust in a brand. It is also clarified that the digital environment requires continuous knowledge updates and the adaptation of communication strategies to new legal challenges.

Further research may focus on the development of ethical conduct standards for online communications, the implementation of self-regulatory codes for PR professionals, and the study of artificial intelligence's impact on the legal regulation of the information space.

Keywords: *PR activity, legal regulation, communication ethics, digital reality, personal data, fake*

information, copyright.

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ЮРИДИЧНІ АСПЕКТИ ТА ЕТИЧНІ СТАНДАРТИ PR-ДІЯЛЬНОСТІ В УМОВАХ ЦИФРОВОЇ РЕАЛЬНОСТІ

Анотація. У статті розглянуто ключові юридичні аспекти та етичні стандарти PR-діяльності в умовах цифрової реальності, що динамічно трансформується під впливом технологічного прогресу, соціальних мереж та змін у сфері інформаційної безпеки. Проаналізовано правове регулювання зв'язків з громадськістю як в українському законодавстві, так і в міжнародному правовому полі, зокрема щодо захисту персональних даних, дотримання авторських прав, поширення інформації, протидії фейковим новинам та регулювання реклами в цифровому середовищі. Наголошено на важливості дотримання етичних принципів у комунікаційній практиці, зокрема правдивості, прозорості, недопущення маніпуляцій та поваги до приватності аудиторії.

Запропоновано практичні рекомендації щодо правомірного ведення PR-кампаній, обробки інформації в соціальних медіа, дотримання етичних норм під час кризової комунікації, а також мінімізації репутаційних та юридичних ризиків.

Метою статті є визначення сучасних викликів і перспектив правового та етичного регулювання PR-діяльності у цифрову епоху, зокрема у контексті стрімкого розвитку технологій, цифровізації комунікацій і зростання суспільного запиту на відповідальну публічну взаємодію.

Для досягнення поставленої мети використано методи аналізу та синтезу, порівняльно-правовий підхід, узагальнення та систематизації, а також логічний і діалектичний методи.

У ході дослідження встановлено, що юридична грамотність є критично важливою складовою професійної діяльності PR-фахівця. Виявлено, що більшість порушень пов'язана з недостатнім знанням законодавчих норм у сфері авторського права та захисту персональних даних. Доведено, що прозорість комунікації та етична відповідальність підвищують рівень довіри до бренду. Уточнено, що цифрове середовище вимагає постійного оновлення знань і адаптації комунікаційних стратегій до нових правових викликів.

Подальші дослідження можуть бути зосереджені на формуванні стандартів етичної поведінки в онлайн-комунікаціях, впровадженні кодексів саморегуляції для PR-фахівців, а також на вивченні впливу штучного інтелекту на правове регулювання інформаційного простору.

Ключові слова: PR-діяльність, правове регулювання, етика комунікації, цифрова реальність, персональні дані, фейкова інформація, авторське право.

Problem Statement. In the era of rapid digital transformation of society, where the majority of social, economic, and political processes occur within the information environment, public relations (PR) has become a vital tool for shaping public opinion, managing reputation, and ensuring effective communication between various stakeholders – businesses, state institutions, and the public. The use of digital communication channels, including social media, content-sharing platforms, and other online resources, has significantly expanded the potential to influence audiences, while simultaneously introducing new risks associated with legal liability and ethical vulnerability.

Under contemporary conditions, the need to ensure legal clarity in the field of PR activity is growing, particularly regarding compliance with legislation on personal data protection, copyright, the veracity of disseminated information, and accountability for manipulative or fake messaging. Despite the existence of certain legal and regulatory acts governing information-related activities, the absence of a comprehensive legal approach to PR communications results in regulatory gaps and complicates the enforcement of relevant legal provisions.

Beyond legal considerations, the issue of ethical responsibility among PR professionals is becoming increasingly pertinent. These specialists must adhere to principles of transparency, truthfulness, respect for audience privacy, and the avoidance of manipulative techniques. In a digital reality where information spreads instantaneously and its impact is broad and often uncontrollable, ethical standards serve as an additional framework guiding the conduct of communication practitioners.

Therefore, the relevance of this study lies in the need for a comprehensive analysis of the legal and ethical foundations of PR activity in the digital age. It aims to identify the legal challenges faced by professionals in the field of public relations and to develop recommendations for ensuring compliance with applicable norms in a rapidly evolving and technologically driven information landscape.

Analysis of Recent Research and Publications. The issue of legal liability in

the context of public relations (PR) activity-particularly concerning legal risks and measures for their mitigation-has been the subject of research by a number of Ukrainian scholars and practitioners. Notable contributions to the development of both theoretical and applied aspects of this topic have been made by Kolisnychenko T. V., Myronenko V. V. [1], Vertheil S. Ya. [2], Zelych V. V. [3], as well as Hubina A. M., Netroba M. M., and Khlebnikova T. M. [4], who have examined legal mechanisms for regulating information activities and liability for offences in the sphere of public communications. In turn, Radzikhovska Yu. M. [5] emphasized the practical aspects of legal compliance and the importance of legal awareness among PR professionals as a key factor in reducing reputational and legal risks. The works of these authors form a theoretical foundation for further reflection on the challenges of legal regulation of PR activity in the context of societal digitalization.

Presentation of the Main Research Material. In the context of legal considerations and ethical standards governing public relations (PR) activities in the digital age, the field of public communication is closely intertwined with legal mechanisms that define the boundaries of professional conduct for communication specialists. Compliance with advertising legislation, regulations concerning the use of intellectual property, protection of personal data, and safeguarding individual reputation are all key components of the legal framework that directly influence the legitimacy and effectiveness of PR communications. An awareness of legal requirements within the digital environment enables PR professionals to effectively mitigate legal risks, act responsibly, and uphold ethical standards in their engagement with the public. Figure 1 schematically illustrates the legal landscape of PR activity, highlighting the principal legal dimensions relevant to the practice of contemporary public communication.

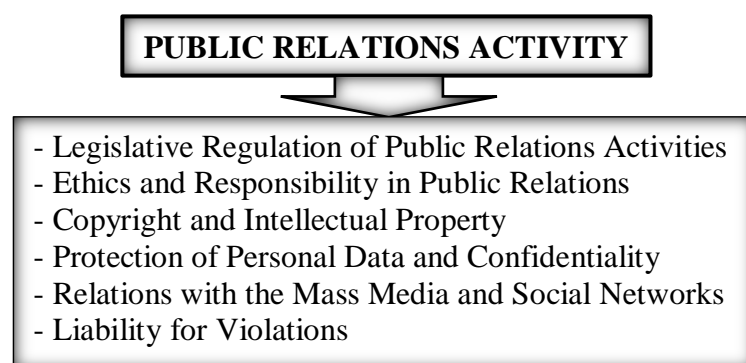


Figure 1 – Legal Framework of Public Relations Activities

Source: Developed by the authors based on materials [6–19]

PR specialists must have a clear understanding of the legislation governing information communications. In particular, it is essential to be familiar with advertising laws that prohibit manipulation, unfair practices, and misleading consumers. In countries such as the United States, Canada, and EU member states, stringent regulations apply to advertising in sectors including healthcare, finance, tobacco, and alcohol. In the US, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees pharmaceutical advertising; in the EU, relevant directives from the European Commission apply; and in Canada, the Advertising Standards Canada agency is responsible. All these jurisdictions require transparency, clear labelling, risk warnings, and restrictions on target audiences.

In Ukraine, PR activities are not directly regulated by a dedicated law but fall under a range of normative legal acts (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Normative and legal regulation of PR activities in Ukraine.

№	Normative document	Brief description
1	Law "On Information" No. 2658-XII	Defines the legal status of information, guarantees freedom of speech, and establishes liability for its dissemination
2	Law "On Advertising" No. 271/96-VR	Distinguishes between advertising and PR, prohibiting manipulative and unfair advertising practices
3	Law "On Personal Data Protection" No. 4170-IX	Regulates the collection, processing, and dissemination of personal data in communications
4	Law "On Access to Public Information" No. 2939-VI	Establishes mechanisms for access to information, particularly in interactions with government bodies and the media
5	Antitrust Legislation	Prohibits the dissemination of false information about competitors and regulates rules for fair competition

Source: developed by the authors based on materials [6; 7; 8; 9; 10; 11; 12; 13; 14]

The legislative regulation of PR activities in Ukraine is based on several legal instruments that define the permissible boundaries within the information sphere, ensure the protection of the rights of information stakeholders, and regulate the ethical and legal standards of professional communication. The absence of a specialized public relations law is compensated for by the application of general legislation covering information, advertising, competition, and personal data components of the field.

One of the fundamental legal documents is the Law of Ukraine "On Information." In particular, Article 5 classifies types of information, with special emphasis on

personal, reference, statistical information, among others. Article 6 establishes the main requirements for information: accuracy, completeness, objectivity, and legality. These provisions form the foundation for disseminating public messages within PR campaigns, ensuring the lawfulness and ethicality of the information presented [6].

The Law of Ukraine "On Advertising" is another important regulatory act that, despite its specialization, directly pertains to PR activities. Article 8 sets forth requirements for the accuracy of advertising information, prohibiting the concealment or distortion of facts. Article 10 outlines the specifics of social advertising, requiring a clear distinction between commercial and social components of messages, as well as appropriate labelling of advertising content. This provision is particularly relevant in contexts where PR activities intersect with brand promotion or image campaigns [7].

The Law of Ukraine "On Personal Data Protection" regulates the rules for processing, storing, and disseminating information concerning individuals. Key provisions (Articles 6, 7, 8, 11, 14, and 15) mandate that any use of personal data must be based on lawful grounds, respecting the rights of data subjects. The processing of sensitive information (such as racial or ethnic origin, religious beliefs, health status, etc.) is permitted only under specific conditions. Furthermore, the consent of the individual for the dissemination of their personal data is obligatory. In the context of PR activities, this implies the necessity of prior informing clients about the purpose of data collection, obtaining their voluntary consent, and preventing unjustified disclosure of information that may violate their rights [8].

The Law of Ukraine "On Access to Public Information" guarantees every citizen the right to obtain information created or held by state authorities, local self-government bodies, as well as other entities performing public functions. Articles 5, 10, 19, 20, 22, and 23 regulate the forms of access to such information, deadlines for considering requests, procedures for submitting requests, and possibilities for appealing refusals. For PR professionals, these provisions provide the opportunity to promptly obtain official data used in public statements, press releases, analytical reports, and so forth, thereby promoting openness and transparency in communications [9].

Antitrust legislation occupies a distinct place in the regulation of the PR sphere

and includes key laws such as the Laws "On the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine," "On Protection of Economic Competition," "On Protection Against Unfair Competition," "On State Aid to Business Entities," and "On Public Procurement." The Law "On the Antimonopoly Committee of Ukraine," specifically Article 20, regulates the mechanisms of interaction between the Committee, the media, and civil society organizations, while Article 24-1 guarantees the transparency of the Committee's activities. This enables corporate PR departments to respond promptly to potential information crises related to investigations or statements by the Committee [10].

The Law "On Protection of Economic Competition" prohibits the abuse of monopoly power, the introduction of discriminatory cooperation conditions, and manipulative practices. Articles 6, 13, 19, 20, and 50 provide an exhaustive list of anti-competitive actions, the responsibility for which may require crisis management responses from a company's PR service [12]. Concurrently, the Law "On Protection Against Unfair Competition," in Articles 5–9, explicitly forbids the use of false or misleading information, imitation of competitors' products, and unauthorized use of third-party PR materials. Compliance with these norms is essential for lawful communication and the formation of a company's honest reputation [13].

The Law of Ukraine "On State Aid to Business Entities" mandates public disclosure (Article 7) regarding the receipt of state support, which is particularly important for ensuring transparency in relations with the public and the media [14].

In conclusion, PR activities must be conducted in compliance with current legislation. Adherence to legal norms not only fosters the development of a sustainable positive image but also mitigates the risks of legal liability for the company. A clear distinction between advertising and PR, observance of the principles of accuracy, lawful processing of personal data, fair competition, and preparedness for crisis situations constitute the foundational elements of the legal culture of the modern PR specialist. Effective and transparent interaction with government bodies, the media, and the public helps maintain trust even amid information turbulence.

Ethics and responsibility in the field of public relations are also integral components of effective PR practice, as their neglect leads to loss of trust, reputational

crises, and potential legal consequences. The core ethical principles in PR include transparency, honesty, objectivity, and respect for the audience. The responsibility of PR professional's manifests at several levels:

- towards the client and employer – through adherence to professional standards and protection of the client's interests;
- towards society – by ensuring ethical communications that contribute to the formation of an open information space and do not harm the public interest;
- towards the professional community – by upholding ethical norms and raising standards within the PR field.

Observance of these principles is a key factor in building audience trust and the success of communication campaigns, contributing to strengthening corporate reputation and creating a responsible informational environment with long-term benefits for both business and society as a whole.

Copyright and intellectual property are crucial legal aspects within the field of public relations. Compliance with legislation in this area ensures both legal security and the professional reputation of a company. PR specialists must create original content, use only materials for which they have obtained rights or permissions, and adhere to rules regarding citation and source referencing. Key regulatory acts, including the Civil Code of Ukraine [16], the Law on Copyright and Related Rights [17], the Law on the Protection of Rights to Marks for Goods and Services [18], and the Law on Advertising [7], define PR materials as objects of intellectual property, regulate authors' rights, and establish liability for the unauthorized use of branded elements. The protection of proprietary developments, such as logos, slogans, and advertising concepts, requires their official registration. The use of others' ideas without permission is unacceptable, as it breaches ethical standards, damages the company's image, and may entail legal consequences. Therefore, legal awareness in the sphere of intellectual property is an essential condition for professional PR practice.

Equally important in terms of legal regulation is the protection of personal data and privacy. In Ukraine, the relevant provisions are established by the Law of Ukraine "On the Protection of Personal Data" [8], which sets requirements for the lawful

processing, proper storage, transfer, and safeguarding of personal information. In particular, it mandates obtaining the data subject's consent for processing, guarantees the confidentiality of information, and requires the implementation of technical and organizational measures to prevent data breaches or unauthorized access. Oversight of compliance with these requirements is carried out by the Commissioner of the Verkhovna Rada of Ukraine for Human Rights. In PR practice, especially when working with client databases, conducting email campaigns, or collecting survey data, specialists must ensure full compliance with legislation, adhere to principles of transparency regarding the purpose and methods of personal data use, and guarantee data security at all stages of processing.

Interaction with mass media and social networks constitutes an integral component of a modern PR strategy. Traditional media – television, radio, print, and online publications – maintain a high level of audience trust, which underscores their significance in shaping an organization's public image. Effective cooperation with journalists and editorial offices enables the dissemination of information through news stories, interviews, reports, and press releases.

At the same time, social media has become a key channel for direct, timely, and interactive communication with target audiences. It allows companies to respond rapidly to user inquiries, create viral content, and foster a loyal community around the brand.

Mass media and social networks perform complementary functions: information published in traditional media is disseminated through social platforms, thereby expanding its reach; conversely, content from social networks often serves as the basis for publications in classic mass media. To achieve maximum effectiveness, it is advisable for companies to integrate these communication channels into a unified information strategy.

PR activities must be conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards and applicable legislation, as violations of these requirements entail legal liability, fines, and significant reputational damage to the company. The main forms of responsibility in this sphere include:

- *Legal (criminal) liability*, which arises in cases of breaches of the law, particularly in instances of defamation, dissemination of false information, manipulation of public opinion, breaches of confidentiality, or copyright infringement;
- *Administrative and financial liability*, applied for violations of advertising and information legislation – such as unlawful actions within PR campaigns that may result in fines, compensation, or even temporary suspension of activities;
- *Ethical and civil responsibility*, which emerges from failure to comply with professional standards, potentially leading to public condemnation, boycotts of products or services, as well as lawsuits due to reputational harm or defamation.

The legislative framework governing liability in the field of public relations encompasses a range of normative legal acts. In particular, the Criminal Code of Ukraine provides for penalties for violations such as copyright infringement (Art. 176), unlawful use of a trademark (Art. 229), and disclosure of confidential information (Art. 344) [19]. The Law of Ukraine “On Advertising” establishes liability for the dissemination of false or unlawful advertising (Arts. 8, 10, 27) [7]. The Code of Ukraine on Administrative Offences prescribes sanctions for breaches of advertising legislation (Art. 164-3) and for restricting access to public information (Art. 212-10) [21]. The Civil Code of Ukraine regulates liability for the dissemination of false information that damages honour, dignity, or business reputation (Art. 277), and provides for compensation for moral harm (Art. 1167) [16]. Additionally, provisions of the Laws “On Consumer Rights Protection” [20] and “On Protection Against Unfair Competition” [13] govern the legitimacy of informational influence on consumers and prohibit the use of false information or competitors’ business reputations.

To mitigate legal risks, PR professionals must comply with current legislation, avoid manipulation of public opinion, refrain from using third-party content without appropriate permission, and abstain from disseminating false or misleading information. Adherence to these requirements contributes to the formation of a sustainable image and fosters trust among the audience.

Conclusions. The study of contemporary legal aspects of public relations activity has revealed that this field is dynamic and requires continuous updating in response to legislative changes and the development of digital technologies. The main challenges

include the protection of personal data, adherence to ethical standards, regulation of advertising, and liability for the dissemination of false information. Analysis of Ukrainian legislation has identified gaps in the regulation of communication on social media, the distinction between information and advertising, as well as accountability for manipulation of public opinion.

Taking into account international experience, a number of amendments to the current legislation are proposed:

- to regulate activities on social media by obliging bloggers to label advertising content (e.g., #advertisement, #collaboration), introduce fines for covert advertising, and define the concept of “manipulative content” within the Law “On Information”;
- to clearly distinguish advertising from information by introducing fines for “paid placement” and mandatory declaration of sponsored publications in the media;
- to establish criminal liability for the organization of bot networks and equate fake reviews with consumer deception.

Prospects for further research include harmonizing national legislation with international standards, analyzing the impact of artificial intelligence on PR communications, defining the legal status of bloggers, and assessing the effectiveness of self-regulation through ethical codes. The application of global experience will promote market transparency, enhance accountability, and ensure a balance between freedom of speech, commercial interests, and citizens’ rights.

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