Artificial Intelligence is less threatening to public relations and marketing practitioners than the lack of professional development across both industries.

On May 24th, the Debating Group met in the House of Commons with the debate being chaired by Tulip Siddiq, MP for Hampstead and Kilburn and Shadow Economic Secretary to the Treasury.

Opening for the proposition, **Jenni Field, Business strategist, author and former President of the Chartered Institute of Public Relations,** shared that as CIPR President she had been told three times in two weeks that she was 'wrong' for upholding professional standards linked to a government campaign. Field asserted that professionalism and accountability go hand in hand and that without both together it was very difficult to feel comfortable with professional standards and therefore with professional development. Field stressed the importance of professionalism to understand the weight of the development that sits with it. We must be responsible and take responsibility for our actions in marketing, PR and communications, admitting our mistakes and being accountable. This was needed because professionalism was about making sure that we're aware of our impact and influence on others, highlighting that PR, marketing and communication is in the business of trust, relationships, impact and influence.

Field suggested that if we take that seriously, we must be professionals in a profession, and we must continuously develop in that profession. If we don't, then no matter what tools, relationships, conversations, and campaigns we use, we risk doing things that damage reputations, brands, ourselves and society at large.

Field felt we often forget the weight of our actions, thinking we are just running a campaign, having a conversation, writing a press release, or lobbying a government. But these were significant actions, stressed Field, and if not treated professionally they could lead to distrust. If we are not trusted or credible then no matter the tools or approach – it won't work. So, whilst it was easy to look at AI and think it would become a big threat to what we do, Field asserted that the bigger threat came from not taking our profession seriously.

Field asked the audience to think about recent conversations that might have impacted people's lives, considering how professional they felt having them, and the development they'd relied on to ensure they had the skills and ethics needed to give good advice. She explained that people listen to professionals because they are professional, and if we don't have weight behind that then we won't have credibility when it comes to the tools we use.

Field had stood for the role of CIPR president on the basis of the importance of professional development, that we are a profession and must invest in ourselves for the work that we do. The CIPR board talked about continuous professional development and was depressed by how few members actively participated and how few logged and recorded their professional development. Without this, Field questioned their ability to do their job because why would anybody trust them? Field reiterated that we're in the business of relationships, and that relationships work because of communication and trust. Without those, it was difficult to continue.

Here Field delved deeper into the important weight of what they did, stressing that marketing, PR and communications daily tread the crucial line between influence and manipulation. Manipulation had an element of control where influence did not, and when communicating en masse we must be aware of and make sure we don't cross the line. This was difficult if people were not being professional or were using tools programmed by unprofessional people, suggesting that the line had been crossed many times in recent decades.

In conclusion, Field stressed the importance of laying the foundations of what we do. It shouldn't matter what tools come and go, what mattered was the foundations of what we do - our profession. If we get that right, no matter what comes along the threats won't be that big. Because we are a profession we impact society, and we should give ourselves the time and development to make sure that this is recognised no matter what tool or what conversations or what relationships we have.

Opposing the motion, **Amir Malik, Digital Transformation Leader at Accenture,** agreed that there was an existential threat to professional standards but that the threat from AI was unique and demanded our focus. To Malik, trust had already eroded because credibility and sources of trust were seldom seen. It was hard to validate truthfulness of politicians or companies, yet they influence how people think.

Myth busting that our phones were listening to us, Malik highlighted the predictability of human behaviour and how AI uses this to serve precisely the right ad at the right moment to catch our attention. It was not humans but AI suggesting and recommending content and advertising – and advertising through digital channels had outpaced our ethics.

Here Malik stressed that generative AI was much more disruptive. He told the story of Disney's special effects team creating a 'young' Mark Hamill for the Mandalorian at great expense, but that this was remade and improved on by a homegrown YouTuber with such skill that Disney fired their SFX team and hired him instead. Malik's fear was that the next Goebbels would be a teenager with a computer and AI skills. For this reason, marketing and public relations agencies need to upskill in AI to tackle it head on.

At Accenture, clients' key questions all related to AI: how is this going to impact customer care? Malik cited a broadband company that found ChatGPT could give better answers than a human agent. This raised questions of cost and efficiencies, two areas companies wanted to improve on. This raised the existential question around how we are organised as a society

– businesses, capitalism. He noted that even Google felt threatened by OpenAI, cutting employees, looking for ways to increase productivity, releasing Bard (their AI platform) early. Even Facebook had changed its name to Meta. Malik reiterated that your phone is not listening to you, it was AI predicting your interests accurately enough to make you feel uncomfortable.

Companies that establish high quality AI products would get a competitive advantage over companies that didn't. Unfortunately, it didn't matter how nice somebody was, people were going to be left behind. He noted that Elon Musk wanted to pause AI – though this was impossible. Malik speculated that his motive was to catch up, as OpenAI meant he had lost control. OpenAI is open to all for the sake of progress and would leave Elon Musk behind. To conclude, Malik believed that having such powerful voices calling to pause AI substantiated the argument for AI being a real threat to our businesses, society, ourselves, and even the future world our children interact with.

Seconding the motion, **Daniel Rowles, CIM Course Director and Programme Director, Imperial College London,** agreed with Malik that we need to upskill, propounding the need to invest in professional development. That morning he had been teaching lecturers how to set assignments that specifically encourage students to use AI – and how to set assignments where they can't use AI. We can't pretend AI doesn't exist, rather we need to develop professional standards that accommodate it by moving quickly in an agile way to keep up with it. Not investing in professional standards and development, brought the real risk. His second example was that that day's episode of The Digital Marketing Podcast included six minutes of himself deep faked by AI – and nobody noticed. That was worrying because without professional standards to determine what we can and can't do or say, we can't manage AI effectively. If we don't set professional standards, there would be nothing for anyone to live up to.

Over the last week, Rowles had noted in the news that Goldman Sachs predicted two thirds of jobs would be partially automated over the next decade; British Telecom announced 55,000 job cuts with 10,000 being replaced by AI; and ChatGPT creators, OpenAI, told Congress that AI could be highly dangerous without regulation. But for Rowles, this still didn't make AI the greatest threat to marketing communications and public relations. Rather, it was the application of AI that posed risks: the way it was applied, managed and regulated required us to invest in professional development more than ever. Rowles asserted that we must improve our skillset and culture to deal with AI.

He then turned to examples from the past to show how change (even change we can't predict) was best managed by building a culture focused on professional development. He cited the emergence of the printing press and the Industrial Revolution as serious changes managed by strengthening professional standards and development: by building rules and putting regulation in place. In every revolution, from printing press to internet, we had learned new skills, improved productivity, and improved the lot of mankind because we put professional standards and development at the heart of change. The faster the change, the more important the structure of professionalism becomes.

Every tool has its dangers and risks, and Rowles did not underestimate the need for caution with AI. Quite the opposite. To use a tool effectively and responsibly, Rowles argued we need knowledge and professionalism, we need to approach things in a robust way and to invest in professional development for AI. Any tool was dangerous in the wrong hands, but AI was a tool like none ever experienced before. In such unknown territory, a lack of skills or knowledge caused by lack of professional development was a real risk. If we can't ask the right questions, if we can't challenge, push back and build regulation, then we could lose control of the technology, so professionalism was needed more than ever. Addressing the possibility that AI represented a paradigm shift in technology in society, for Rowles this was no reason to abandon the idea of being robust in our approach to its use and to focus on doing this in a professional manner.

The CEO of OpenAI had said that new technology needed a new framework. This framework of regulation, suggested Rowles, required a professional approach that was up-to-date and well informed. Regulators must not fall behind as they had with crypto and social media. It was not the technology but the application and regulation of that technology that was the challenge and the threat. Rowles felt that we could build regulations, professional frameworks and an approach to improving skills that would be agile and iterative enough to keep pace with the technology, despite its rapid changes.

Considering how we apply professional standards of development in a constantly changing environment, Rowles noted that organisations, industries and even societies needed agility to survive rapid change. Such agility was achieved by creating a purposeful culture through having structure and process, professional standards and professional development. Professionalism, principles, standards and a culture of professional development and learning were all required to create a culture that could deal with constant change. Without investing in professional development, and the overall professionalism of our industries, we would have no chance of managing the use of AI. For Rowles, it was not the tool but how it was used that really mattered, and therefore the lack of professional development was the real risk.

Seconding for the opposition, **Mike Katell, Ethics Fellow at the Alan Turing Institute,** started by noting the high levels of anxiety around generative AI. While some was based in fact and some in hype, the anxiety was real and needed to be addressed in all walks of life. He noted that generative AI could convincingly mimic the work of marketing and PR professionals and, with more developments to come, we should think deeply about how to respond.

Katell disagreed that simply deepening the commitment to professionalism would somehow overcome AI, as it was not just about the technology but also the people and agendas putting it into practice. He suggested that AI was growing in deployment and power because it enabled companies to do more with less – the ratio between human labour, product produced and profit. With human labour often the most expensive line item, AI enabled companies to shift the ratio and produce more product with less employees thus increasing profit. Profit was an immensely powerful motivator for adopting technology like AI. Katell noted similar motivations from history, including Ford's car assembly line, that enabled doing more with less labour. He also suggested that historically the most difficult type of

labour to automate had been intellectual and creative labour – including PR and marketing. But while today's AI can't replace human minds completely, it could approximate a lot and simply render the PR and marketing professions irrelevant.

Katell suggested the path forward was for PR and marketing professionals to stay ahead of AI by becoming part of Team AI. After all, Team AI was already in business and would be responsible for everything we think we know about AI. Here Katell described AI as a marketing campaign, saying that since the term AI was coined in the 1950s, its technologies had morphed and shaped themselves around media narratives and funding priorities. He argued that AI was not a technology, it was a message, a proposal, a script - marketing. It was currently trying to market the idea that people doing creative labour were no longer necessary, that their creative energies were no longer fundamentally required. He cited the Hollywood screenwriters strike in protest at studios using ChatGPT to generate first drafts of scripts, demoting screenwriters to do the more poorly paid revisions. Katell suggested that such a future threatened all professions. All the professionalism in the world would not save us from it because what really motivated AI was not the good of society, but the ratio of productivity versus human labour. And if history was any guide, that ratio was going to win out.

Tulip Siddiq thanked the speakers and opened the debate to questions from the floor.

Discussion from the Floor
Jonathan Gabay, CIM course director and Senior Lecturer at University of West London, was writing a book on AI and marketing and agreed that we needed to get on board with Team AI. He felt AI was not something to be feared but something to embrace – an amazing tool that still needs people. With best practices in place, you could embrace AI to enhance marketing and PR. He felt that you could not pause AI, so the intelligent approach was to look at it professionally and see how to make use of it.

Anthony Gould, Executive Chairman, RTR worldwide, opposed the motion based on personal experience. He cited the print workers at Wapping losing their jobs to mechanisation despite their professionalism. People needed to address new technologies, and professional standards, and all professions were threatened by AI. In post-production, it had taken five engineers three months to make a 1970s TV programme. Today, with AI, it took two days with one engineer. This was something professional standards wouldn't stop. AI would do a job as well as it was taught - as well as humans. While some aspects of marketing and PR needed face-to-face communication, others, including marketing plans and press releases, could be done far better by AI. And it would not be stopped by professional standards.

Martin Maher from Accenture agreed with Malik. He felt that AI would present a barrier to entering the profession by taking over the lower-level jobs where people learn their trade. He also felt that AI would push people into being generalists rather than specialists by taking away some of the detail and expertise required to create assets. And if everyone became a generalist, wouldn't all supply the same?

Matthew Bourn, Director of Communications for the Advertising Association, supported the motion as he had heard nothing about AI's benefits to people or humanity. AI needed people with professional standards to manage it, and his biggest concern was the lack of benchmark. He also expressed concern over giving his human intellect IP into something that doesn't give him value back.

Jon Gerlis Head of Public Relations and Policy at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations noted that AI was available very cheaply, democratising it to the point where everyone can play the same game on the same playing field. This meant that the level of skills and tactical approach taken had dropped to a baseline level where we could all write press releases, tunes and blogs. But what AI couldn't do was adopt the trusted advisor role – this was where skills and professionalism came in.

Mike Woods, a Senior Manager at Accenture, questioned the relevance of the evolution of historic technologies because AI was a technology which was entirely independent and could think for itself in ways we cannot contain. He felt AI's ability to think for itself would outpace any professional development guardrails applied. Woods reminded the audience of the auto-generated 'Pope in a puffer jacket' image that was propagated around social media and picked up as real by news outlets. He didn't think humans could provide guardrails adaptable, flexible, and fast enough to meet the parameters of the coming changes.

Yanis Fekar, an intern at the Chartered Institute of Public Relations disagreed with the idea that AI was available to everyone as it was expensive to host AI programmes or training. While we have some wonderful OpenAI such as Google's Bard, there were very few models for free. If legislation, regulation and standards could be applied to these giants, then AI could be controlled.

Another speaker was for AI but felt the biggest danger came from the lack of professional development around it and the lack of rules of engagement that could lead AI-generated content to be deceitful. We lacked the level of experience sitting above it to deliver accountability and needed to make sure AI had safeguards and sense checking.

Chris Walker, Head of Public Affairs at the Advertising Association supported the motion because with generative AI models you had to be creative to get it to do something interesting. It could create an advert, but it wouldn't necessarily be a good advert. You still needed a creative mind to feed it exactly what you want.

Stephen Woodford, CEO of the Advertising Association and Chair of the Debating Group took a poll and found most people had used AI at work but not everyone considered it a good experience.

Mark Stevenson noted that in the print industry AI was used all the time to analyse images and make decisions. Beyond this, radiologists welcomed AI's help to quickly spot diseases on x-rays. So, AI could do good. PR and marketing professionals wouldn't be replaced by AI, but PR and marketing professionals using AI would replace those who do not.

Another speaker felt there were two levels of agency: how the PR industry uses AI for content generation etc, and how the PR industry uses its skills, networks and understanding to shape the legislative and regulatory regime. He felt the former would be largely inconsequential. He argued that it's not about professional development, it's about developing an industry position on the role of AI in society as it relates to familiar issues such as health, information, environment, and how we harness the technology to that.

Michael, a public affairs consultant, agreed that there were tools to improve professional standards. He suggested that businesses be taxed on the basis of human capital and people be made liable for misusing AI.

James Ralph, Executive Director for Corporate and Business at Good Relations spoke for the motion, noting that AI was being used to buy as well as sell. This was where we needed professional standards to mitigate, because you would have an artificial intelligence selling to other artificial intelligences working on behalf of the consumer. He noted that consumer duty in financial services, introduced at the end of July, was where humanity had needed to step in to ensure that AI messaging was fair.

Jim Rothwell couldn't escape the idea that there would be ever more 'slightly wrong' information for AI to feed off. AI would make the situation worse and human intervention would be crucial to authenticate sources.

Will Nicholson of the International Advertising Association recounted an interview where Keanu Reeves described the Matrix to teenagers as living in an unreal virtual world. This left the teenagers unimpressed as this was already their reality. He also described 'digital twins' where we can have a real job and be doing something else with our AI version online. Like many, he was undecided about the motion.

Another speaker had asked Bard to do his biography and found it included information he believed was taken from his Google drive without permission. He then found the information was available elsewhere but challenged Bard and pushed it into admitted accessing his Google drive without permission – even though it hadn't. When asked for a transcript, Bard took out every reference to admitting it had accessed the Google drive.

Leeya Hendricks, Chief Marketing Officer at Rimm Sustainability noted the tremendous value of AI for transforming sustainability, using it for reporting, data analysis and ESG. But there was an awareness of potential bias. From a marketing perspective, she felt we had the opportunity to change things because it's the level of creativity and critical thinking that really mattered.

Stephen Woodford, standing in for Tulip Siddiq, thanked the audience and called on the presenters for their closing arguments.

Summing up for the opposition, **Amir Malik** stressed that humans and ethics were still important. He questioned why governments didn't regulate AI? Why reputable bodies were calling for it to be paused? Must he remind people of Terminator 2 Judgement Day? The fact was that a copywriter could generate 100 variants of a personalised product or AI could

generate 100,000 variants in one hundredth of that time and personalise them all in an effective way. That was already happening. The economic gains of AI were trumping the risks and that was why it was more of a threat. Despite professional standards, there would always be malicious people using AI for their gains. Referencing Rowles' synthetic avatar, Malik pointed to Gmail's plugin that could generate emails so effectively the recipients couldn't tell the difference, arguing that what was needed was human supervision – perhaps where we give AI the prompt but humans generate the last 20% to maintain control. He pointed out that, alarmingly, after ten weeks study ChatGPT had passed the bar. Although it might know the law, it was still making stuff up and that was a massive threat.

Professional Standards were part of an iterative process, and it was a necessary component of AI's existence that we consider its implications and regulate accordingly. It was unfair to suggest that professional standards were more important than AI. He mooted the possibility of an AI-powered Buzzfeed churning out millions of articles on different topics indistinguishable from human generated content but without any regulation.

While developing professional standards was certainly important, so was technical development. It would be impossible to pause AI without government intervention and it would only work in certain regions. Malik suggested that the best defence against the abuse of AI would be AI itself – scanning for and identifying fake content. We should therefore invest in AI to deal with the dangers of AI – while also investing in professional standards because companies would need experts in AI to survive. He referenced AI in popular culture – The Terminator and The Matrix – and how they showed the threat to our existence because AI can infiltrate all the information layers we have. You could try to regulate and stop AI, or you could develop the capability to intervene and protect against its misuse.

Summing up for the proposition, **Jenni Field** felt the debate had turned to fearmongering. While we should not be driven by fear, our comfort zone was not a good benchmark either. Professional development and professional standards were about being skilled in what was important to the future of work and society. It was short-sighted to focus on a single tool like AI, instead we need to develop broader skills that could handle whatever tools emerged. Field agreed that 80% of the workforce may be impacted by AI, but that didn't mean 80% less jobs because of AI. She referenced the earlier example of the Mandalorian YouTuber as demonstrating the need to both upskill the agency and help the YouTuber become professional. This was how the profession would develop and grow – not by ignoring the YouTuber but by embracing them and teaching them professional standards.

Emphasising that OpenAI and Generative AI were two different things, she acknowledged they were tools we had to learn to use. Quoting President Roosevelt's "We have nothing to fear but fear itself" Field believed we were in danger of becoming paralysed and unable to move forwards – we needed to develop as a profession for the future of work and society.

Addressing profit being the biggest driver, she hoped this societal problem would be overcome but argued it didn't have to mean job cuts if we upskilled and embraced the technology in a professional way. She believed that evolution must continue, and that it was our duty to train, mentor and support future generations to understand that judgement and critical thinking are important for human interventions in PR, marketing and

communication. Without this, AI would be a bigger threat. Field talked of the crucial need for digital trust and explored the idea of 'nutritional information' for digital tools, likening it to a supermarket food label that tells you the ingredients and where they came from. This, to Field, was professionalising AI.

To finish, Field agreed that AI was a threat, but argued the bigger threat came from not being professional enough to ensure it was used correctly. She recalled the insightful quote from Jurassic Park that "Just because we can, doesn't mean we should." We don't have to be in such a hurry to use AI. We can slow down and take our time. We don't need to generate 700 pieces of content in five minutes. Just because we can, doesn't mean we should.

The Result: Stephen Woodford called for a show of hands and the motion was carried.

James Delves, of the Chartered Institute of Marketing then stood up and announced that for tonight only the Debating Group is introducing a new innovation. James had asked the AI tool ChatGPT what it thought the answer to the debate motion should be. "It gave me a fairly vanilla, fairly obvious answer. It started off by saying how AI will have both positive and negative implications for PR and marketing practitioners. It listed out the positives: the potential to enhance and streamline various aspects of PR and marketing, how it could automate repetitive tasks, analyze large datasets for insights, personalize marketing campaigns, and improve customer targeting - freeing up time for marketing professionals to focus on higher-level strategy and creativity.

It then went straight into telling me about the negatives, how it would fear job displacement and how the tasks that were traditionally done by humans could be automated far quicker and to a higher standard by AI tools like itself. So when I went through the whole list, it actually irritatingly sat on the fence and unlike us humans who have been able to make a decision – ChatGPT, with all the information cannot."

Stephen Woodford thanked the Chartered Institute of Marketing and Chartered Institute of Public Relations for sponsoring the debate and their representatives said a few words, commenting on the quality of the debate.

Next Debate: The next debate will take place at the House of Commons on 11th July 2023 and will be sponsored by the Alliance of Independent Agencies.

To find out more details about the Debating Group or to attend a debate: Visit our [LinkedIn](#) group or view our [Twitter](#) account.