Inquire: Audience Interaction

Overview

Ethics may seem rather abstract, but in mass communication, they are very important. In order to understand the ethical obligations of mass communication, we will start by explaining how mass communication identifies a target audience, and how they reach that target audience. Once we know who we talk to and how we talk to them, we can cover the ethical obligations that exist for that conversation. But, it’s also important to look at the ethical obligations you have towards those outside of your target audience.

Big Question: How should senders interact with their audience when using mass communication?

Watch: Mass Communication

Mass communication is the large-scale sending of a message, often through media or technology, to a large number of receivers. Think of one mass communicator. Can you think of one? It sounds strange asking it that way, but what if I said, “think of any actor, YouTube star, musician, or any other famous person”? You could think of dozens! All of these people are mass communicators. It may not be intentional, but they are! They communicate to numbers of people through several different channels. Any time Beyoncé tweets, thousands and thousands of people see it. She has just taken part in mass communication.

Any time a person can communicate with thousands of people in mere seconds, they have ethical obligations they need to uphold. Imagine if a mass communicator, let’s say the President of the United States, decides to play an April Fool’s Day joke. The president decides to take a picture of the Texas State flag in the trash. Then, he posts the picture on Twitter with the caption, “They finally seceded!” As you might imagine, this would cause a major uproar. Texans would be shocked, maybe even scared. People from the rest of the United States would be confused and not know what to think. While the intent was to get a laugh, this tweet could very well cause a huge misunderstanding and conflict in the country. Because a mass communicator (the president) didn’t think about the ethical responsibilities he holds (be mindful of the consequences of your message), misinformation is spread and the masses are confused.

While this sounds like a crazy example, it might not be that far fetched from a situation that could happen in reality. There are often times that a company has to cover up a situation where someone from their company did or said something that shouldn’t have been done or said. Can you think of a time that a joke went wrong on a huge scale? What about a time on live television that someone misspoke and caused confusion? Have you ever been a mass communicator, intentionally or otherwise?
Read: How to Use Mass Communication in an Age of Social Media

Overview

Mass communication is quickly becoming one of the preferred methods of communication for many people. With the rise of social media, everyone is quickly adapting to an interconnected world the likes of which we have never seen before. Social media is a kind of mass communication that allows people to create profiles and share information between profiles as a means to network on the internet. As we increase the amount of mass communication we engage with daily, it is important to understand how we identify our audience, how we reach that audience, and what ethical obligations we have both to those in our audience and those on the outside.

How to identify the target audience of mass communication

With the rise of social media, companies and people alike are beginning to establish a brand. A brand is traditionally seen as a specific item produced by a specific company with a specific name, like Coca-Cola or Pepsi. When it comes to mass communication and social media, a brand takes on a different look. A brand on social media is the specific kind of content and persona that a profile uses to reach their target audience. For instance, the brand that Wendy’s has established for itself on Twitter is full of sass, memes, and jokes.

The first step to identify your target audience is to understand the brand you have established and want to broadcast to your audience. If your brand provides helpful tips for first-time mothers, then your audience probably does not include single men age 18-24. Once you have identified the content your brand communicates and the specific messages you will share online, it becomes much easier to identify your target audience.

The second step is to look at your specific message. Helpful tips for first-time mothers is a start, but if your message is specifically how to help moms get more sleep, your target audience for that message does not include moms that are already getting in enough sleep. Messages can have different target audiences based on the information you are trying to convey.

How does a mass communicator reach their target audience?

Once you have identified the audience you want to reach with your mass communication, how do you actually do that? First, you should identify the most effective platform for your message. Is it something that needs to be recorded as a video? Can it fit into a tweet? Knowing what platform to use is essential to effective mass communication.

Once you’ve decided on a channel (platform), you need to then identify the most effective communication method for that platform to reach your receivers. If you write a long-form blog post will your audience read it? Do they respond better to watching a video? Or should you just try to shorten the blog post into a shorter written text to read? As you develop your brand and your audience this step becomes easier as you can look at what messages have been better received than others. It is vital to adapt your message to the specific channel that gets it to your audience so that you are effectively using your mass communication tools.
Finally, you must adapt your message to fit the channel your audience responds to best. You’ve written a tweet, but you know most of your audience doesn’t follow you on Twitter. They do, however, look at everything you post to Snapchat. So rather than tweeting your message, post it on the network that people actually watch! Adapting your message into a form that will actually reach your audience is crucial to ensuring you are effectively communicating with those that you are targeting.

What ethical obligations does a mass communicator have to their audience?

Once you have identified and reached your audience, it is important to understand the ethical obligations you have to those that listen to you. You should: be truthful, be open, and be conscientious.

Being truthful with your audience is very important. Don’t mislead them or tell them things that are wrong. As a person with a following, you have an obligation to ensure that you are only sharing information that is truthful. If you don’t, it can be harmful to those that listen to you, and you should avoid harming your audience at all cost.

In that same vein, being open is critical. Everyone will inevitably make a mistake. Being open about those mistakes and taking steps to correct them is a great step to maintaining and growing your brand. Doubling down will only serve to hurt your image and potentially your audience.

Finally, be conscientious. A conscientious person wants to do what is right. With regard to your brand, it means taking actions that will help your audience without causing harm to others. Doing the right thing for your listening audience is one of the most important things you can do. It shows you respect them and want to ensure they are better off for having listened to you.

What ethical obligations does a mass communicator have toward individuals outside of their audience?

Now that we’ve covered what obligations you have to your audience, let’s talk about obligations to those outside of your audience. You should: be polite, think of the impact your message has, and be inclusive. When crafting messages, you should not be hostile to those outside of your audience. If you ever do interact with those outside of your audience, you should be polite. Don’t attack or antagonize them, and certainly don’t have your audience attack those outside of your audience.

You should you never outright attack people outside of your audience, but you should also be aware of the impact your message can have on those individuals. Words have power, and thinking about how your message might affect those that hear it (including those that are outside of your target audience) is important. Choose language that is not going to be offensive or hurtful to those individuals. Awareness of the impact of your words is called being mindful. Mindfulness is an important skill to develop as it will allow you to easily communicate with many different audiences.

Finally, be inclusive. You don’t want to push anyone out of your audience or make it so that people that want to join in on your audience are unable to. Even if you don’t think someone needs the things you’re saying, they might. It is important to be open to growing your audience even into unexpected demographics.
Reflect Poll: Audience or Outsiders?

Should a sender focus on upholding their ethical obligations to their target audience over those outside of their target audience, or those outside of their target audience over their target audience?
- Audience over outsiders
- Both equally
- Outsiders over audience

Expand: Ethics in Television

Overview

Ethical considerations exist in social media, but they also need to be considered in the realm of television. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) determines what these ethical obligations are and investigates whether or not television shows are meeting those burdens. This section will talk about the FCC -- what they do and whether or not they're doing a good job at it.

The Role of the FCC

The FCC is in charge of regulating television, radio, satellite, and cable for all fifty states. Their job is to enforce the laws that control media content. One of their stated objectives is to ensure that new technology is able to grow and be used well while also ensuring that diversity is not harmed.

Diversity is large amounts of differing ideas, content, and producers from different backgrounds being able to create content without discrimination. One of the largest ethical considerations for producers to consider is how they are representing diversity in the materials they create. The FCC attempts to make rules to ensure that diversity is able to flourish alongside the content that the American people want to see.

Think of your favorite movie or television show. Now write down what about that show makes it diverse. Is the cast racially diverse? What about gender? Now, look into the production team of that show or movie. Is that diverse? Representing many different ideas and backgrounds is important to ensure the best possible content that is reflective of real life. Making sure that television content is diverse and that opportunities for people of all backgrounds to flourish in the creation of television content is one of the leading ethical obligations of content producers today.

The FCC doesn't just protect diversity, however. Head over to the FCC website: https://www.fcc.gov/about-fcc/what-we-do and take a look at what they say their job is. How do you feel they are doing? Are they doing a good job? A poor job? How could they improve?

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

This article gives five tips to remain ethical in the world of mass communication.
- Link to resource:
  https://www.thebalancecareers.com/why-mass-media-ethics-are-still-important-2315164
This article gives an in-depth look at how to reach your target audience.


This article explains how to grow your audience once you have reached your target.

- Link to resource: https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/white-papers/10-tips-understanding-audiences-targeting-new-ones/

**Lesson Glossary**

**social media**: a kind of mass communication that allows for people to create profiles and share information between profiles as a means to network on the internet

**brand**: social media, the specific kind of content and persona that a profile uses to reach their target audience

**conscientious**: it means wanting to take actions that will help your audience without causing harm to others

**mindful**: being aware of the impacts of your words

**diversity**: large amounts of differing ideas, content, and producers from different backgrounds being able to create content without discrimination

**Check Your Knowledge**

1. You should never change the channel you use to reach your audience, even if they don’t like it.
   - a. True
   - b. False

2. Understanding your personal brand is the first step in identifying your target audience.
   - a. True
   - b. False

3. Mass communication does not have an obligation to be truthful.
   - a. True
   - b. False

**Answer Key:**

**Citations**

**Lesson Content:**

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