

Episode #: 02

Episode Title: AI, image and professional credibility with Ben Verinder

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Intro

Louise Everett (00:13)

Welcome to ClarityMatters.

For organisations and communicators alike, using AI can signal speed and innovation, but it can also trigger doubt. Audiences are increasingly wary of machine-made messages, and inside the workplace, many professionals feel a strange double pressure: use AI to stay relevant, but don't be seen to rely on it too much.

For those of us whose reputation is built on judgment, creativity and trust, that's a tricky line to walk. So today we're exploring a new professional reality where AI isn't just shaping the work, it's shaping how we're seen.

Our guest today will help us unpack what this means for image, influence, and credibility in the age of AI. I'm thrilled to be joined by Ben Verinder, a strategic communication and public relations expert specialising in AI and reputation, leadership communication, reputation research and crisis management.

Ben, welcome to ClarityMatters. It's a pleasure to have you.

Ben Verinder (01:19)

Thanks for having me. I'm really pleased to be here.

Main conversation

Louise Everett (01:22)

You've worked across journalism, software and in-house PR.

You're one of just 50 founding chartered public relations practitioners globally, an advisor to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations on AI and ethics, and co-editor of "AI for PR" with Stephen Waddington, which will be released in May. And I have a preorder, with all proceeds going to charity.

So it's fair to say you're right at the forefront of the thinking on how AI may be reshaping professional image, credibility and reputation at work.

So let's get straight to the point.

Do you think AI use is changing how communicators see themselves and how they believe others judge their skill, value, or credibility?

Ben Verinder (02:15)

Yes. Thank you for having me.

Yes, it definitely is. And we've got lots of evidence around this. In fact, it affects how people across all industries see themselves in the workplace. And I'll talk you through a few studies that sort of shine a light on this issue. So there's a considerable amount of social desirability bias at play in how our professions, including public relations, responds to questions about artificial intelligence. So if you are in a workplace where artificial intelligence use is encouraged, you are likely to, if someone like me asks you questions about it, to overestimate and overplay your use of AI. And similarly, if you're in a workplace where you consider that artificial intelligence use is discouraged and it's frowned upon, you're likely to underreport that use, and also likely to suffer from a trust penalty.

There's a fantastic study that came out of Stanford University in the US, which was 13 different experiments looking at essentially the impact of AI use on trust. And in workplaces, where, particularly where leadership might not be as energetic about AI use and suspicious of it, then people who are open about their AI use, suffer a trust penalty, a decrease in trust amongst their colleagues.

Not only that: organisations that are open about their AI use, if they do so without that use being considered legitimate by their stakeholders, they suffer a trust penalty. So there's a really important finding from all this research for public relations functions and for organisations, which is: it's not enough to simply say, hey, we're using AI in the following ways.

The people that matter most to us must consider that that use is legitimate.

Louise Everett (04:27)

I came across a study from last year. There seem to be several workplace studies that are showing that employees are using AI but hiding it. It was a 2025 WalkMe survey that revealed 49% of workers and 53% of executives keep their AI use secret, fearing that they will be judged as lazy or less competent if they were to admit to relying on the tool. So, through your research, you're seeing that there is a sort of stigma around this.

Ben Verinder (05:07)

There is, but it does depend. It depends on the culture of the organisation you're in and the noises that are coming from either the team leadership, public relations team or from the broader organisational leadership.

So I was talking to a senior communications practitioner yesterday, and she was talking about the sense of guilt that she feels in the deployment of AI. And partly that's because she's in an organisation where they are, I would say, lukewarm about deployment, and they're really not encouraging about it.

So she's feeling that pressure that you very much described there. And, there are considerable challenges but again, it's contextual. So it does depend on the organisation you're in and whether you've got leadership on the issue, whether it's

negative or whether it's just absent. And this is a governance challenge, not a public relations challenge. It's about: do you have a clear view as an organisation?

On your, you know, on your attitude and your view of artificial intelligence, you might have a human-only or human-first approach. That's fine. But it's yeah, it's derivative, this issue, this challenge.

Louise Everett (06:25)

It is quite a confusing position for employees to be in, when out in the world it's AI noise everywhere: jump on the train or be left behind.

But then if they have to fall in line with the culture of their organisation, which might be sort of for or against it or very much, let's be human first, or let's really embrace the new technology, so quite hard for employees to navigate and then adapt.

Ben Verinder (06:56)

Yeah, it is. I think there's a huge role here for internal communications, in particular in helping organisations develop policies that reflect the views of their employees.

And that's why blanket policy won't work. There's a brilliant chapter in our book, two brilliant chapters [actually], one by Serena Mitchell, who's the comms manager at Sussex University Business School, and also by Amy Mollett, who's the head of social media at Cambridge University. Both of those write a lot about the complexity, the necessary complexity of developing and socialising an AI policy, particularly Amy's chapter is just incredible on that. She focuses on that issue.

It's not a simple thing. It requires quite a lot of effort. So there's a lot of change management involved. To give you an example, but there's also, considerations of public relations team management.

So to give you an example, one of the considerable risks, probably my top, and certainly my top three of risks, of artificial intelligence deployment is cognitive offloading, which is actually giving too much of your thought process to the algorithm - and essentially reducing your capabilities and skills and judgment, the quality of your judgment over time, as a result.

So we need to guard against that. And that means, let's say in a public relations team, you might have members of your team who really value their copywriting skills, and they do not want them to degrade.

So they quite rightly understand that they are a prized asset in the market, in the labour market. So they're going to want to hold on to those. And therefore a policy that, for instance, encourages or even mandates the use of artificial intelligence for writing, particularly first draft writing, would be really problematic for those individuals, and massively decrease for them the value of the job that they're doing.

So we need to nuance our team and organisational policies to take account of not just the views, but also the specialisms and skill sets, of the people that we've got. So it's complicated. It's not a one size fits all.

Louise Everett (09:17)

It's not. And do you see in your work, that for organisations that do have these policies, does it tend to be a blanket approach for everyone, or are you seeing these more nuanced approaches?

Ben Verinder (09:34)

Most organisations still don't have a policy. So most teams don't have a policy and most organisations don't have a policy, and that's hugely problematic. Most organisations have not trained their members of staff on how to use AI in any way whatsoever, from prompting through to the ethical considerations.

And interestingly, what you said earlier on Louise, is a really important point about people using it and not telling people, that's fundamentally really problematic. And we call that shadow or ghost AI. And it's problematic for lots of different reasons.

The first is that you can't adhere to a policy if you're using the technology in secret. If you've got a policy and that policy doesn't match the reality. There are a few things that you referenced that are very important. The other thing to bear in mind is that whether we like it or not, we are in a professional arms race at an individual level, a team level, an organisational level, and a national level, even a regional level probably.

So there's some research, clear research from America, from Boston, actually, about public relations and AI. One of the key drivers for AI adoption among public relations practitioners is fear. Or in other words, we will use AI even if we don't like it, because we fear being left behind. Now, if that's the case, if I've got a policy imposed upon me by my organisation that I think is negatively affecting my career chances, because I'm not developing skills and capacities and productivity that I think I should be doing. I'm going to secretly use AI to boost my productivity, independent of the policy.

And I've got multiple, different examples of this. I've got a friend who worked at Apple, and I remember when Apple banned AI essentially, at use on data security grounds. Everyone just went home and used it on their own computers or their phone. And there was a change of heart within about two weeks because actually, the data security issues were much greater. There's a poll by the brilliant Dan Sleeve who's an advisor to public sector communicators, and he did a poll that was in the hundreds of public sector communicators.

And he asked a question: be honest, are you using tools that are not approved by your organisation? And over 50% of people said, yeah. And in my training, I was working with large in-house teams, and sometimes I work with groups of communications directors.

And one of them said to me, you know, I've got a blanket ban on AI use beyond one tool. It's very restricted. He said "I've lost three people in the last three months because they

know that they don't want to stay with us because they really think that their skill set, comparative skill set is degraded”.

Louise Everett (12:41)

So if we move on, if professionals, are I say, feeling uneasy about being open with AI use or there are restrictions or, all of those things, what does that mean for organisational transparency? Especially when communications are supposed to build trust.

So what does that usage of AI mean for organisational transparency around AI?

Ben Verinder (13:11)

Well, I think that's a fantastic, brilliant question. Because how can you be truthfully, truthful with your stakeholders if you don't know yourself. So shadow AI is rife. One of the other consequences of shadow AI is obviously that it's impossible to be accurate in your reassurances to your stakeholders.

And as I said, I hinted earlier on, it's not enough. We've got to legitimise, we've got to socialise and legitimise our use, to have a conversation with stakeholders.

It's Grunig's excellence model writ large actually, if we do this well, we need to take account of what our stakeholders do and don't want us to use AI for. And that includes staff, but obviously external stakeholders as well. If we don't have an accurate picture of what's going on now, we just won't have an accurate picture of usage that we'll be able to have an accurate, meaningful conversation with the people that matter about, you know, transparency will not be possible.

And that has huge ramifications for things like legal and regulatory compliance. So, for instance, a couple of things and these are just two examples, content that is generated without sufficient human oversight in this jurisdiction is not afforded any intellectual property rights.

So if you are generating creative content from videos through to logos through to whatever, and you haven't had sufficient human oversight, and this is playing out in court, but then you're essentially signing over intellectual property that you have no rights to sign over. In other words, it's not worth, the contract's not worth the paper it's written on.

So transparency then becomes really problematic. And we're seeing in America and a variety of other places, organisations being sued for this very reason. It's not widespread, but it's happening. And then there's, you know, other things like here's a classic example, voice recording software, note taking software.

If we are recording someone's voice for a start, that's biometric data. Secondly, we have duties under UK GDPR, of a legitimate interest and related to consent, for instance. If we're not transparent with somebody, let's say we're, you're in a meeting and somebody's little AI note taker pops up. If I don't ask for your consent, then I'm considerably risking falling foul of UK GDPR, for instance.

And yet I see this all the time. It's really problematic. Yes, you can have a legitimate interest, etc. but and by the way, this is quite a lot of note taking software where the servers are exclusively based in the US, which is really problematic. I can think of 20 other problems here where transparency, lack of transparency, will get you into a lot of hot water. And therefore if we don't know what we're doing, we can't be, honestly transparent.

Louise Everett (16:43)

So, do you have examples of what responsible transparency around AI use could look like in practice, not in the theory? Are there some sort of straightforward things that organisations could be doing?

Ben Verinder (17:00)

Yeah, there are. You know, I cite this and this is why we asked Amy to do the chapter to write a chapter on this for the book. But, I mean, the University of Cambridge has had a generative AI policy in the public domain, which it has been since 2023, which is still really worth looking at for any organisation, because it understands explicitly that it's not enough to simply say, this is how we're using AI. It explains why. So it does the job of attempting to legitimise, and making efforts to legitimise use, so that it won't suffer a trust penalty as a result.

So that's always a good one. But there's agency policies like PR Agency One, James Crawford's agency, that published an AI policy in July 2023, which still holds water. Again, it's not one thing that they're individual to those organisations, but they've obviously been developed with input from their stakeholders, employees, etc.

So it's a two-way communications exercise in which you adapt your policy based on what your organisation's stakeholders consider to be legitimate, including your staff but also lots of other people. Fortunately, both in the private and the public sector and agencies right now, we've still got a considerable volume where it's the Wild West. It's like you've got a few people using it, using artificial intelligence very well and on an individual productivity scale.

And there's another challenge here, which is, that you'll read a lot of research and articles about the failure to grasp collective productivity through the deployment of artificial intelligence. Well, that's why - because it's not been treated as a strategic concern. It's being treated as, it's been deployed peripatetically amongst teams without really much intentional thought about collective benefit.

And in fact, you don't really need a sophisticated strategic model to capture collective benefit. You just need to approach it as a collective enterprise and have a basic strategy. But at the moment, people are sort of throwing it out there and wondering why there's not uniform productivity gains.

Louise Everett (19:29)

If I'm a comms practitioner, working within a large organisation, a large corporate, that is embracing AI and is sort of fairly transparent about it, is there anything that I should be doing in the work that I do, to disclose my use of AI? So is that something that's becoming an expectation?

Ben Verinder (19:54)

It's again, it's organisationally dependent. However, I think in my model, which is called the bridges model, developed by my company Chalkstream. So about two years ago I started teaching a course called artificial intelligence for reputation leadership for the CIPR. It's for senior leaders, and it includes a model that I produced, sort of developed as part of the course. And the bridges model really is, again, one of many, many different models you can apply.

It's not very sophisticated about how to deploy AI across a team. And the B stands for briefing and what that means is you can't really effectively use artificial intelligence as a team without a conversation with both leadership and the people who are going to pay for your licenses. So IT or equivalent, because if you're continuing to self-fund, that's problematic.

And I have challenges about that. It's unprofessional for a start. There are other issues there. If you want to capture the key benefits, often you'll want a team licence. You'll probably want professional enterprise licences, in order to get benefits and some of the particular data security elements and capabilities and what's called the depth of context or the size of context windows. That's in other words, essentially the working memory of a given large language model.

And to do that, you've got to have a chat with somebody about you know, "is this okay?" Because, I'm not a massive fan in this regard of the, you know, "do first, seek permission later". I think, okay. That's okay, up to about six months ago.

But I worry if we're still in that stage.

Louise Everett (21:42)

Do you think we are?

Ben Verinder (21:44)

Yeah. For most organisations, they are. They're sneaking around and using it in different places depending on where you are in the adoption curve. You know, people say to me, I had a question at a conference I did the other week: do I like AI? And the honest answer is, and this is about me, not about AI. If I could destroy it tomorrow, I would.

Louise Everett (22:07)

Really?

Ben Verinder (22:08)

Yeah. But I'd probably say the same about - if I'm brutally honest - about social media. So that's more about me and the challenge of governance of different companies. And I

see so social media, for instance, has had billions pumped into it to make it and the devices themselves, to make them addictive.

On the artificial intelligence side of things, I'm not worried about what's called AGI. You know, it's sort of AI rising up and coming against us. It's more that I do see a considerable amount of possible harm from misinformation and disinformation powered by artificial intelligence. I mean, propaganda, misinformation, nothing new, but extremely convenient now with the rise of AI-driven deepfakes.

So just on that, I think that's going to have a very pervasive impact on social fabric. There's some significant challenge, but here's the massive part: my view is completely irrelevant. And it's stupid; that just being expressed is in some way just utterly pointless because it's not going back in its box.

So we're going to have to work with this technology, and we're going to have to try our best to make it work for us, rather than against us. It's very clear that our government, along with some other governments, not all of them, is far behind the curve in regulating intervention to protect us as citizens.

Louise Everett (23:43)

So before we wrap up, can we take a little step back a moment? So this year marks the 20th anniversary of Claritas. And over the last 20 years, communications has evolved rapidly in scale, speed and scrutiny. But there are some lessons that endure. So if you could go back to your 20-year-old self, what's one piece of career advice you would give?

Ben Verinder (24:08)

I suppose I was smack in the middle of my degree, I was doing ethical philosophy, I was doing a philosophy grad. I had an amazing lecturer, an American philosopher, who, if you got things right, would throw a pencil at you. Which sounds bad, but it was really cool.

He was a great man. And, I did quite well in philosophy. At the end of that degree, I was seriously considering whether I would carry on in academia or not. I didn't, and I think maybe I'd give myself a bit of advice about maybe having a go at that actually, second time around. But I have to say, I feel extremely blessed in my career. It has been a happy accident. I'm kind of addicted to learning. So I think that's been the lodestar of my career.

I've always enjoyed the things most when I've had an opportunity to learn new things, particularly from people. I find that really exciting. So I suppose I would just say, stick to that principle, and you'll be ok. Because I've come out the other side and I'm probably going to be working in AI now till the end of my career.

Louise Everett (25:24)

Looking forward now, if you could put one idea or a piece of advice into a 20-year time capsule, what would it be and why does it matter?

Ben Verinder (25:35)

The best bit of advice I ever received was: understand your energy or understand where your energy comes from. And I thought that the best advice for me would be about, you know, get a good accountant or whatever. 13 years later, the energy advice is the best.

Because I'm an extrovert, but I'm like many extroverts. I'm not exclusively powered by the need for human interaction. But if I go below a level of interpersonal human action, particularly face to face, my energy is quite considerably depleted. And I didn't find that out for years. So I was at some point very heavy with research projects because we do research and I would spend, you know, up to two weeks writing reports, complex data analysis, and I would come out the other side feeling awful, and I never knew why.

And now I do. So I mix and match my work much more. I'm much more clever. I'm not clever, but I'm much less stupid about planning, I mix things up so that I'm feeding, giving my energy. And likewise, if you're an introvert, and you're having to expose yourself to interpersonal, face to face communication, to a great volume, you're likely to feel the same after a while. So it's about understanding that kind of element of who you are.

Louise Everett (26:58)

Just before we wrap up, Ben, I'm just going back to talking about being energised and energisers, back to your upcoming book that's coming out in May. You have an event that's coming up.

Ben Verinder (27:15)

Thank you for reminding me. That's so kind of you, I nearly forgot. Yeah. So the book comes out in the 3rd of May, but on the 18th of June, we are with Communicate - the wonderful people of Communicate - running an event, an AI in PR event, which brings the book to life and a lot more: interesting debates between different people about, you know, what's good and bad about AI and lots and lots of, all the people, the people I've mentioned alongside lots of other experts. All these amazing contributors to the book are coming in and doing panels, doing plenaries, doing all sorts of stuff.

So that's going to be in central London 18th June. Details published soon. Just follow me on socials and I'll probably bore you to death with the details.

Louise Everett (27:59)

Wonderful, and we will share those details as well, in the show notes today. Ben, thank you for the incredibly insightful conversation today. There is so much to take away. As I said, we could carry on or I could certainly carry on. I've got so many thoughts that have come up. So thank you so much for taking the time with us.

Ben Verinder (28:22)

Thank you very much for having me.

Louise Everett (28:24)

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in B2B communications

As we've highlighted then. The real issue isn't using AI, it's the moment people think the human has stepped out of the loop. So the reputational sweet spot for communicators is clear competence with the technology, paired with unmistakable human judgment, responsibility and craft. The goal isn't to hide AI, it is to use it well, while staying visibly accountable for the thinking.

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Thanks for being with us.