
CHAPTER 6

MASS COMMUNICATIONS AND ETHICS - TELEVISION

This chapter will introduce the topic of ethics in mass communications, particularly television. In today's world there is little doubt that television is the most widely accessible and powerful educational and informational force. Television ethics, therefore, is of particular interest to many English teachers and their students. For more and more people, television is the way in which they get news and information about the world. Because it is one form of media used to transmit information and entertainment, it is particularly prone to ethics concerns.



BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Advantages and Disadvantages of Television

Television communication offers a variety of advantages and disadvantages to the programmer, advertiser, and viewer. For programmers and advertisers, the advantages of television include mass coverage throughout the world, re-play of programming and advertising, viewing flexibility (time and place), and prestige. ("I saw it on television" gives any statement interest and oftentimes validity).

The disadvantages of television are that the message is costly, and the message is temporary. Furthermore, television cannot be selective so that advertising and programs are sent to all audiences and cannot target specified groups.

Television offers viewers up-to-date information and entertainment; a choice of stations; and a connection with the world.

Three Types of Television Service

In most parts of the world, viewers can choose among three types of television service: commercial, cable, and public.

Commercial networks, like CNN and NBC, claim to have the ability to meet the information and entertainment needs of their viewing audience. These stations carry programs that are paid for by advertisers who, in exchange for their financial sponsorship, receive time on the air to advertise their products.

Cable stations, like ESPN (sports) and HBO (movies), generally target viewers interested in special topics. In the United States as well as other countries, people can purchase cable service for a variety of programs: history, wildlife, music, and movie stations, and other special interests.

Public television stations, like PBS in the United States, have little or no commercial sponsorship, and receive support from viewers, corporations, or governments. These public stations do not contain commercial advertising.

What are the issues for television ethics? What happens when a television station carries information that offends a viewer or group of viewers? What can parents do to ensure their children are not exposed to offensive or inappropriate television programming? What kind and how much advertising should television carry? When does news reporting on television become sensationalism? When do we censor violence and sex on television? Who decides and how? These are questions that media ethics experts encounter and that will be addressed in this chapter.

How Television Ethics Works

Television networks usually try to exercise professional judgment and to avoid offending viewers. Some television networks have published codes of conduct to guide their efforts (see [Internet Resources](#)). In cases where a television station does offend a viewer or group of viewers, laws are in place to guide both the offended party and the television industry. Laws take over when ethics questions are not resolved between people representing two sides of an issue.

When a program or an advertisement offends a television viewer, several outcomes might occur. The following is a list of some of the ways in which viewers have, in the past, used their right to object to television programming or advertising, and registered their concerns about the ethics of television.

1. A viewer might write a letter of complaint.
2. A viewer might bring a legal suit against the television network or a specific department or individual employed by the network.
3. A viewer contacts a consumer group and registers a concern. The group, then, may present the concern of several viewers on the same topic in more public ways:
 - Letters to a local newspaper complaining about the programming or advertising;
 - Informal complaints (usually verbal in a meeting with representatives of the television network);
 - A public demonstration;
 - Formal complaints through a judicial body such as a court.

When the viewer or group of viewers and the television network in question do not resolve an offense, laws are in place to help resolve the dispute. Whatever means a viewer chooses to present a complaint, members of the television industry do not take it lightly. Because many television stations have received viewer complaints, professional television journalism groups have been established to guide ethical television programming and advertising. Sometimes, members of these groups are called upon to assist in legal cases. (For lists of organizations, see the [Internet Resources](#))

The following activities will have students examine some cases that illustrate this process. They will evaluate their own television ethics and become better acquainted with the importance and value of ethics for all involved with television – viewers, television networks and advertisers.



CLASSROOM APPLICATIONS

PRELIMINARY LESSON PLANNING

Materials:

- Make copies of [Your Call! A Survey on TV Ethics](#) for each pair of students.

WARM UP ACTIVITY-- YOUR CALL! A SURVEY ON TV ETHICS

(15-20 minutes)

Objectives

- To provide opportunities for students to explore real-world topics in television ethics
- To introduce one of the web sites for students of television ethics
- To generate interest in learning about television ethics

Procedures

1. Place students in pairs. Urge students to work with a partner with similar English language needs. However, alternative forms of pairing are possible.

Distribute one copy of [Your Call! A Survey on TV Ethics](#). All are cases of a media personality trying to be humorous, but in some cases, breaching the code of ethics of the network.

Note: Canadian Broadcast Standards Council, Code of Ethics web site: <http://www.cbsc.ca/english/codes/cabethics.php> has further details on true cases.

2. Ask students to complete the survey with the terms "Abusive", "Discriminatory", "Neither" or "Both." In order to complete the survey, students must be certain to understand what these two terms mean. (See #4 below for definitions.)

3. In order to be determined offensive and worthy of discussion, a television network must have presented material that was either discriminatory, abusive, or both. Here are brief definitions of these terms for the purposes of this exercise:

Discriminatory: identifying someone in a negative way based on race, religion, sex, or sexual orientation

Abusive: rude, discourteous, sarcastic, slanderous

3. Upon completing the survey, students should discuss these cases, and give their opinions about them. Ask students "Which case did you find the most obvious to judge? The most difficult?" Alternatively, ask students, "If asked to do so, what procedures would you use to determine the outcome of these cases?"

For more information, see [Lesson Extensions](#)



ACTIVITY #1-- DOING IT OURSELVES: PREPARING A SURVEY ON TV ETHICS

(Part 1: 25-35 minutes; Part 2: 45-60 minutes)

Objectives (Part 1)

- To expand vocabulary in television ethics
- To review a code of ethics in television media

Procedures (Part 1)

1. Read an online code of ethics for any television or media network. A good example can be found at this web address: <http://www.cbsc.ca/english/codes/cabethics.php>
Others appear in the [Internet Resources](#) section of this chapter. Identify the salient parts of the code and write them down. Then, make a list of relevant words or expressions found in the code with their definitions. A sample item for your list from the web address above and a list of relevant words and expressions from the same web site can be found in [Appendix B-1](#)
2. Now, complete [Appendix B-2](#). Check students' work for correct spelling and definitions.

Objectives (Part 2)

- To consider the issues of television ethics with reference to a local television station and its viewer audience

- To design and carry out a survey, and present the results

Procedures (Part 2)

1. Brainstorm questions with students for the survey. "What would you ask someone in order to get information about television ethics?" Discuss with students why some questions are more appropriate and useful than others in a survey. Encourage students to use some of the words and expressions they generated in completion of Part 1. Example questions that students might ask in their survey are below:

Do you watch TV? If not, why not?

What kinds of programs do you watch?

Do you ever watch advertisements on TV? If not, why not?

What kinds of advertisements do you like?

What kinds of advertisements do you find offensive?

Write the questions on the board.

The survey should include about 10 questions and have a variety of questions relevant to the context. Depending on time and student abilities, the survey might be carried out at the language program or school, in the neighborhood around the program or school, or even among students in other parts of the program or school.

2. Set parameters for the survey: How many informants? How long do students have to complete the survey? In what form should the results be submitted?
3. Have students write the survey. Each student should contribute one question. In a large class, pairs or small groups of students might submit the questions for the survey. Other groups of students may order and correct the items in the survey to avoid repetition of questions and inappropriate questions. Once designed, the survey should be distributed in draft form to students for final changes. To the extent that it is possible, students should be in charge of this step.
 1. Make sure that the survey is carefully proofread. Have student volunteers prepare the final draft and give it to the teacher for proofreading. Once corrected, copies of the survey are distributed to students, with each student receiving at least two copies of the survey - one for each of two respondents. (Those students who can manage more respondents will receive the corresponding number of copies of the survey).
 2. To prepare students to carry out these surveys orally, students should be guided through role plays in collecting the data. Discussion on how to approach and address survey respondents should be addressed here. **Note:** If the survey is to be handed to respondents in written form, instructions for students will be necessary. This will assure more reliable results.

3. Students may need to know how to identify suitable candidates for the survey. (Provide students with suggestions on how to choose prospective respondents.)
4. Now, students are ready to go out and collect the information for the survey.

Note: The survey can be conducted in the native language -- if student and informant both are native speakers of the same language; otherwise, it will be a rich language learning opportunity to conduct the survey in English.

5. In the following class, students report their results. Students will need guidelines for completing this step. *Suggested Guidelines for Reporting Survey Data* appear below.

Suggested Guidelines for Reporting Survey Data:

Students prepare a clean copy of the survey with data for each item on the survey and a summary of responses for the entire list of questions. Some students will want to interview and collect the data, while others may like to collate and analyze the data. In this way, all students can participate. The goal is to carry out the survey as effectively as possible, to put together the survey data, and to summarize the findings in a summary format.

Some guidelines for students in analyzing the results of the survey: (Count each response only once.)

1. Do not discard the survey papers, as you may need them later.
2. Record comments made by respondents that may not have been presented on the survey forms.
3. Make calculations, in line with statistical data collection.
4. Interpret results on the basis of statistical data and interview data.
5. Evaluate respondent comments and mathematical calculations to answer some questions about the respondents' views on TV ethics. Sample questions may be - What does the respondent believe about TV ethics? What issues are most important to the sample about TV ethics?



ACTIVITY #2 -- PRESENTING RESULTS OF A SURVEY ON TV ETHICS

(approximately 30 minutes)

Objectives

- To have a real experience with data analysis and presentation
- To learn about their community's attitudes on television ethics
- To use language in meaningful contexts

Procedures

1. Make sure all students have a complete data set and all information about the survey data collection including results.
2. Ask students to prepare oral presentations of a designated length (2-5 minutes is sufficient for most students). Note: Teachers may want some students to make these presentations in a group.
3. In an effort to maintain a sense of authenticity, have individuals or groups make their presentations on different aspects of the survey. For example, ask each group to present the results on one question in the survey.
4. Give students the scoring criteria for the presentation.
Example:
10 points: Clarity of presentation of data
10 points: Use of terms studied
10 points: Quality of interpretation of the data
30 points (possible) Student Score: _____
5. Have students make their presentations in class. Identify what the audience should listen for in the presentations. Remember to compliment students for their performances in this new activity. Students are likely to feel a strong sense of achievement following this lesson.



COOL DOWN ACTIVITY-- WHAT CAN A PRIVATE CITIZEN DO?

(approximately 15 minutes)

Objectives

- To conclude the lesson
- To encourage those students with particular interest or expertise in media

Procedures

1. Lead a discussion on media ethics and what the students have learned. Questions may include - What can a private citizen do to improve television programming? What ethical issues can your group address? Which ones must be handled by others - government? professional associations or individuals? corporate leadership? universities? What does the survey show us about the way some people (our respondents) view television ethics?
2. For those students who are interested in pursuing this topic, ask them to do one of the suggested extensions to the lesson, listed below, for extra credit.



LESSON EXTENSIONS

- Ask students to examine one of the sites listed below in the Internet Resources section for examples of television ethics cases and what has occurred to change the way television programming and/or advertising is managed.
- Have students interview a professional journalist and find out what he/she knows or has experienced in an ethical dilemma.
- Watch a movie on television. Ask students to identify dialog, incidents or issues that might create ethical dilemmas for them or for others.
- Look at a series of television advertisements. What can we learn about the ethics of advertising? What kinds of images do the various advertisements project about women, children, men, young people and the elderly? Are there breaches of ethical conduct in any of these advertisements?
- Write scripts for television advertisements that attempt to follow the code of ethics presented in the Corporation for Public Broadcasting at

<http://www.cpb.org/ombudsmen/ethics.html>

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INTERNET RESOURCES

Classroom Activities and Lessons

<http://www.cbsc.ca/english/codes/cabethics.php>

Canadian Broadcast Standards Council

This web site offers a professional model for other networks with their CAB Code of Ethics, printed and described in detail on this web site. Links to the role of the Council, application of broadcasting act and regulations, broadcaster responsibility on the air, and many other topics of interest are linked and available starting here.

<http://www.rtdna.org/>

Radio and Television News Director's Association

This web site has codes of ethics and standards across the half-century, as well as a history of the association.

http://www.rtdna.org/pages/media_items/code-of-ethics-and-professional-conduct48.php

Radio and Television News Directors Association (RTNDA)

This web site lists the code of ethics adopted by the Board of Directors of the RTNDA.

http://www.cjr.org/campaign_desk/wikileaks_alleges_collusion.php?page=1

Columbia University Journalism Review

The Columbia University Journalism Review publishes this web-based analysis daily. Please take a look at the piece they did recently on WikiLeaks. WikiLeaks, for those who may not know, is the name of the case described below. What do you think about WikiLeaks? Make an ethically sound judgment using your knowledge in this course!

<http://journalism.indiana.edu/resources/ethics/>

How far is too far? A discussion of media ethics

When does a newspaper go too far in reporting the news? At what point does news cease to be news and become sensationalism? Search current articles that discuss these points.

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APPENDIX A

Your Call! A Survey on TV Ethics

Below is a list of cases on television ethics. You decide which cases are **Abusive** (mark with "A" in the blank space), **Discriminatory** (mark with "D" in the blank space), **Both** (mark with "B" in the blank space), or **Neither** (mark with "N" in the blank space).

Note: Your teacher will give you the "answers" after a brief discussion on media ethics.

1. ___ Telling ethnic jokes on the radio.
2. ___ Telling jokes at an annual humor festival.
3. ___ A show in which people call in with stories of foolish mistakes.
4. ___ In talking about a specific ethnic group, the host addresses legal aid problems in one country.
5. ___ On a show, the host states that women do not think and cannot argue properly.
6. ___ Rewording a popular song to parody a member of government.
7. ___ A host discusses the reasons for the government to adopt a policy of bilingualism.
8. ___ The host of a radio program tells listeners where the police have set up radar to catch traffic violators.
9. ___ An oral advisory indicates that a film is thought-provoking and controversial.

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APPENDIX B-1

A Partial List of Salient Parts of the Code of Conduct: Television (Sample)

Clause 1

Clause 2 - Human Rights

Commentary for Clause 2 - Examples in these categories: Not all Discriminatory Comments are Abusive (radio and TV); other grounds for discrimination; Examples of Comments Found to be Abusively Discriminatory; Examples of Comments Not Found to be Abusively Discriminatory; a case of discriminatory humor

Clause 3

10 Relevant Words and Expressions (Samples from Clause 2)

| | |
|-----------------------|------------------------------|
| Discriminatory | Offensive humor |
| Abusive | National origin |
| Free speech | Derogatory |
| Ethnic origin | Degrading |
| Handicap | Complaint/complainant |

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APPENDIX B-2

Salient Parts of a Media Code of Conduct with 10 Relevant Words and Expressions

Student Name(s) _____

Salient Parts of A Media Code of Conduct

10 Relevant Words and Expressions

| | |
|-------|-------|
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ |

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