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Humans still needed:

An analysis of skills and tools in public relations

Discussion paper by
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Foreword

The international public relations community owes Jean Valin a significant debt of gratitude. Recently, he has been instrumental in the Global Alliance's work to define worldwide capabilities in public relations.

Jean has subsequently led this project on behalf of the CIPR #AIinPR[1] panel to help understand the impact of technology, and specifically artificial intelligence, on skills in our profession.

We're publishing Jean's paper with the intention of starting a debate about the impact of technology on public relations. Current discourse is polarized between techno panic and denial. Neither is helpful.

We'd welcome comments and challenges to the analysis. We'd also welcome approaches from any other organisations around the world that are working in this area.

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[1] The CIPR #AIinPR Panel: https://www.cipr.co.uk/ai

Humans still needed
An analysis of skills and tools in public relations

By Jean Valin APR, FCPRS, FCIPR (Hon)

The rapid advance of artificial intelligence (AI) means that software will increasingly be used to create content; content marketing will be driven by algorithms; bots will manage public enquiries; and decisions of channels and tactics will increasingly be automated, driven in real time by public responses and behaviours. But how much of what we do in public relations already is, or will be replaced by technology, and specifically artificial intelligence (AI)?

With that backdrop the CIPR #AIinPR panel tackled the question of skills in public relations. We wanted to know how much AI was already in public relations and how fast it is evolving. We reached out to dozens of professionals who helped us understand what is going on in our industry.

> “We tend to overestimate the effect of a technology in the short run and underestimate the effect in the long run.”
>
> **Roy Amara, Past President, Institute for the Future**

[2] Global Alliance Global Capabilities Framework: http://www.globalalliancepr.org/capabilitiesframeworks/

How we tackled the project

To cover the full landscape of communication and public relations skills we used a simplified version of the Global Alliance Global Body of Knowledge (GBOK)[2] which describes over 50 skills and abilities needed to practice public relations. These are summarised in the diagram below, which was originally used in connection with the Global Alliance's Melbourne Mandate.

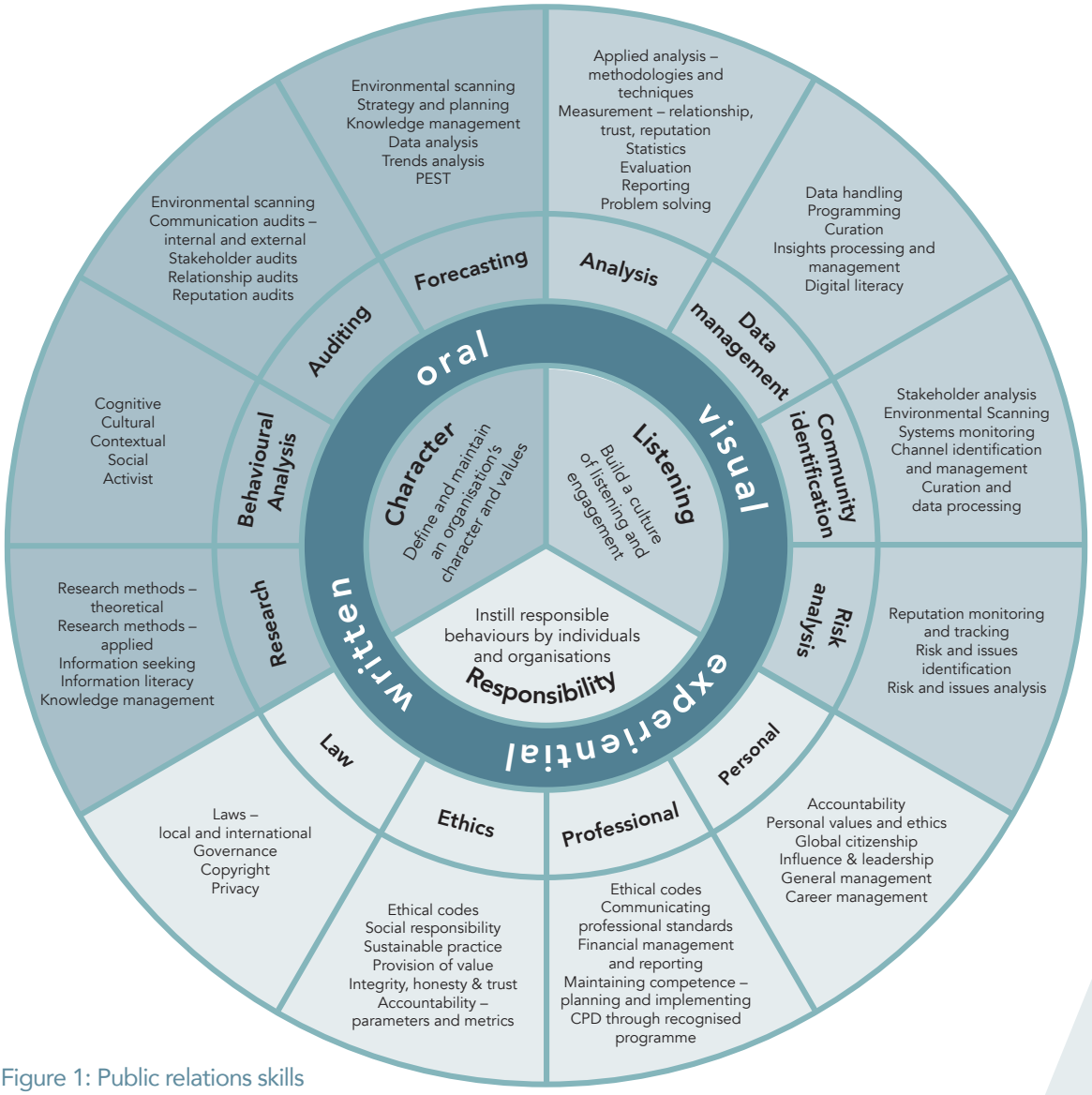

Figure 1: Public relations skills and abilities as defined by the Global Alliance GBOK project.

The GBOK is a consolidation of the skills and abilities that are used to develop exam questions by certification bodies and education frameworks from around the world. It provides a fairly complete list of competencies in public relations. The project has subsequently been developed by the University of Huddersfield into a capabilities approach that was recently published at the World PR Forum in Oslo[3].

We quickly realised that skill sets don't translate directly to tasks which is how the AI industry has tackled the issue. It took some mental gymnastics to develop at least a preliminary comprehensive picture.

[2] Global Alliance Global Capabilities Framework: http://www.globalalliancepr.org/capabilitiesframeworks
[3] Global Capabilities in Public Relations and Communication Management (GCPR): whttps://www.hud.ac.uk/about/schools/huddersfield-business-school/research/gcpr/publications

All AI tools use technology but not all tech is AI

AI has become a catch all term to describe technology that engages with people or displays human characteristics. It is contributing to hype and uncertainty around the topic.

> **The CIPR #AIinPR panel defines AI as a sophisticated application of technology whereby a machine demonstrates human cognitive functions such as learning, analysis and problem solving.**

The market for tools in public relations is exploding. A crowdsourced exercise by the #AIinPR panel has characterised more than 120 tools.

In each case we've added a description, and labelled each tool by function and AI sophistication using a five point scale.

1. Simplification – technology that simplifies a public relations process, or provides a tactical service
2. Listening and monitoring – media and social media listening and monitoring tools
3. Automation – automation of tactical tasks
4. AI for structured data – machine intelligence applied to structured data
5. AI for unstructured data – machine intelligence applied to unstructured data

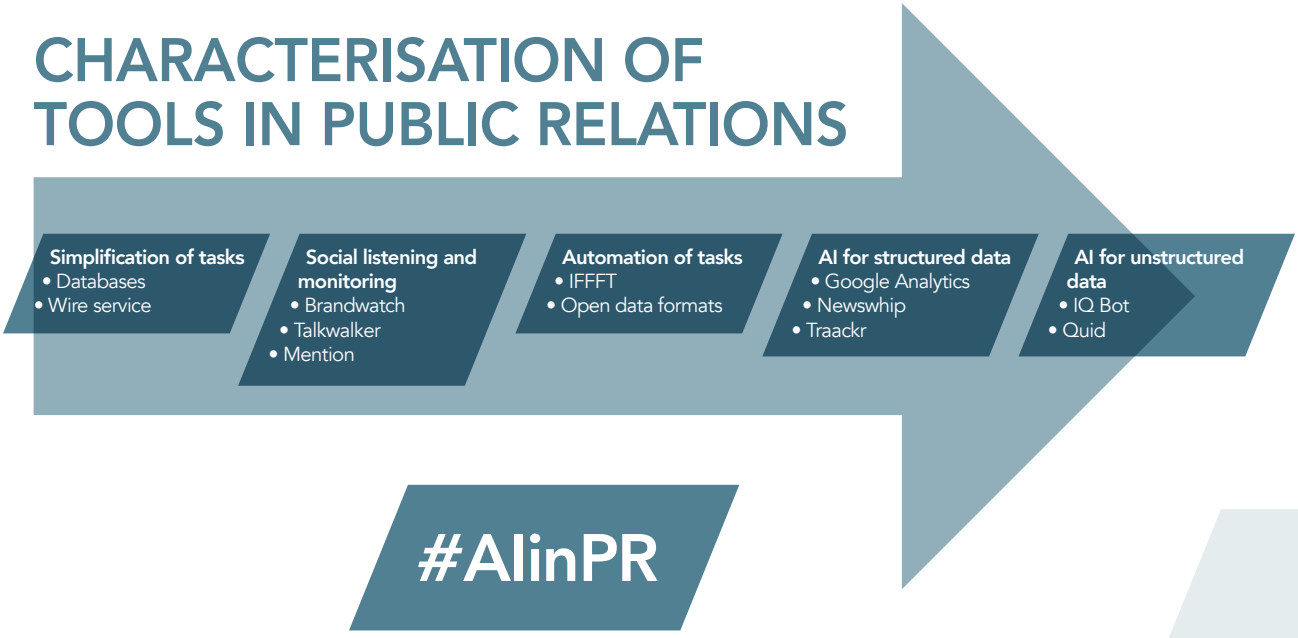

Figure 2: five point scale of public relations tools.

The last two levels on our scale represent what we deem to be AI.

You can access the tool database and contribute to the project via Stephen Waddington's blog[4]. In time we plan to share the database in a Creative Commons format and develop a web app to interrogate the data.

[4] #AIinPR group publishes crowdsourced PR tool database. What's missing? https://wadds.co.uk/blog/2018/5/8/aiinpr-group-publishes-crowdsourced-tool-database-whats-missing

Benchmarking capabilities against tools

We asked a team of 17 reviewers from around the world to take a crack at the list. We started our exploration with two sets of skills; one with a greater potential for AI and one set of skills with little or no AI.

We recognise that the exercise was highly subjective – hence so is our analysis and interpretation of the data. Responses varied greatly based on each individual's interpretation of the skill set and their level of knowledge of existing tools.

A note of caution: some of the skills listed multiple elements – some of which do have more AI or technology. This made our analysis a bit more complicated. We weighted responses and scores accordingly giving more weight to the main intent of the skill.

Where we found a tool that would warrant a higher score, we used the higher score. In some cases, there were wide differences between reviewers. We surmise that this is related to the relatively low use, or awareness, of AI tools within the industry. We don't claim to have found the best methodology to tackle this issue, we just had to start somewhere.

There is no question that the level of sophistication is evolving rapidly

Many experts agree that AI will help more than hurt white-collar workers by freeing them from more mundane tasks and allowing them to concentrate on innovation and creativity.

An Oxford University study called the Future of Jobs[5] suggested that millions of workers in the UK are in danger of being replaced by computers and robots. The academic paper looked at 702 of the most common occupations and used a set of algorithms to assign a probability of computerisation to occupations, ranking occupations from 0 (no risk of automation) to 1 (very high risk of automation). Public Relations jobs ranked 634 out of 702 jobs. We wanted to dig deeper.

Responses from our reviewers confirm this assertion but also found a number of public relations tasks being automated or assisted by AI. Check out the visual representation below to get a snapshot of our findings.

We organised our analysis in three categories.

a Skills with zero tech or AI
b Skills or portions thereof that may have a minor contribution from tech or AI tools
c Skills where tech or AI is already more prevalent

[5] The Future of Jobs, Working Paper, University of Oxford: https://www.oxfordmartin.ox.ac.uk/downloads/academic/future-of-employment.pdf

Skills with zero tech

Of the 52 skills in the GBOK, 17, or 32% of our lists, were deemed to currently have zero tech support. Given the high human aspects associated with judgement, interpretation and experience, we don't see the 'zero list' changing much in future. Fundamental human traits such as empathy, trust, humour and relationship building can't be automated – at least not yet.

Skills such as: flexibility with constant changes, mentoring, familiarity with theories and its application, strategic thinking and ethical considerations are unlikely to be overtaken by AI. There might be tools that inform our decisions now and, in the future, but predominantly, these will remain the domain of humans.

Skills or portions thereof that may have a minor contribution from AI tools

Our zero list responses indicate that another 14 skills are deemed to have at least some indirect support from technology or some form of AI as opposed to drastically simplifying, replacing or automating tasks associated with these skills. We make a distinction between skills that are highly intellectual such as critical listening skills and having global awareness for example and skills such as campaign implementation for example where automation and AI already have more of a foothold.

Therefore, another 27% of the skill set benefits from the support of some technology or AI tools to assist us in decision making or deep analysis. In five years, there may be more assistance from AI tools which will contribute more directly to the application of skills in this category but on balance, again, human intervention is dominant with AI playing a relatively minor role.

Robots operate on strict rules and algorithms; human critical thinking skills will be least impacted by AI. Given the relatively low use or take-up of AI tools in the sub-set of skills (27%) where we see AI tools supporting but not overtaking humans, we surmise that take-up will increase with experience and familiarity. Perhaps this will shift a few more skills from our zero list to a higher level of AI in the future.

Bottom line: 59% of the skill set are predominantly not candidates for AI. This reinforces the Oxford findings described above. In five years, this could shift but we can't tell yet by how much.

Skills where AI is already more prevalent

At the other end of the spectrum, we found 41% of the GBOK skill set to have some form of AI or technology that simplifies our lives. Our AI potential list was rated with the five-point scale. Check below to see how the scores evolve over time.

The AI potential list shows that only a portion of skills – 12% of total skills (out of 52 skills) are truly using AI (4 and 5 on our scale) now with a prediction that this will climb to 38% within five years.

Skills associated with conducting basic research, creating content, evaluating campaigns, tracking issues and countless work processes are being automated or already have some AI.

In five years, we see these types of tasks becoming either fully automated or having a high degree of AI applied. The sophistication within these tools will only increase. The extent to which technology or AI will expand will never fully replace public relations professionals but will increasingly assist us and possibly do a better job.

Using our tools scale, here's a summary of our findings.

Level 1: Technology that simplifies a process or provides a service

Here we found tools that assist us in mastering language, preparing graphic and sound-rich presentations, translation, implementation and roll out, project management and planning.

Today, only 6% of the skill set benefits from this level of technology. We see many of these tasks being further automated within 5 years.

Level 2: Social listening and monitoring tools

This is an active area where several tools help us identify and build communities, track comments and analyse sentiments. Predictive technology also helps us to be sensitive to diversity and segmentation of stakeholders. We found 8% of the skill set operates at this level today, with the potential for more automation or AI in the future.

Level 3: Automation of tasks

We found tools that help us practice and critique our speeches, manage content, analyse data, produce documents, videos and soundtracks, and engage on social media. At 17% of the skill set, this is the highest score today. Most of the reviewers see a further shift to AI within 5 years.

Levels 4 and 5: Machine intelligence applied to structured and unstructured data

This is the heart of AI in our profession. We can create and curate content with automated and predictive technology. We can identify trends, track issues and generate reports and presentations. Chatbots are becoming prevalent and can learn and improve on their own. We can filter through data and process large amount of information which frees up time for more intellectual tasks, creativity and reflection.

Reviewers pegged these two levels at 12% now and predict a massive shift to 38% within five years as take-up and familiarity increases. Our confidence with AI tools will increase with experience.

Mapping the impact of tools against skills

Finally, we've plotted the capability of tools on the GBOK skills and abilities wheel to create a composite picture of what our reviewers believe to be the current capabilities of tools in public relations.

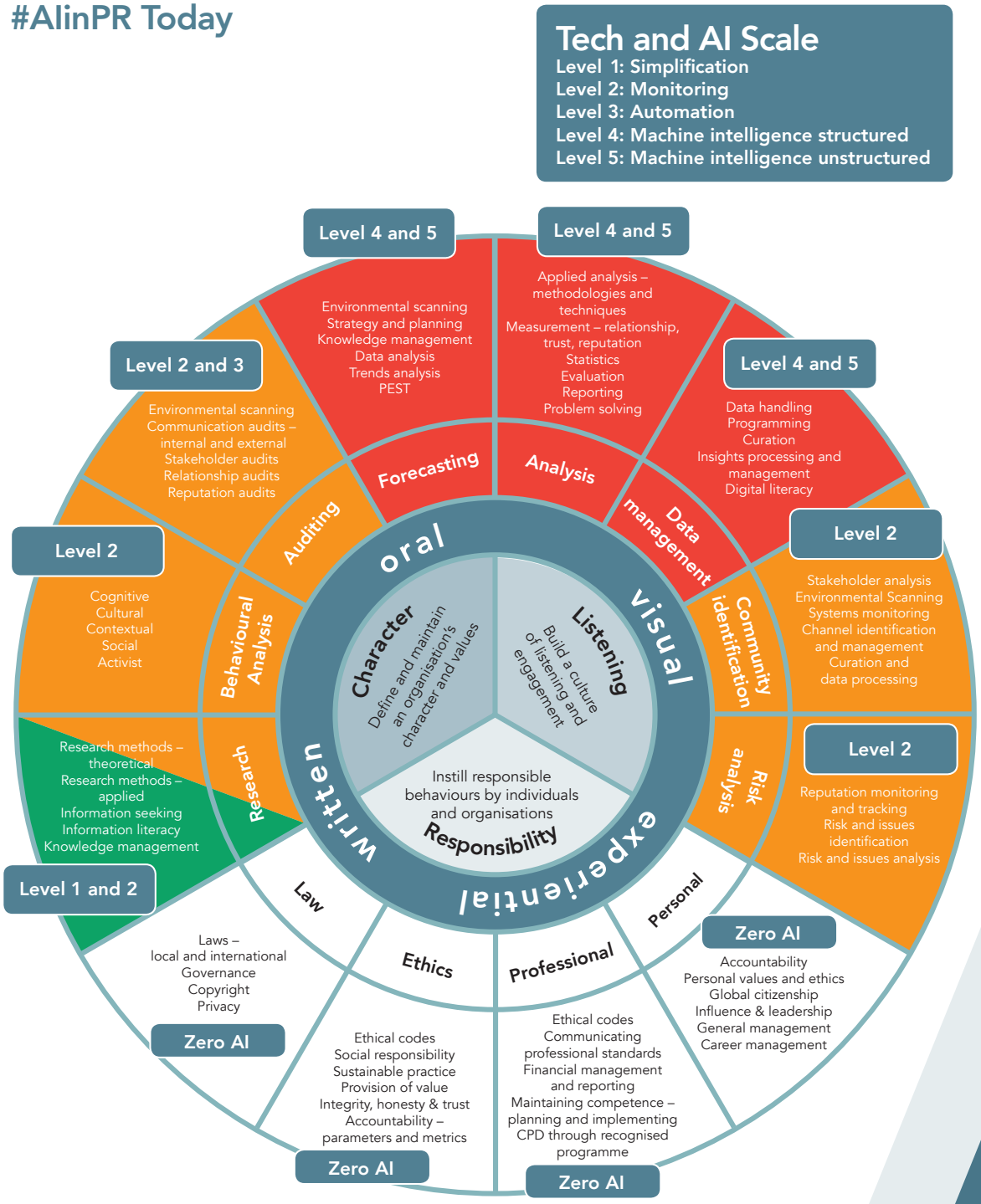

Figure 3: estimate of current tool plotted against GBOK public relations skills and abilities.

We've done the same to try and understand the technology in five years.

#AIinPR in 5 years

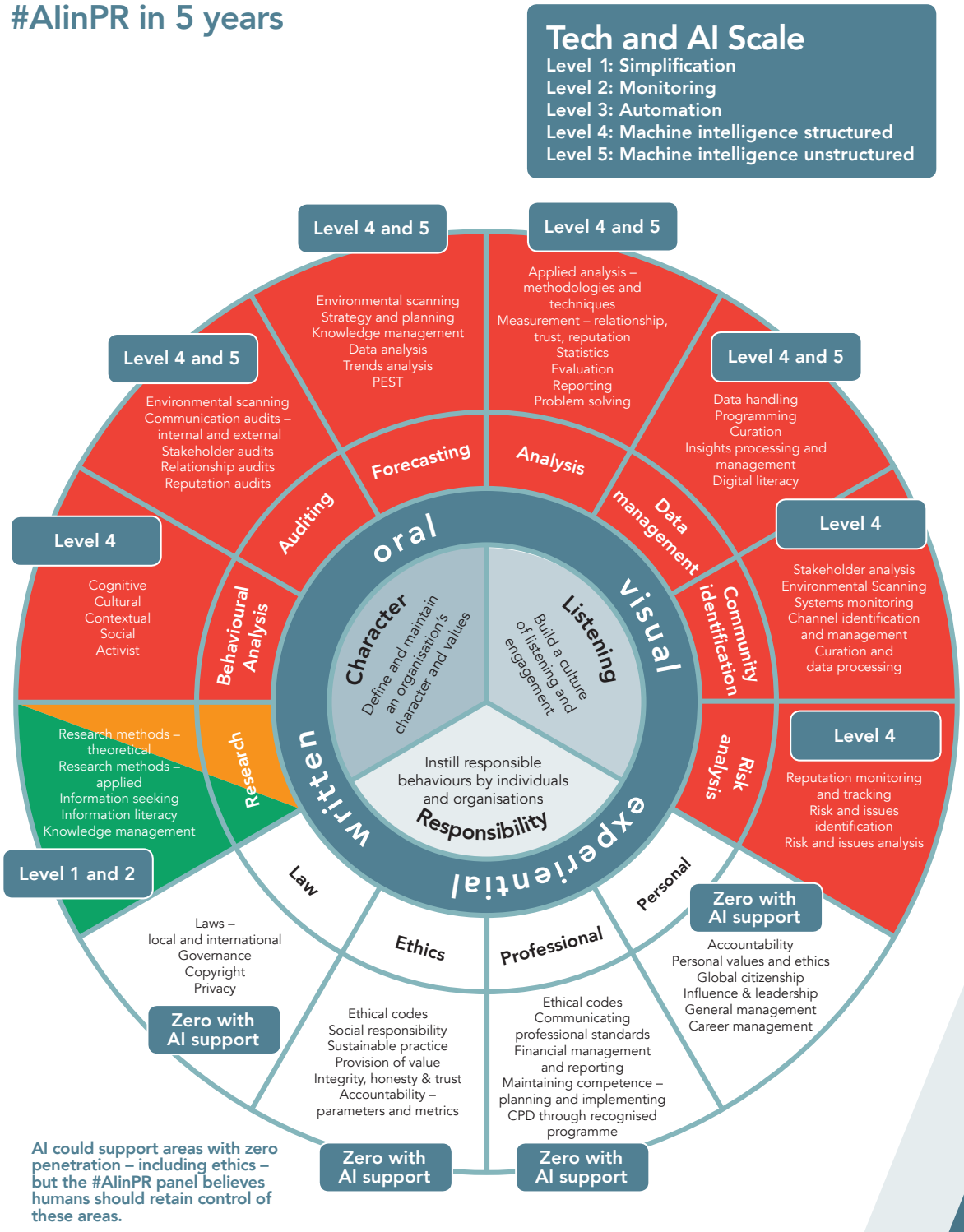

Figure 4: estimate of tools capability in five years plotted against GBOK public relations skills and abilities.

Lessons for the future of the public relations profession

We get a richer sense of AI impact when we consider, using the results of the CIPR State of the Profession (SOTP) 2018 survey[6] of UK practitioners, that copy writing, strategic planning and social media relations are among the most common public relations activities.

It is here, in terms of the daily lives of the broadest range of practitioners, that AI is likely to have most impact. According to SOTP, which also assesses skill strengths and weaknesses, it is in the domain of social media relations that public relations needs the most help from AI.

AI can be incredibly useful, but if it is used without complementing human awareness, it can be detrimental. We need humans to think creatively and abstractly about problems to devise new and innovative strategies, test out different approaches and look to the future. Parts of what we do – or in some cases entire tasks – are or will be automated and will benefit from AI.

Regardless of the tasks and skills that can be automated or benefit from AI, human intervention in editing, sensitivity, emotional intelligence, applying good judgement and ethics will always be needed.

That is one of the lessons of this exercise: We need to emphasise education, experiential learning and continuous development of these very human traits that are valued in our profession.

The second lesson is that we need to become aware of AI and its potential pitfalls and quirks in our profession. AI is about to massively change our lives. The public relations profession needs to keep up. We need more experience with these tools and more critical reviews to learn how best to use them and their limitations.

Indeed, we need to be vigilant in the ethical implications of using data, guard against privacy breaches and be mindful that our licence to operate comes with behaviours that place the public interest above organisation or client. Ethics will continue to be the dominant differentiator in the professional practice of public relations. And that is a good thing.

[6] CIPR State of the Profession 2017/18: https://www.cipr.co.uk/stateofpr

Thank you

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For more information on the CIPR's AI Panel, visit www.cipr.co.uk/AI