

# Introduction to Mass Communication: Writing Assignment #2

## Become an advocate

In Chapter 14 “Media Ethics: Truthfulness, Fairness, and Standards of Decency,” Hanson writes about the employee at a media organization who takes the reader or viewer’s side to determine whether the media organization is making solid decisions in coverage. This person is known as the **ombudsman**, or simply the reader advocate.

In the coming weeks, we’ll be discussing ethical issues faced in the field of mass communication. In many cases, the decision about whether an action by a media organization or individual is right or wrong has already been made. You may or may not agree with the decision made.

*Is it right to run photos of DUI recipients in a print publication?  
Is it ever OK to publish the address of a newsworthy individual?  
How far should a media organization go to get a story? Is entrapment too much?  
Can you ever use images of previous historical events to tell a current story?*

We’ll be discussing these questions and others in the coming weeks. Members of the mass communication industry make ethical calls every day to determine what content is or isn’t published or aired on television.

## Assignment

Chose a real-life ethical dilemma involving a media organization. It can be one of the ones we discussed in class. It doesn’t have to be.

**Examples:** It can be a media outlet running a visual of a body on prime time news, or a radio station airing a caller cursing because there is no delay. Or it can be a social media mistake by a big company that’s later apologized for and triaged (*#mcdonaldsstories* or *#mynypd*). **THESE ARE SUGGESTIONS, DO NOT RESPOND TO EVERY ONE INDIVIDUALLY.**

Then step into the role of ombudsman. Consider and write about the decisions likely made by the media outlet or company during the discussion to run or publish the content in question. Also analyze the after effects. What happened after publication? Was there an uproar? Was there public outrage? Did the masses responded appropriately?

Use the **Bok Model for Ethical Decision Making** to analyze what ethical decisions were made during the publication process or after the fact. You don’t know how decisions were made, you’re allowed to make assumptions. If an apology was issued, was it enough to cover the damage caused? Or was the rage unfounded?

Finally address whether or not you would make a similar decision, or if you would have made a different call. Remember hindsight is 20/20, try to picture yourself in the moment when you write about your personal direction.

**Minimum expectations:** Two full pages, double spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font, standard MLA style. Points will be deducted for not meeting minimum expectations. I will not accept single-spaced papers.

**DUE NOVEMBER 15 BY 9 A.M. TO TURNITIN.COM (SEE SYLLABUS FOR CLASS INFO)**

## Suggested outline

### INTRO

Introduce the real-world ethical dilemma, explain positive and negative results of the decisions made. Use this paragraph to set the tone or your paper.

### BE THE OMBUDSMAN

Critique the campaign or decision as an outsider. If you were in charge of damage control, what would you say? If you were in charge of the team putting out the information, what would you tell them ahead of time? How would you have changed the content to better serve the public?

### APPLY THE ETHICS

Use the **Bok Model for Ethical Decision Making** to briefly analyze the scenario. Put yourself in the place of the decision makers when working through Bok's three steps: consult your conscience, seek alternatives and hold an imaginary dialogue with everyone involved.

### CLOSING

Finally write about what you would have done. Do you think the decisions made by the mass communication company were good? Would you have approached the situation differently? What would you have done? If you would have made the same choice, why?

## Topics to explore

**#McDStories:** In 2012 McDonald's was hoping to start a social media conversation. The company asked Twitter users to share their stories about eating at McDonald's restaurants. Instead of feel-good stories, users responded negatively. Twitter users made jokes about diabetes, about how the food never seems to go bad or how horrible kitchen conditions were at restaurants.

**#myNYPD:** Following a similar concept to the previous example, the New York Police Department's public relations department decided to ask people to share their stories. Instead of positive stories, people responded with pictures of alleged police brutality.

**"The Family Issue(s)" Ebony cover:** Ebony Magazine published a story about Bill Cosby and his fictional television family the Huxtables for its Nov. 2015 issue. The cover shows a photo of the iconic family with piece of broken glass overlaid on Cosby's face. Ebony readers have responded two very different ways: Some thanking the magazine for bringing sexual assault to the forefront and inviting conversation, others calling it libel, saying Cosby has not been convicted. The discussion has been so vast that *#NotBuyingEbony* became a trending hashtag.

**"NYMed" and death on television:** Mark Chanko died at a New York hospital in 2011 after being hit by a sanitation truck. More than a year later his widow was watching television in the early hours of the morning and saw him die again, on television. His death was recorded as part of Dr. Mehmet Oz's "NYMed" show. Chanko's wife, Anita, hadn't given permission for his image to be used. So his face was blurred. But the final moments of his life still aired on television.

**NBC doctor breaks quarantine:** In 2014, NBC News Chief Medical Editor Dr. Nancy Snyderman broke a voluntarily Ebola quarantine after visiting Liberia for a story. She was supposed to stay at home for a specified period. She was seen outside a restaurant in New Jersey. NBC and Snyderman apologized to members of the public.