

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OR ACTIVISTS? THE CASE OF CONFERP IN DEFENDING AN ETHICAL IDENTITY FOR PUBLIC RELATIONS IN BRAZIL

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Introduction

Ethics have taken a central position in professional and academic circles in the debate about public relations, what public relations does and how it should be practised today. Several reasons can be identified for this enquiry into norms, some of which are historical and others contextual. Historical reasons include, among others, the scattered origins of the profession, closely tied to propaganda and advertising, its contentious relationship with the world of journalism and the connotation of manipulation or spin of information and public opinion. The contextual reasons arise from the citizens' current "implosion of trust" (Edelman, 2017) in institutions, governments and organizations and a media world significantly weakened by phenomena such as fake news and social bots.

The theme of ethics has been at the heart of theories on public relations. There are several authors who seek answers to the ethical issue that hovers over the very mission of this profession: how can public relations

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reconcile values that appear to be irreconcilable, as in private interests (of companies) and public interests (of citizens)? Bowen (2008), for example, positions public relations as organizations' awareness and public relations professionals as ethical advisers. A position that can only be possible if the practice of public relations is guided by a universal, imperative, Kantian-type ethics (Bowen, 2004). Leeper (1996) suggested applying Habermas's discourse ethics to public relations, highlighting their alignment with Grunig's two-way symmetrical model of public relations (1992, 1996). Other authors, including Pearson (1989), Burkhart (2004, 2009) and Gonçalves (2013), were also inspired by Habermas to defend dialogic ethics for the practice of public relations as a process of mutual understanding.

Despite the fertile theoretical ground, in this article we have decided to discuss the theme of the ethics of public relations from the perspective of professional associations and councils, which from the start focused on thinking about the ethical dilemmas that run through professional praxis. The first part of this article discusses major international codes of ethics for public relations adopted by the main international public relations associations in order to map the main institutionalized values. Codes are a moral reflection focused on a profession's rights and duties and establish the basic moral rules demanded in that profession. They are, for that very reason, the first step towards self-regulation of professional conduct, a fundamental step in the professionalizing and legitimation process of any professional activity.

The second part narrows the analysis to the situation in Brazil. Public relations practice in Brazil offers a rich field of study to understand the profession's ethical questions. Starting with a brief analysis of the development of regulation for the profession in Brazil, we shall focus our attention on the Conferp System and its defence of ethical PR practice. The ultimate aim is to understand what major values underlie public relations practice in Brazil and how they contribute to solidifying it as a profession.

Professional associations: the guardians of ethical conduct in public relations?

Codes of ethics reflect the evolution in a profession's rules. Usually drawn up, approved and updated by professional associations, codes of ethics may be understood as the result of continuous negotiation between the profession and the society in which its professionals act (Frankel, 1989). Professional associations and councils, in their struggle for the groups' interests, occupy a fundamental role in monitoring best practices and the application of codes of ethics.

In 1965, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA)⁴ adopted the international code of ethics, known as the Code of Athens. This code was written by Lucien Matrat, a pioneer in public relations in France, and reflects an optimistic view of the world after the Second World War in its significant connection to the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" drawn up by the United Nations in 1948 (Watson, 2014). The Code begins with a contextualization on fundamental human rights, stating that "in the course of their professional duties and depending on how these duties are performed, Public Relations practitioners can substantially help to meet these intellectual, moral and social needs"; Considers that "the use of the evolving techniques enabling them to come simultaneously into contact with millions of people gives Public Relations practitioners a power that has to be restrained by the observance of a strict moral code".⁵

For Tim Traverse-Healy (1988), one of the founders of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the International Public Relations Association (IPRA), Matrat's code highlights the central values of public relations – truth, dialogue and respect for the public interest – as in the examples below (*italics added*):

4. More information at www.ipra.org/

5. The Code of Athens can be viewed in full at: www.ipra.org/static/media/uploads/pdfs/ipra_code_of_athens.pdf (accessed 2 March 2019)

- The PR practitioner should refrain from “Subordinating the *truth* to other requirements” (paragraph 11) and “Circulating information which is not based on established and ascertainable facts” (paragraph 12).
- “To establish the moral, psychological and intellectual conditions for *dialogue* in its true sense, and to recognize the rights of these parties involved to state their case and express their views” (paragraph 7).
- “To act, in all circumstances, in such a manner as to take account of the respective interests of the parties involved; both the interests of the organisation which the practitioner serves and the interests of the *publics concerned*” (paragraph 8).

One of the first studies on professional associations’ codes was carried out by Herbert Lloyd in 1973, covering 26 countries. This study highlighted that the Code of Athens was adopted in full or with some variations by most of the member associations surveyed (82%). It also revealed that “42 percent have a quasi-legal procedure for the enforcement of Codes of Ethics” with very different levels of severity: from mere criticism or warning to suspension or expulsion for the offender (1973, p.4).

For some other authors, associations’ lack of power to impose sanctions on those who break codes is one of their greatest problems (Wright, 1993; Huang, 2001). Fitzpatrick (2002) outlined the evolution of the code of ethics of the American public relations association, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA),⁶ over 50 years and discovered that implementation of the code has been weak throughout its history. In the study “Benchmarking of Codes of Ethics in Public Relations” (2002), the Global Alliance (GA)⁷ also detected a lack of mechanisms available to the different associations to apply punishments to their members. This is due to the difficulty in proving that professionals’ conduct actually corresponds to real breaches of the code. Perhaps for that very reason, in the year 2000, when the PRSA revised its

6. www.prsa.org

7. www.globalalliancepr.org

code after more than 50 years, it established that a member could only be expelled in the event of legal proceedings.

The difficulty in applying sanctions may be reason enough to look at codes as mere strategies for managing the profession's image, but several authors continue to defend their importance. Kruckeberg (1989) highlights that, as well as serving as guides for professional activity, codes make it possible to identify a range of expectations underlying the profession. Day (1991) argues that codes of ethics are the best way to encourage professionals not to trust in merely subjective judgements and instead internalize the profession's underlying values. Grunig (2000) stresses that codes of ethics are valuable because they highlight "the divided loyalties that practitioners experience when they try to balance their personal values with those of organizations, publics, and professionals (p. 29). When analysing the codes of 41 professional associations, Taylor and Yang (2015, p.549) identified six dominant themes: (1) *professionalism*, (2) *advocacy*, (3) *moral standards*, (4) *clients' interests*, (5) *expertise*, and (6) *relationships*.

Institutionalized values in public relations codes of ethics

In 2002, the Global Alliance (GA)⁸ began the "Global Alliance Ethical PR Project" with a comparative study of the main international public relations codes. The main result of this project was the development of a global standard for the ethical practice of public relations in the form of a set of principles and declarations – the Global Code of Ethics. Drawn up in 2003, the Code was updated recently, in 2018. This Code begins with an initial declaration:

8. Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management is the confederation of the world's major PR and communication management associations and institutions, representing 160,000 practitioners and academics around the world. The Global Alliance's mission is to unify the public relations profession, raise professional standards all over the world, share knowledge for the benefit of its members and be the global voice for public relations in the public interest.

“As professional communicators and public relations professionals, we have the potential to influence economies and individuals. This carries obligations and responsibilities to society and to clients. We understand that there is a direct relationship between ethical conduct and trust which is critical to our reputation”.⁹

The obligation for members to adopt a code of ethics is a common practice among other international associations, such as the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), with its “Code of Ethics for professional communicators”, updated in May 2016,¹⁰ and the International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO), with the “Stockholm Charter”,¹¹ adopted in 2003. Founded in 1970, the IABC is “a vibrant global membership association with thousands of members from around the world, representing many of the Global Fortune 500 companies”.¹² The ICCO is a worldwide organization that aims to be the voice of public relations consultants throughout the world. It brings together national associations representing 55 countries spread over Europe, Africa, Asia, the Middle East, the Americas and Australasia. Together, those associations represent more than 2,500 public relations companies.¹³

An analysis of the codes of ethics of the three main international associations – GA, IABC and ICCO – enables us to answer the following question: “What are the main institutionalized values in public relations codes of ethics?” A first reading reveals an alignment in the selection of a set of ethical values and conduct standards that should guide professionals when resolving potential conflicts of allegiance in relation to: 1) duty to oneself; 2) duty to the client organization; 3) duty to the employer; 4) duty to the profession; and 5) duty to society” (Seib & Fitzpatrick, 2006, p.16). The following table

9. The Global Alliance Code of Ethics can be viewed in full here: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/561d0274e4b0601b7c814ca9/t/56c201e1d07c00b66443b47/1455555043172/GA+Code+of+Ethics.pdf>

10. The IABC Code can be viewed in full here: https://www.iabc.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/08-Code-of-Ethics_IEB-Approved_4-May-2016.pdf

11. The Stockholm Charter is available here: <https://iccopr.com/members/stockholm-charter/>

12. Information available on the IABC's official website: www.iabc.com.

13. Data available on the ICCO's official website: www.iccopr.com.

shows the main values and conduct guides, taking examples from the three codes analysed:

Values and standards of conduct	GA, IABC and ICCO Codes
Honesty/Truth	My actions bring respect for and trust in the communications profession (IABC) We will adhere to the highest standards of accuracy and truth in advancing the interests of clients and employers (GA)
Integrity	We will conduct our business with integrity and observe the principles and spirit of the Code in such a way that our own personal reputation and that of our employer/clients, and the public relations/communication profession in general is protected (GA) I do not accept undisclosed gifts or payments for professional services from anyone other than a client or employer (IABC)
Loyalty	We urge members to demonstrate commitment to those they represent, while honouring their obligations to serve the interests of society and support the right of free expression (GA) Consultancies may represent clients with conflicting interests. Work may not commence for a new and conflicting interest without the current client first being offered the opportunity to exercise the rights under any contract between the client and consultancy (ICCO)
Confidentiality	I protect confidential information while acting within the law; I do not use confidential information for personal benefit (IABC) Trust is at the heart of the relationship between a client and a public relations consultancy. Information that has been provided in confidence by a client and that is not publicly known should not be shared with other parties without the consent of the client (ICCO)
Transparency/ Accuracy	I give credit to others for their work and cite my sources (IABC) Public relations consultancies should not knowingly mislead an audience about factual information, or about the interests a client represents. Consultancies must make their best efforts to strive for accuracy (ICCO)
Respect for human rights	We believe in and support the free exercise of human rights, especially freedom of speech, freedom of assembly, and freedom of the media, which are essential to the practice of good public relations (GA) An open society, freedom of speech and a free press create the context for the profession of public relations. Consultants operate within the scope of this open society, comply with its rules, and work with clients that share the same approach (ICCO)

Table 1 - Professional conduct standards and values according to three international communications and public relations associations (adapted from Gonçalves, 2007)

The excerpts from the codes summarized in this table indicate institutionalized values and rules of conduct. They are values that guide professional

conduct in relations with both the professional him or herself and the employer: honesty, integrity and loyalty. With regard to ethical dilemmas that may arise in professionals' relationships with client organizations, a concern with regulating potential confidentiality problems is the most visible. The duty to society is clear in the defence of the value of transparency and respect for human rights.

The argument for a professional practice whose *telos* is defending the organization without forgetting society can be clearly seen in the Global Alliance Code: "We will serve our organisations and employer and client interests by acting as responsible advocates and by providing a voice in the market place of ideas, facts, and viewpoints to aid informed public debate" (GA). It can therefore be argued that the codes reflect the normative ideal advocated by James Grunig in his excellence theory in public relations: "We believe that public relations should be practiced to serve the public interest, to develop mutual understanding between organizations and their publics, and to contribute to informed debate about issues in society" (Grunig, 1992, p.9). Below, we shall try to understand if this normative ideal is also present in the professional identity of Brazilian public relations.

The case of Conferp in Brazil

As in many other countries, public relations in Brazil have been through a five-stage process that sociologists of professions usually call professionalization: (i) the emergence of the full-time occupation; (ii) the establishment of a training school; (iii) the founding of a professional association; (iv) the protection of the association by law; and (v) the adoption of a formal code. For space reasons, we shall not present the history of PR in Brazil in this article, but instead focus attention on points relating to regulation of the profession and the defence of a normative code.¹⁴

14. To find out more about the history of PR in Brazil, see Kunsch (2003) or Moura (2008).

Brazil was one of the first countries in the world to legally recognize the profession of public relations, in 1967. The same year, the first undergraduate course in public relations was set up at the Escola de Comunicações e Artes de São Paulo (Kunsch, 1997, p.28). The profession of public relations was created on 11 December 1967 (Decree-Law no. 5,377) and regulated on 26 September 1968 (Decree-Law no. 63,283). One year later, on 11 September 1969, Decree-Law no. 860 came into force, which mentioned the creation of the Federal Council and Regional Councils of Public Relations Professionals. In May 1971, the Conferp System was set up – a federal body consisting of one federal council and seven regional councils that were responsible for the different states of Brazil (Decree no. 68,582).

Since it was set up, Conferp has become the body responsible for the coordination, oversight and discipline of carrying out public relations in order to promote and ensure that the profession is exercised legally and ethically. The exercise of the profession began to be exclusively carried out by graduates from public relations courses registered in the Conferp System.¹⁵ Conferp therefore also oversees, preventively and through reporting, communications agencies, organizations that have a communications section or professional in the field among their staff to guarantee the quality of professional work.

The first Conferp Code of Ethics was published in 1972, a few years after the public relations profession was regulated in 1968. As the profession was, originally, heavily associated with the military regime, Conferp reformulated its code of ethics during the redemocratization process of Brazil over the following years – in 1985, 1987 and 2003. The last update, which was made in 2003 and remains in force today, included penalties for those who break the Code, ranging from fines to removal of professional registration.

15. According to the Brazilian classification of occupations drawn up by the Ministry of Work and Employment, there are 68 regulated professions today, in other words, fields that may require technical training, higher education courses or diplomas to exercise the profession. This number is equivalent to 2.8% of the total number of professions listed in the country. Of these, only the profession of public relations and another 30 have professional councils. Source: <http://conferp.org.br/noticia/nova-gestao-do-conferp-toma-posse-em-brasilia/>

Conferp introduced professional registration as a compulsory condition for exercising the profession in Brazil. In theory, not being registered makes it illegal to exercise the profession, activity or function of public relations, and those who breach this rule, whether a legal or natural person, may be punished by the fines established in the Brazilian Criminal Code and the Conferp normative resolutions. However, the observed reality is very different. A study carried out in 2015 highlighted that 48.32% of Conferp members believed that registration was irrelevant to their careers.¹⁶ According to recent data, in December 2018, there were 19,043 natural persons registered as professionals and 690 as legal persons. In the first group, only 5,629 were working, and only 341 of the second were currently active.

Furthermore, since the 1990s, the dispute with journalism for the profession's territory has been getting worse. There are more and more journalists working in communications consultancy in Brazil in the public and private sectors. In 2012, the survey "*Quem é o jornalista brasileiro? – Perfil da profissão no país*"¹⁷ ("Who are Brazilian journalists? A profile of the profession in the country") indicated that 60% of journalists are employed in communications consultancy.

Aware of this situation, Conferp constantly seeks to promote public relations professionals and the proper exercise of the profession in Brazil. According to strategic guidelines available on its institutional website, it aims to be "the national reference for public relations as a body for a regulated profession within the institutional community, public opinion and strategic communications planning, in order to connect and contribute to the country's political, economic and social system". The values of transparency, citizenship, respect and ethics are beliefs that the organization wishes to keep constant in its work, which has "relationship" as its keyword.¹⁸

16. The results of the study can be found in annex 3 of the 2013-2016 management report available on Conferp's Transparency Portal: <http://conferp.org.br/portal-da-transparencia/>.

17. The study was carried out by the Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC) in cooperation with the National Federation of Journalists (FENAJ) and is available at: <http://fenaj.org.br/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/pesquisa-perfil-jornalista-brasileiro.pdf>.

18. Conferp's strategic guidelines are available at: <http://conferp.org.br/sistema-conferp/missao-visao-e-valores/>.

The ethics of PR – global or local values?

Conferp vs Global Alliance

In recent years, Conferp has invested in institutional communication that enhances its role as the defender of ethical professional conduct by Brazilian professionals. To better understand this role, we have chosen to analyse Conferp's normative positioning in the light of the Global Alliance's Global Principles of Ethics (2018). Although Conferp and the Global Alliance (GA) have different statuses – one is the federal council of a single country and the other is a confederation of professional associations from several countries – they are similar in the emphasis they have placed on defending the profession and ethical practices.

The research question that has guided our analysis is as follows: “Are the 16 global principles presented by the Global Alliance for PR practice reflected in the professional identity defended by Conferp in Brazil?” To answer our question, we have applied the content analysis method (Bardin, 2011) to the following corpus, each item of which is presented below: (i) Conferp Code of Ethics (2003), (ii) institutional website (2019), (iii) two institutional campaigns (2016; 2017), (iv) three e-books (2016; 2018). We then performed a content analysis to identify, codify and quantify the 16 Global Alliance guiding principles, summarized in the following table, in the seven items that form the corpus for analysis.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES	Working in the public interest
	Obedying laws and respect diversity and local customs
	Freedom of speech
	Freedom of assembly
	Freedom of media
	Honesty, truth and fact-based communication
	Integrity
	Transparency and disclosure
	Privacy

PRINCIPLES OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE	Commitment to continuous learning and training
	Avoiding conflict of interest
	Advocating for the profession
	Respect and fairness in dealing with publics
	Expertise without guarantee of results beyond capacity
	Behaviours that enhance the profession
	Professional conduct

Table 2 - Set of principles and declarations for ethically practising public relations proposed by the Global Alliance. Source: www.globalalliancepr.org/code-of-ethic/

(i) Code of Ethics for Public Relations Professionals

The first code of ethics was published by Conferp in 1972. The code was last reformulated in 2003, and remains in force today. Conferp's code is organized into 38 articles and subdivided over 10 sections: 1. On General Responsibilities; 2. On Relations with the Employer; 3. On Relations with the Client; 4. On Professional Fees; 5. On Relations with Colleagues; 6. On Relations with Professional Bodies; 7. On Relations with Justice; 8. On Professional Secrecy; 9. On Political Relations and Lobbying; 10. On Observance, Application and Validity of the Code of Ethics.¹⁹

(ii) Institutional Website

The current website of the Conferp System,²⁰ launched on 4 January 2019, is responsive to mobile devices, allows users to register to receive newsletters from Conferp, has a section on news and space for publishing articles written on public relations. In this survey, we analysed the following sections: Who We Are/Conferp System, Who We Are/Mission, Vision and Values, Public Relations/Areas of Work, Campaign and the homepage banners.

(iii) Institutional Campaigns

We analysed two institutional campaigns carried out by the Conferp System that were shared on digital media.²¹ The 2016 campaign focused

19. The Code of Ethics for Public Relations Professionals may be viewed in full here: <http://conferp.org.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/CódigodeÉtica.pdf>.

20. <http://conferp.org.br>

21. The campaigns are available here: <http://conferp.org.br/campanha/>.

on the message “*Successful communication begins with public relations. The Federal Council of Public Relations Professions is the body that monitors and encourages best practices among professionals, from training to exercising the profession.*” Its target audiences were public relations professionals and students and businesspeople. Its main goals were to: a) position public relations personnel as professionals suitable for managing business communication; b) strengthen the importance of registration among public relations students and professionals; and c) establish the main activities performed by public relations professionals. The 2017 campaign’s main messages was “*Public Relations: building good examples to transform society. Public Relations professionals are the partners of businesses, institutions and organizations in civil society that take the initiative to perform transforming actions that inspire and engage everyone to work for a better world.*” Its target audiences were society in general, public relations students and teachers. The campaign’s main goals were to: a) position public relations as a social transformation activity; b) reinforce public relations as a regulated profession; and c) establish the main activities performed by public relations professionals.

(iv) E-books

We analysed three e-books produced by Conferp: (1) the *Manual Sistema Conferp* (Conferp System Manual),²² composed of 20 pages and published in 2016, which was drawn up based on laws, resolutions and rules that guide Conferp’s actions and the exercising of public relations as a profession in Brazil; (2) the e-book *Relações Públicas – 10 Cases de Sucesso: Do Desafio ao Resultado* (Public Relations – 10 Success Stories: From Challenge to Result),²³ also published in 2016, which sets out the experiences reported by several professionals over 22 pages; (3) the e-book *Relações Públicas e Cidadania – 10 Cases de Sucesso* (Public Relations and Citizenship – 10 Success Stories),²⁴ published in 2018, which was organized by Conferp in partnership with

22. *Manual Sistema Conferp* can be viewed in full at: http://conferp.org.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pdf_manual_conferp.pdf.

23. The e-book *Relações Públicas - 10 Cases de Sucesso: Do Desafio ao Resultado* can be viewed in full at: http://conferp.org.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/pdf_ebook_cases_rp.pdf.

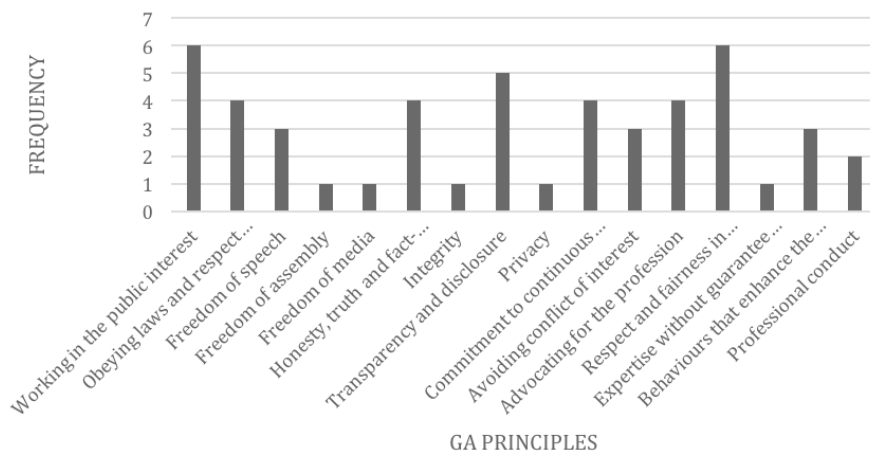
24. The e-book *Relações Públicas e Cidadania - 10 cases de sucesso* can be viewed in full at: http://conferp.org.br/site/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ebook_camp_conferp.pdf.

the Brazilian Public Relations Association (ABRP). Its 24 pages present 10 success stories developed by the community of public relations professionals and teachers, which justify public relations practices working towards exercising citizenship.

Analysis and discussion of the data

The data was analysed using a framework formed of the 16 Global Alliance (GA) principles. The frequency of each principle in the seven items analysed was indicated using a binary system (0–not present; 1– present). The data were summarized in 2 graphs: Graph A indicates the frequency of each GA principle in the corpus analysed; Graph B shows the frequency of every GA principle in each of the seven items analysed.

GA principles vs corpus analysed



Graph A: GA principles in the corpus analysed
Key: up to 2 – low; 3-4 – low-mid; 5-6 – mid-high; 7 – high.

As we can see in Graph A, none of the Global Alliance’s principles was found throughout the corpus. There are three principles with a **mid-high** frequency: *Working in the public interest* (freq. 6); *Respect and fairness in dealing with publics* (freq. 6); and *Transparency and disclosure* (freq. 5). These principles deal with the role as a mediator between the public interest and the interests of the organization, already highlighted in our theory review (Grunig, 1992,

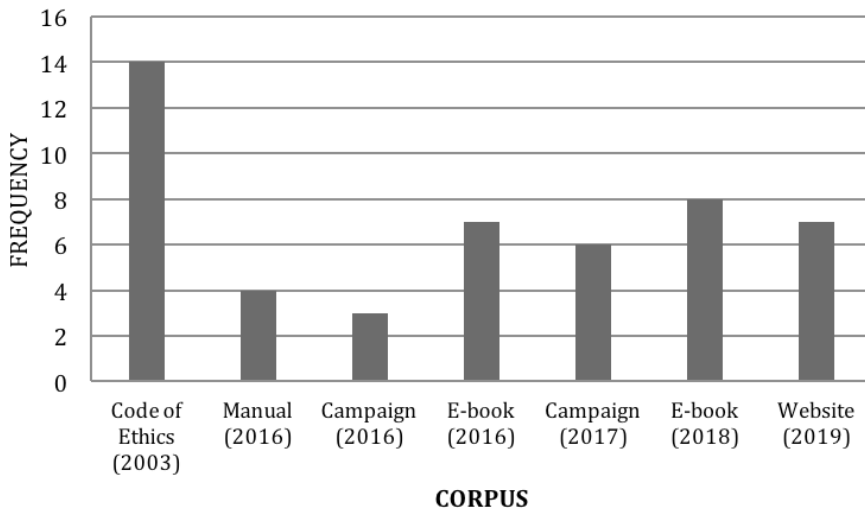
2001) and the comparative analysis of the codes of the three international associations (Table 1). Furthermore, as Duarte (2011) says, transparency is more than accountability and providing information. It is a feature that can boost dialogue by stimulating access to and availability of supervision mechanisms.

Of the 16 GA principles, seven have a **low-mid** frequency and six have a **low** frequency. The principles *Freedom of assembly*, *Freedom of media*, *Integrity*, *Privacy* and *Expertise without guarantee of results beyond capacity* were found in only one of the items analysed – the Conferp Code of Ethics.

Most of the principles, 13 in 16, have a **low-mid** or **low** frequency in the corpus analysed. The principles related to the reputation of the activity and the positioning of professionals – *Commitment to continuous learning and training*, *Advocating for the profession*, *Avoiding conflict of interest* and *Behaviours that enhance the profession* – have a low-mid frequency but, even so, their frequency is higher in relation to principles connected to universal values set out in the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UN, 1984) – *freedom of speech, assembly and press*.

It can further be highlighted that the principles related to abstract values of *Integrity* and *Privacy* appear in only one of the items analysed – the Conferp Code of Ethics. Similarly, *Expertise without guarantee of results beyond capacity*, one of the more concrete and direct principles of conduct, is present only in the Code. Finally, all the principles appear at least once in the seven Conferp discourse objects analysed.

Corpus analysed vs GA principles



Graph B: Corpus analysed vs GA principles

Key: up to 4 – low; 5-8 – low-mid; 9-12 – mid-high; 13 or more – high.

Graph B shows us which documents produced by Conferp best reflect the principles defended by the Global Alliance (GA). The Code of Ethics is the only piece of content with a **high** frequency of GA principles, containing 14 of the 16 principles defended by the international body. Only two principles are left out: *Respect and fairness in dealing with publics* and *Behaviours that enhance the profession*. It is important to note that the former principles appear in all the other content in the corpus analysed.

None of the content contains a **mid-high** frequency of GA principles. In the corpus analysed, a **low-mid** frequency was found in: the e-book *Relações Públicas e Cidadania: 10 Cases de Sucesso* (2018) (freq. 8); the e-book *Relações Públicas 10 Cases de Sucesso: do desafio aos resultados* (2016) (freq. 7); the institutional website (2019) (freq. 7); and the 2018 institutional campaign (freq. 6). Finally, the content with **low** frequencies are the Conferp System manual (freq. 4) and the 2016 institutional campaign (freq. 3). This campaign included the lowest number of principles of the entire corpus analysed.

The data therefore indicate an alignment between the Conferp Code of Ethics and the Global Alliance principles of around 87.5%. Based on the data analysed, we can infer that, apart from the Code of Ethics, the e-books and institutional website are the content that has the greatest ability to disseminate the profession's global ethical principles. It can be understood that the institutional campaigns, perhaps due to their advertising format, are more limited channels for transmitting and reinforcing professional ethical aspects, and were produced, above all, with the aim of informing the public about the main actions carried out by public relations professionals. Nonetheless, it is strange that the Conferp System Manual (2016) did not include a space dedicated to the profession's ethical issues.

In search of an ethical professional praxis

Be it in public relations or in any other profession, codes of ethics exist for at least two interrelated reasons: to reinforce public trust in the profession and guide professional conduct (Abbott, 1988; Banks, 2003). The way in which codes of ethics reinforce public trust in a profession is by making a public declaration of the ethical standards of conduct that people can expect from a group of professionals. Therefore, a code of conduct acts as a kind of promise made by a group of professionals to those that trust in their services. Naturally, for a professional code of conduct to provide guarantees to the public about a profession's trustworthiness, the professionals' conduct must be more or less consistent with the code. Codes of ethics therefore serve to guide or regulate professional conduct.

The 16 principles listed by Global Alliance suggest an ideal standard of behaviour that reflects the most common ethical questions in the profession and are guides in the decision-making and action processes. They therefore convey what Parsons (2004, p.20-21) calls the "five pillars of public relations ethics" that "carry the weight of ethical decision-making in public relations practice": veracity (to tell the truth); non-maleficence (to do no harm); beneficence (to do good); confidentiality (to respect privacy); fairness (to be fair and socially responsible).

Ideally, the standard of behaviour defended by the Global Alliance is global and can be expected anywhere on the planet. Our research confirmed that the 16 global principles of the Global Alliance are largely reflected in the Conferp Code of Ethics in Brazil. As a professional council, Conferp has legal responsibilities for coordination, oversight and discipline in carrying out public relations in order to promote the profession and ensure it is exercised legally and ethically. It therefore defends the group by overseeing professional action and complying with a code of ethics similar to the Global Alliance's international code.

What also became clear in our study was that Conferp, by way of its strategic communication and power for argumentation, is also proactive in defending ethical public relations practices. In other words, Conferp plays a role as an activist that goes beyond oversight of compliance with the code of ethics. It was found that the Global Alliance's principles are also present, although with different visibility, in different items produced by Conferp – the institutional website, institutional campaigns and e-books. *Working in the public interest, Respect and fairness in dealing with publics, Transparency and disclosure* were the principles found most often in the different discourse objects analysed. Although the principle *Respect and fairness in dealing with publics* is missing from the Conferp Code of Ethics, it is often mentioned in all the other items analysed.

So it could be argued that Conferp uses different communication strategies to promote the issue of professional identity, focusing on the ethical issue. The initiatives, as well as publications, campaigns and the website itself, demonstrate the organization's concern to engage with the professional group, without forgetting to highlight different values and principles of conduct. Under the umbrella of ethics, Conferp seeks to get close to professionals, academia and society in general, restating its desire to be a national reference as the body of a regulated profession in the institutional community, public opinion and strategic communication strategy.

This study is therefore believed to be relevant to call attention to the issue of association activism focusing on the ethical issue, without being restricted to the code of ethics. The results of this study are our contribution to showing how Brazil's Conferp System manages to play a dual role as professional council and ethical activist and that using different communication strategies it is able to maintain a dialogue with Brazilian public relations to achieve its goals as an association and as an activist.

In the seminal work *Effective Public Relations*, Scott Cutlip highlights that public relations “are judged by their impact on society” (1985, p.193). Professional associations’ codes of conduct, therefore, as indicators of institutionalized values, are and will continue to be fundamental items in monitoring the actions of public relations in the public sphere and evaluation of the profession by public opinion. If, as well as publicizing and overseeing their codes of ethics, associations and professional councils implement other communication strategies focusing on the principles of professional conduct, the important and necessary ethical discussion underlying the public relations profession will surely become more present and consistent. Because the legitimation of the actions of public relations and all those who work in the strategic communication field will and must always come from ethical praxis.

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