



Digital Advocacy Needs Guardrails Before It Loses Legitimacy

Digital advocacy has become one of the most powerful forces shaping public life. It influences regulation, mobilizes citizens, frames policy debates, and can alter reputations almost overnight. Yet, as it becomes more effective, is it also becoming harder to distinguish legitimate advocacy from engineered persuasion?

This question surfaced during a recent PRCAI Dialogues discussion in New Delhi titled *“Setting Guardrails for Digital Advocacy: Ethics and Accountability in the Age of AI, Platforms and Algorithms.”* The conversation brought together voices from law, policy, corporate communications, and international organisations, including **Apar Gupta** of the Internet Freedom Foundation, **Shweta Rajpal Kohli** of the Startup Policy Forum, **Carson Dalton** of GSK, and **Sudeshna Mukherjee** of UN Women. The discussion was moderated by **Prasanto K. Roy** of FTI Consulting.

As **Rishi Seth**, National Chair for Public Affairs and Advocacy at PRCAI, noted during the discussion, *“Digital tools are now central to how public advocacy is practised and public opinion is shaped. The real question is not whether we engage in advocacy, but how we pursue it responsibly, transparently, and with sound professional judgment.”*

That distinction will define the credibility of our profession in the years ahead. For decades, advocacy followed relatively predictable rules. Campaigns had identifiable architects, influence moved through institutional channels, and public opinion shifted gradually. Today, digital platforms have changed that equation: influence can scale instantly, and narratives can be coordinated across thousands of accounts. AI bots can generate convincing content at industrial speed, and amplification can occur without any visible centre of control.

In this environment, the real challenge goes beyond ethics; it is whether influence remains transparent. Advocacy is not inherently problematic, as all democracies depend on it. Public health campaigns rely on it to counter misinformation. Civil society organisations use it to mobilize citizens around rights and social justice. Industry bodies use it to inform regulatory frameworks that affect investment and innovation. The act of persuasion itself is not the issue.

As the panellists voiced, the problem emerges when persuasion becomes invisible engineering. Today, it is possible to simulate consensus. A narrative can appear organic while being orchestrated. Influencers can amplify positions without disclosing financial or organisational interests. AI systems can generate thousands of seemingly authentic voices. The public may encounter a wave of opinion without knowing who shaped it or why.

When that happens, trust begins to erode. As a panellist noted, the serious question facing communications leaders is how to advocate responsibly in a system where scale and speed have outpaced the norms that once governed influence.

A broad consensus emerged among the speakers on the key principles, or guardrails, that should govern digital advocacy. First, transparency must become the baseline. If a campaign, article, or opinion is supported by a client, an organisation, or a coalition of interests, that relationship should be visible. The central point was that advocacy loses legitimacy not because it represents interests but because those interests are concealed.

Second, authenticity must replace synthetic amplification. AI can assist with research, analysis, and insight generation. But when it begins manufacturing participation, credibility collapses. People can accept persuasion. They rarely forgive deception.

Third, internal accountability matters more than external regulation. Governments and platforms will inevitably intervene when digital influence spirals out of control, but regulation tends to arrive late and often bluntly. The real guardrails must be built inside organisation by leaders willing to ask uncomfortable questions early. Is a tactic merely effective, or does it risk undermining long-term trust? Will this campaign stand up to scrutiny if its mechanics become public?

These questions are not theoretical. We have already seen examples in which digital campaigns that operated within legal boundaries triggered regulatory backlash simply because they appeared manipulative. When advocacy works too well without transparency, it invites suspicion.

This is why the future of influence will not be determined by who can shout the loudest online; it will be determined by who can sustain credibility in a noisy system. As another panellist remarked, digital advocacy has democratized voice. Citizens, activists, entrepreneurs, and institutions can now participate in public debate in ways that were impossible even a decade ago. That is an extraordinary development, but with that power comes responsibility.

If the communications profession fails to define its own ethical guardrails, those guardrails will eventually be imposed from outside. And when that happens, the space for legitimate advocacy may shrink for everyone.