



ICCO

INTERNATIONAL
COMMUNICATIONS
CONSULTANCY
ORGANISATION



MODERN COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FOR SOCIETY

The First Annual Global PR Industry Policy Position Paper by ICCO

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS CONSULTANCY ORGANISATION (ICCO)

The International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO) is the global voice of the public relations and communications industry. Through our network of 41 associations, representing PR and communications agencies in 80 countries, ICCO members strive to shape the future of communications by improving professional standards and tackling collective issues collaboratively.

Engage with ICCO to forge international partnerships and join a global network of communications agencies.

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**NETWORKS ACROSS
80 COUNTRIES**

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AND RESEARCH**



**20+ INTERNATIONAL
EVENTS**

**100s OF
PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT AND
LEARNING RESOURCES**



**INTERNATIONAL
MATCHMAKING AND
PARTNER DEVELOPMENT**

**KNOWLEDGE
EXCHANGE AND
COLLABORATIVE
CAMPAIGNS**



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Foreword



Patrick Penninckx
**Head of Information
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Council of Europe**

COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Dear friends,

The International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO) is well known in the public relations and communications industry, having developed important guiding documents, including the 2003 Stockholm Charter, and most recently, the 2017 Helsinki Declaration, which are followed by PR businesses and their clients around the world. These principles closely align to the values upheld by the Council of Europe, and other international institutions fighting for causes to benefit society.

In 2020, the Secretary-General of the Council of Europe welcomed ICCO as an official partner within the cooperation along with its digital companies and associations, in order to defend Human Rights, the Rule of Law and Democracy. Such cooperation is essential as it provides us with valuable input for the future-proof and practice-oriented policymaking and standard setting, taking the experience of practitioners into account.

The following position paper represents the collective position of an influential industrial standard-setting organisation on the relevant issues at the intersection of the latest technological and communications developments.

The document raises several issues directly related to our own line of work at the Council of Europe – the contemporary challenges for the freedom of expression and media, media literacy, as well as the ethical use of AI in media – and provides valuable insight into possible solutions.

We look forward to working with the public relation industry, global institutions, and other relevant stakeholders, to tackle these critical issues at a time of great change for the global media landscape.

Best wishes,

Patrick Penninckx
Head of Information Society Department, Council of Europe

Introduction



Nitin Mantri

**Group CEO, Avian WE
and ICCO President
(2019 – present)**

The International Communications Consultancy Organisation (ICCO) is a not-for-profit federation of 41 public relations (PR) trade associations around the world, collectively representing over 3,000 PR agencies across 81 countries and six continents. ICCO is the voice of the PR industry and has, since formation in 1989, worked to progress international collaboration on PR and communications topics. Within Europe, the organisation is particularly strong, representing the vast majority of major PR agencies.

The objectives of ICCO are firstly to raise professional and ethical standards in PR globally. Second, shape the future of PR with readiness in new skills, business structures, and technology. Third, raise awareness of the valuable contribution PR makes to business and wider society.

Beyond these objectives, which support PR agencies and professionals, we understand PR professionals all have a collective duty to inform PR agencies, businesses, governments, NGOs, and world leaders on how to communicate with the public. Their work advises and influences the public on everything - from vital health awareness campaigns to innovative, and often, complex technology or commercial product campaigns.

As media and communications experts, we have a unique perspective across traditional media, including broadcast, print, and new digital media. PR professionals know the power of different media and different mediums to influence, which can create both difficulties and opportunities.

Distinct from advertising, PR is concerned with “earned media coverage” as opposed to “paid coverage”, and touches almost every aspect of a person’s daily life. It is, therefore, our duty to provide information, views, and recommendations that will inform businesses, international institutions, governments, and leaders’ response to the media and communications challenges impacting societies around the world.

I hope this paper can be the start of a great dialogue between all types of stakeholders as we tackle core issues facing communications today – with PR professionals rightly at the heart of the conversation.

It is important to acknowledge specifically that this paper is being published amidst war in Ukraine, in which systemic, sophisticated misinformation is being communicated by the Russian government. ICCO removed all Russian membership and has consistently condemned any proliferation of misinformation by any government, or any consultant that engages with such actors. The expulsion of Bell Pottinger being another example. Through collective international high standards, we can fight bad practice and will continue to do this in a united, coherent and emphatic way. Join us. We are coordinating efforts with partners across Europe and internationally.

Best wishes,

Nitin Mantri

Group CEO, Avian WE and ICCO President (2019 – present)



“ “ This document describes the joint commitment of ICCO member organisations around the world to tackle burning questions facing society. The international PR industry stands firmly for freedom of media and freedom of speech, and will push for greater media education, media literacy, and ethical use of modern communication technologies.”

Jürgen H. Gangoly, Austria
ICCO, Regional President Europe (2016-2020)

“ “ PR & Communication professionals both design the modern communications landscape and are key players within it, dictating how comms impacts people’s lives. Freedom of media to enable free expression, media literacy to fight fake news, and responsible use of artificial intelligence for good, are all at the core of today’s agenda for ICCO. This first white paper was created as a global collaboration, taking heed from the Council of Europe’s great work. The paper will inspire and support PR businesses and communications stakeholders in our efforts to collectively design a better communications landscape and benefit society.”

Massimo Moriconi, Italy
ICCO Regional President Europe (2020 -present)



“ “ Communications technology, including AI, has empowered communications professionals and people worldwide to achieve great things. However, AI can manipulate emotions, with the power to divide as well as unite. This great power to influence must be coupled with responsibility and accountability. Using tools ethically is the only way to regain trust and essential for a free, democratic society. PR professionals must be proactive. It is essential we learn, educate, and communicate responsible use of AI. That is why we participate in high-level and multistakeholder initiatives and working groups, like COE’s CAHAI Group.”

Christina Forsgård, Finland
ICCO Ethics Chair (2019- present)

About this paper

1. HOW TO USE THIS POSITION PAPER

This paper has been created to inform influential institutions on the important views of PR and communications experts regarding modern challenges in communication.

It is to be used by institutions to inform their own decisions with regard to policy as well as to begin a dialogue with PR and communication experts.

Consider this paper as the start of a productive conversation in which we can openly exchange views and information relating to these critically important challenges and opportunities.

The challenges addressed may vary in extent internationally, but share overarching characteristics. The paper has been written to advise the Council of Europe in the first instance, but with global contributions, it's designed to be useful in any country or region in the world.

All three major challenges addressed in this paper overlap with one another and collectively form the three biggest communication challenges for society at the present time. Let's tackle them together.

2. THE NECESSARY INPUT OF PR EXPERTS ON SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Changes to policy and to regulation are often advised in response to new technology. What must also be considered is not merely the capabilities of technology, but the way in which it is being practically used by businesses and by the public. This can change as rapidly as technology itself.

PR experts are uniquely placed to be the conduit of information between businesses, the public, governments, individuals, technology companies, and the media.



CHALLENGE 1: FREEDOM OF MEDIA AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The right to freedom of expression and freedom of the media are fundamental to a functioning democratic society. In Europe, these rights are protected by Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights.

In a digital, globalised world, the lines between censorship and suppression of dangerous, misleading information have been complicated. The power of online platforms have enabled greater democracy, scrutiny, and empowered free speech. However, the platforms have also enabled highly effective misinformation campaigns, distribution of inaccurate information, and empowered hate speech. All of these are PR and communications issues.

1. PR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Freedom of speech and a free public relations business are interdependent in a democracy. In countries where freedom of speech is restricted, the pressure faced by journalists is also felt by public relations professionals. Only through a free press can PR function as an ethical business. To represent clients properly through both traditional and new media, freedom to speak the unfettered truth is a necessity. The loss of a free press and increasing state control, particularly of TV, radio, newspapers, and in some cases, of online media and communication channels, create an impossible landscape for PR agencies, particularly international ones, to operate. This is the current landscape in many European countries and around the world.

PR agencies and communications consultants often control or advise on the use of their clients' social media accounts. These are key communication tools in every country and through them clients can reach the public with important, truthful messages. They can also be used by the public to more closely engage with clients (brands, politicians, influential individuals). Most governments wield little control over these platforms and therefore the regulations and standards are controlled by technology firms. Perhaps, there is no specific regulation (although that is changing and there is increasingly more content regulation applicable to social media, a recent example being Covid-19 laws targeting health misinformation), but there is censorship in many states across the globe. Also, platforms are often being accused of complicity with non-democratic regimes in removing politically undesirable content.

PR professionals are natural allies to trusted and independent journalists, news organisations, broadcasters, educational institutions, NGOs, and other think tanks in communicating and promoting freedom of media and freedom of speech. The logical conclusion is that PR professionals must not be silent on this issue.

2. CHALLENGES IN FREEDOM OF MEDIA AND FREE SPEECH

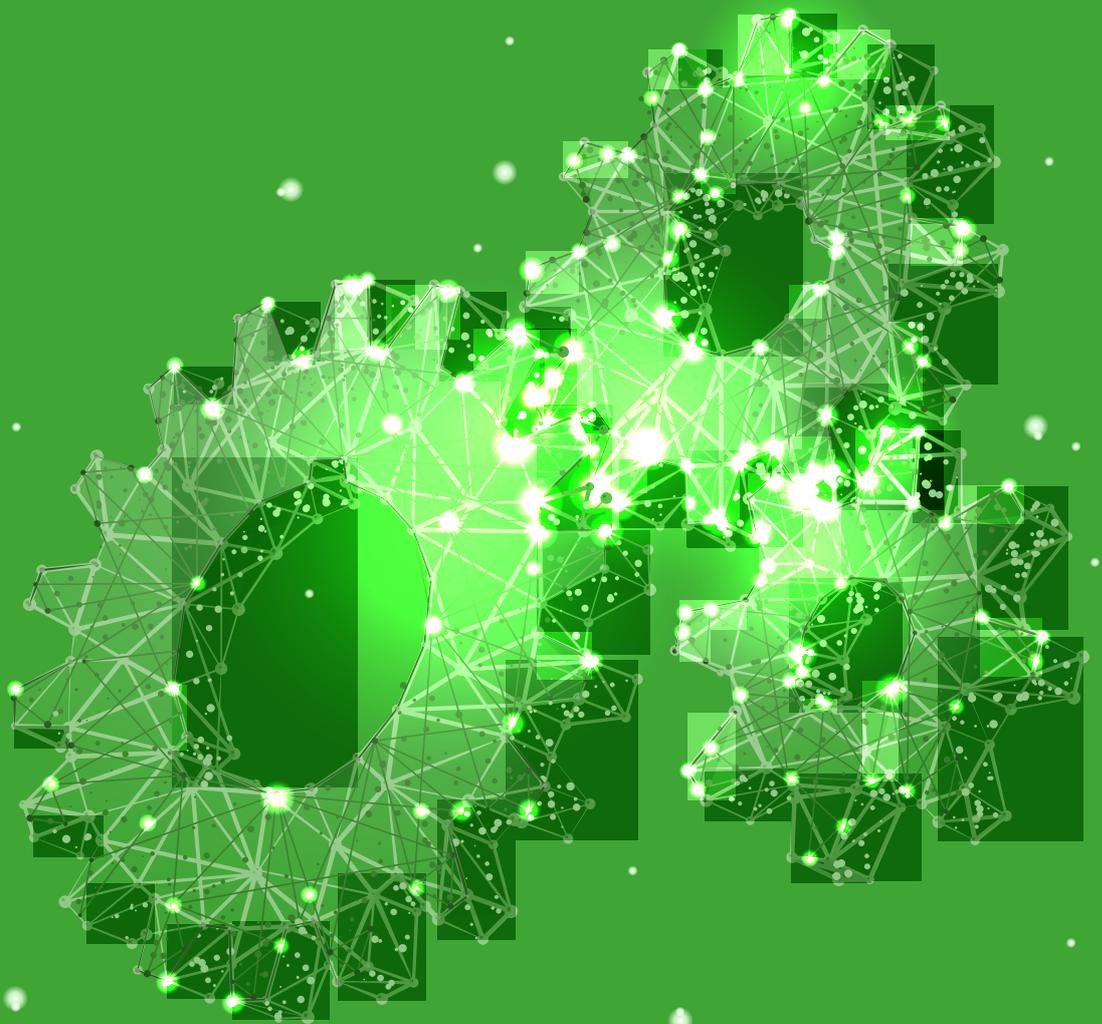
- Rise of the suppression/censorship of free media and free speech in certain countries.
- No access or restricted access to digital platforms that offer free speech in certain countries.
- Possible opaque collaboration between governments and digital platforms.
- Lack of democratic, recognised, and agreed decency standards existing on digital platforms (not at the level of television advertising standards, for example).
- Lack of effective enforcement of platforms' own community standards regarding the content they allow and prohibit. They also have to follow the national content regulations regarding the removal of illegal speech. There are emerging international standards on that (see, for example, the CoE Recommendation CM/Rec(2018)2 on the roles and responsibilities of internet intermediaries) and an increasing body of

national laws. However, the lack of effective enforcement is again a challenge.

- Platforms are not bound by the same legal or ethical rules as publishers. There is a lack of clarity as to the applicable content standards on platforms, a lack of enforcement of content-related rules, and incentivisation of sensationalist, click-bait and downright false content, which results in more user engagement, and therefore, more advertising spend. In short, platforms prioritise advertising revenues over accuracy of information, user demand, user experience, and user safety.
- Lack of accountability on social media and difficulty to enforce/apply standards suitable for different regions.
- Lack of understanding in the difference between PR and advertising (from both the public, politicians, and business leaders).
- Low perception about what PR industry can do to preserve and encourage freedom of media and freedom of speech within the contemporary information society.
- This distrust and lack of understanding between different elements of the media landscape, between journalists, PR agencies and NGOs, can exacerbate problems.

3. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- ICCO Code of Conduct ensures PR agencies uphold the principles of free media and free speech.
- ICCO supports member trade associations in upholding these principles, and removing any agency that breaks this code of conduct. All ICCO's PR firms sign a code of conduct and operate under strict ethical principles. We condemn any communications work being done by authoritarian regimes, work hard to prevent distribution of false information, and are committed to communicating truth. Anyone breaking the code is dismissed from their trade association.
- ICCO to gather and share with members best cases, campaigns, and initiatives protecting freedom of media and freedom of speech.
- ICCO can form an alliance with other relevant (government/ intergovernmental and non-government) institutions (The Trust Project, Human Rights Watch, Reporters Sans Frontières, journalism and media institutions, but also Council of Europe and other intergovernmental institutions) to collectively condemn poor conduct (joint statements), wherever we see fit, and continuously support one another in upholding the values of free speech and a free media.
- ICCO can work with the Council of Europe and other international institutions to produce a set of standards and guidelines that are suitable for communications on both traditional media and new media. E.g. "Freedom of Communication Standards". This could apply to journalists, PR and communications professionals, businesses, and the public.



CHALLENGE 2: MEDIA LITERACY AND EDUCATION

1. PR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH MEDIA

The relationship of PR service providers with media and journalists is defined by constant interactions, dependency, and interdependency while fulfilling different roles and duties in and for the same information society we all live and work in.

Journalists often see it differently, but we at ICCO and in the entire PR industry are convinced, media and journalists cannot prosper without trusted sources, external information, and professional content and contact providers – like PR agencies – all over the world.

On the other side, professional PR service providers also need a vivid, critical, and independent media landscape with entities trusted and respected by the people to run their businesses and to provide their client services.

In some regions of the world, PR professionals face problems being recognised and accepted as credible sources by media and society in general. In other regions or under other circumstances, established PR agencies, with their internationally recognised, transparent set of business ethics and with respected industry experts working for them, are seen as especially credible sources in a world with ever more doubtful sources.

Consequently, media and PR professionals should work together to provide a framework of projects and measures that enhance the value of professional media and critical journalism in society.

2. CHALLENGES

- Better media literacy of all age groups in a rapidly changing media environment and a profound media education in schools and universities is key to reach the described goals.
- The ability to judge between credible media, credible sources, and dis-and-misinformation is a core competence needed for fact-based decision-making in the private and business life and for participating in democratic processes.
- Media literacy and source identification is becoming one of the most important cultural techniques in our times. Everybody should have access to information, training, and education to improve media literacy and the competences to differentiate the quality of information sources.
- PR may contribute to enhancing people's media and information literacy. Whilst it may not impact an individual's PR business directly, proper, ethical PR is more effective in a landscape of high media standards and media literacy. Low media literacy can be seized upon by less credible organisations resulting in distrust in all PR firms, not just the rogue outliers.
- It is certainly important to distinguish between editorial content and PR content, especially when the lines blur,, both from a business perspective and a user/reader perspective. The current standards and guidance on this is unclear.

- Strengthening communication between PR companies and media organisations is key. Educating journalists and other media actors on PR's role is necessary to further develop a constructive relationship, and add value to the democratic public debate.

3. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

- The actors of the PR industry and all its industry organisations are urged to take responsibility in media education and contribute to the reputation of PR and its recognition as credible source for journalists, decision-makers, and people in general.
- To actively organise or contribute to projects, measures improving trust in quality media, and providing training and educational activities that enhance media literacy, should become a part of standard CSR activities of PR industry organisations and consultancies.
- National PR associations should, wherever possible, provide know-how and resources to joint projects with international institutions, like the Council of Europe, and with national and international media and journalist organisations, like The Trust Project, so media literacy, credible source identification, and trust towards quality media is improved.



CHALLENGE 3: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND DIGITAL MEDIA ETHICS

1. PR'S RELATIONSHIP WITH ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

The PR industry benefits from intelligent communications technology and has welcomed advanced and powerful tools to help automate repetitive and labour-intensive communication tasks, better understand human behaviour, and influence various audiences more efficiently.

As a result, the PR and communication industry is already using various AI-powered platforms, tools, and applications to provide impact and value to its clients across multiple business areas.

PR specialists are accustomed to using communications technology in media monitoring and outreach, social media management, monitoring and analysis, tracking and analysing online conversations and sentiment, analysing website traffic, creating data-driven campaigns, delivering highly personalised content, and predicting and managing crisis.

As AI-powered tools improve and new ones are introduced to the markets, PR and communications specialists can master issues in more depth than previously, operate accurately and faster, influence more effectively, predict behaviour, prevent and mitigate crisis, and trigger attitude and mood changes in audiences. As a result, technology brings a competitive edge to PR consultancies embracing intelligent and ethical use of artificial intelligence.

Access to inexpensive, up-to-date, and relevant information enables situational intelligence in real-time economy and gives PR professionals the ability to focus on strategy, scenario planning, and creativity.

2. CHALLENGES

- Professional PR consultancies are a force for good when they follow the industry's ethical codes of conduct. In addition, the global technology industry provides PR professionals with practical tools designed to collect and use socio-economic and behavioural data to inform and influence people.
- The use of AI in communications, networking, lobbying and insight tools are multiplying. Gaining deep insight into markets, businesses, groups of people, and individuals is becoming extremely easy. For example, AI provides PR professionals tools to understand not only what has happened on a deeper level, but, interestingly, what will happen and how to influence people's feelings and predict individual behaviour.
- Social media applications and related services provide compelling platforms for influencing and lucrative honey pots for unethical or illegal intelligence gathering and information use. As AI-powered social media platforms get more user-generated content and data of individual behaviour, the algorithms, insight tools, and mechanisms to use or exploit this information will raise ethical dilemmas for professional PR.
- PR professionals are raising questions about several issues related to AI that challenge human decency, human rights, democracy and the rule of law: biases, polarisation, misinformation, disinformation, deep fakes, voice fakes, unrecognised GDPR violations, and invasion of privacy.

3. PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Understanding new communications technology and what kinds of ethical challenges AI, algorithms and data gravitation bring to PR practitioners is crucial. However, the PR industry should not just wait for what happens in AI development in communications technology, its standards, and regulatory framework. Instead, the PR industry should proactively contribute and influence on all levels:

- educate and inform global PR professionals of AI challenges and opportunities.
- participate in high-level and multistakeholder initiatives and working groups (e.g. CAHAI).
- gather insight from other disciplines, bring PR industry's understanding and facilitate finding common ground.
- generate joint projects in disseminating and communicating ideas and results.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BIGGEST COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES

FREEDOM OF SPEECH SUPPRESSION

FREEDOM OF MEDIA SUPPRESSION

MEDIA ILLITERACY, PARTICULARLY ONLINE – INCLUDING MEDIA PROFESSIONALS

LEGISLATION KEEPING PACE WITH NEW TECHNOLOGY, PARTICULARLY AI

THE POWER OF PLATFORM SUPERSEDING THE POWER OF LEGISLATORS

TO MEET THE CHALLENGES:

COMMUNICATIONS AND MEDIA EXPERTS AT THE HEART OF POLICYMAKING, ALONGSIDE THE TECHNOLOGY EXPERTS.

1

INDEPENDENT EDUCATION APPROPRIATE FOR DIFFERING LEVELS OF MEDIA INTERACTION AND KNOWLEDGE.

2

PROPERLY ORGANISED DIALOGUE BETWEEN VARIOUS COMMUNICATIONS MEDIA INDUSTRY STAKEHOLDERS – JOURNALISM, BROADCAST, TECH, ADVERTISING, MARKETING, PR – TO FIND JOINT SOLUTIONS.

3

SOLUTIONS:

1

DEVELOP TOOLS AND SYSTEMS THAT IDENTIFY ACCURACY, RELIABILITY, CREDIBILITY.

2

LIKewise, IDENTIFY AND PUNISH FREQUENT OR DAMAGING UNRELIABILITY OR ACCURACY.

3

IDENTIFY THE GREAT RANGE OF VARYING TYPES OF DAMAGING AND UNRELIABLE MEDIA.

4

IDENTIFY WHERE COMMUNICATIONS HAS BEEN CENSORED IS NOT “FREE” IN A CLEAR AND COMPARATIVE WAY.

5

VIDEOS AND EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES TO SPOT AND UNDERSTAND THESE DIFFERING SCENARIOS.

6

TRACKERS TO CONTINUOUSLY MONITOR NEW THREATS AND RAISE AWARENESS OF THESE WITHIN THE MEDIA COMMUNITY AND THEN BEYOND.

WHAT YOU MUST DO NOW

01

ENGAGE WITH THE ISSUES AND UNDERSTAND THE SIGNIFICANT ROLE OF PR.



ENGAGE WITH NATIONAL PR ASSOCIATIONS WORKING LOCALLY.

02

03

OPEN DIALOGUES THAT SPAN PR, TECH, ADVERTISING, AND JOURNALISM.



BRING FORTH IDEAS, PROJECTS, AND BE PART OF THE SOLUTION.

04

WE LOOK FORWARD TO SHARING THE PROGRESS IN VERSION TWO.

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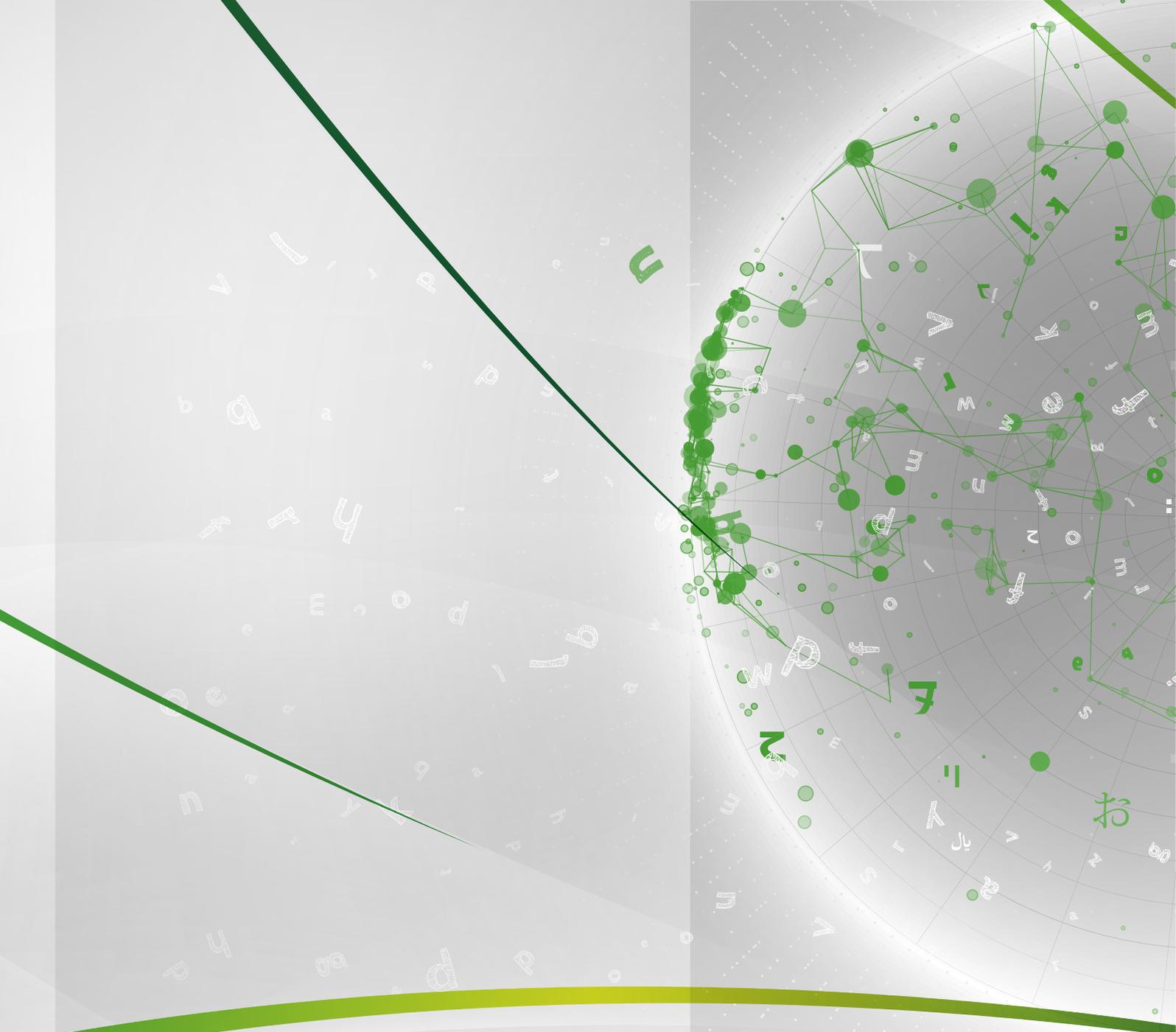
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