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IPRA Code of Athens—The first international code of public relations ethics: Its development and implementation since 1965



Tom Watson*

The Media School, Bournemouth University, Poole, Dorset BH12 5BB, UK

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ABSTRACT

In 1965, the International Public Relations Association (IPRA) adopted the International Code of Ethics, which became known as the Code of Athens (IPRA, 2001). The Code was authored by Lucien Matrat, a French public relations pioneer, and reflected a hopeful, post-World War 2 ethical framework with its strong linkage to the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 (IPRA, 1994). A code of ethics was an early strategic imperative of IPRA, established 10 years before, and was coupled with a Code of Conduct, known as the Code of Venice of 1961 (IPRA, 1961, 2009). Both codes were adopted by many national public relations associations and widely promoted.

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1. Introduction

At Athens, Greece on May 12, 1965, the International Public Relations Association adopted a draft of an International Code of Ethics for public relations practice. The Code had been an object of the nascent IPRA since 1952 and was to become a major promotional strategy of the organisation from the mid-1960s onwards. Largely written by the French public relations leader Lucien Matrat (IPRA, 2001), it followed an earlier IPRA Code of Conduct (known as the Code of Venice) and was adopted wholly or in a modified form by many public relations professional associations in subsequent years (IPRA, 1994).

In this paper, which is based mostly on material from the IPRA archive held at Bournemouth University (Watson, 2011), the formation and implementation of the Code of Athens is traced from the early 1950s until the mid-2000s. It discusses IPRA's external presentation of the Code as well as the internal debate between leading members about its relevance and implementation, which led to major revision just three years after it was adopted. Reviewing the emphasis on the Code's dissemination by its main author, Lucien Matrat, the paper will also consider whether it became a publicity strategy of IPRA and not the proposed standard for ethics in public relations sought by its founders. IPRA's subsequent employment of the Code was mainly symbolic and instrumental. There will also be consideration of the role of ethical codes and whether they can be 'universal' across all cultures, religions and ethical backgrounds, as IPRA sought. This will, it is hoped, advise current ethical discussions in public relations in what some consider as the post-professional era (Fawkes, 2012).

* Tel.: +44 1202 961986.

E-mail address: twatson@bournemouth.ac.uk

2. Ethical codes

Most public relations professional bodies and trade associations have some form of ethical and/or practice rule or code (Fitzpatrick & Bronstein, 2006; Seib & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Typical examples are of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) and the Public Relations Consultants Association (PRCA) in the United Kingdom. CIPR has a four-section document including a Code of Conduct (CIPR, undated); while PRCA has a Professional Charter for all members plus specialist versions for public affairs and healthcare. Both have complaints and arbitration procedures. The PRCA code commences with a general exhortation for members:

A member shall:

1.1 Have a positive duty to observe the highest standards in the practice of public relations. Furthermore a member has the responsibility at all times to deal fairly and honestly with fellow members and professionals, the public relations profession, other professionals, suppliers, intermediaries, the media of communication, colleagues, and above all, the public. (PRCA, undated, p. 1)

Bowen (2007) comments that in public relations, “ethics includes values such as honesty, openness, fair-mindedness, respect, integrity, and forthright communication” (p. 1). These values appear to be widely applied around the world. Many codes also have a “best interests of the profession” element, for example the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA). Wright (2006), a long-time prominent IPRA member and a leading US public relations academic, acknowledges the Code of Athens’ obligation for respect of human rights including those related to “intellectual, moral and social needs” (p. 189). He also introduces the moral core which separates it from typical codes of conduct for practitioners:

The code recognizes the power of public relations in the global society, noting the need for ethical conduct by public relations professionals who have the ability to reach and potentially influence millions of people. Such power must be restrained, according to the code, “by observance of a strict moral code” (Wright 2006, p. 189).

In the history of the Code of Athens’ development and implementation which follows, the insertion of a human rights-focused moral core for this ethical code will be seen as an unintended consequence of the IPRA’s founders’ desire to establish such a code. Other elements of this code and the Code of Conduct (the “Code of Venice” adopted in 1961) were similar to other professional codes of their time and have significantly influenced current codes, as indicated by Bowen (2007) and Wright (2006).

3. Evolution of codes

Although IPRA was not formally established until 1955, discussions in Europe about its formation had begun in 1949. Among its draft ‘Objects’ agreed in 1952 was a code of ethics on an international scale. Minutes from 1953 reported on the previous year’s discussions made this clear:

(i) Aims and objectives

That an International Association should have as its aims

- (a) The raising of the standards of Public Relations practice in all countries
- (c) Explaining public relations to the world outside the profession
- (e) Consideration of the problems facing public relations officers in all countries . . . professional ethics (linking the codes now being compiled in several countries) (London & Hastings Minutes, 1953, p. 3)

It can be seen that preparation of a code of ethics was a priority. This was reinforced in 1955 when IPRA was established at a meeting in London on April 29, 1955: a modified version of the 1952 decision was adopted as an ‘Object for the Association’:

- (e) To review and seek solutions to problems affecting public relations practice common to various countries, including such questions as the status of the profession, codes of professional ethics and qualifications to practice (London Minutes, 1955, p. 4).

At its second Council meeting in The Hague, Holland, later that year, a French member Etienne Bloch was commissioned to undertake research into “professional ethics, status and qualifications” (Hague Minutes, 1955, p. 3) and prepare a report. This was presented to the Council’s next meeting in Paris the following year and IPRA decided to move forward:

It was generally agreed that the Association should move towards a position where it could advise its members of the professional standards expected of them (Minutes underlining), and that work should continue towards this end after the Council members had had an opportunity of studying the subject in the light of local conditions in their various countries (Paris Minutes, 1956, p. 6).

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