



# Who are you talking to? The audience of an op-ed

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The communications used for any narrative change project must have an audience. You need an audience who is open to change and willing to drive a narrative out to other people. Your base, including activists and members, may be part of your audience. Op-eds typically try to find an audience beyond your base.

Your narrative change audience includes people you want to move to action. This includes people who may agree with you but aren't aware of the opportunity for change. Audience also includes people who share goals and values but don't have the language and tools to act or speak about those goals and values with other people.



View and download the [Audience Worksheet](#), a tool to help you find and reach your audience.

How do you identify them specifically:

1. Clarify the people who have the ability to take action and change behavior based on the argument you want to make.
2. Get to know them and meet them where they are.
3. Learn how they most effectively communicate.
4. Get their feedback.

## Audience First (the why)

“A great op-ed needs to make an argument to an audience,” we wrote in [The Argument: How an op-ed can shift the narrative](#). Despite their ordering in that sentence, the audience comes first, not the argument. A narrative is held and shared by people, not arguments. It is people that take action and change behaviors. Think first about who those people are, how they find and use information, who they talk to, what moves them. Clarifying these will help you develop stronger arguments faster.

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights (EBC) is an Oakland-based organization focused on organizing power in communities of Black, Brown and low-income people. The EBC runs criminal justice reform campaigns, among others, in the broad San Francisco Bay Area.

In 2021, EBC was running police reform campaigns in Alameda County. Their executive director at the time, Zach Norris, had a personal story involving his family being mistakenly pulled over by police. The personal story made for a potentially compelling argument about the misuse of license plate readers and, more broadly, policing tactics that led to bad outcomes for Black and other people of color.



attention to the Chauvin trial. The better strategy that was happening around the time the op-ed would publish. That turned out to be too general an audience. It didn't help clarify the op-ed's argument. A broad audience can lead you to write for too many people.

Our op-ed development process included refining the audience to create a more interesting and timely op-ed. The audience progression went like this:

- **People paying attention to the Chauvin trial.** This was just about everyone. And almost everyone had a policing story to tell. The Zach Norris story was compelling but needed a unique argument that helped people see policing in a new way.
- **People paying attention to policing in the Bay area.** This narrows the audience a bit. But could we think about the audience in a way that invited people to see policing in a different way?
- **People in Oakland and other Bay area cities who were following the debate over automated license plate readers.** Everyone is exposed to license plate readers. They affect people who may not think about policing and race. This is a unique audience.
- **People who care about privacy, abolition and policing. And policymakers at the intersections of these issues.** This final audience includes people who can make changes driven by new policing narratives. It also invites privacy and abolition folks to see their shared interests (through the lens of automated license plate readers).

## Audience Identification in the Wild (the how)

Let's look at how campaigns and organizations can define, identify and narrow in on their audience. These are some basic but not always obvious steps. You can always do more but stepping back and reviewing this process during a narrative project will produce more engaging and actionable communications.



characters, interests and activities. Bring some post-it notes (or set up a [Jamboard](#) or [Miro](#) space if you're online). Talk about who makes up your base, who you want to reach, who influences decision makers, who isn't typically at the table (and why). Get specific and talk through:

- **Demographics and geography** including location, age, race, gender and more. These may or may not be strong defining characteristics of an audience but are worth examining.
- **Values.** Are they conservative, liberal, somewhere else on the political values spectrum? How do they view education, family, community, work and religion?
- **Culture and pop culture.** What do your audiences read, watch, listen to? What kind of art and culture do they follow?
- **Where is the audience?** Are they online, offline, on Facebook, reliant on text, WhatsApp, TikTok or other media channels?
- **What groups do they join?** Name advocacy, community, school, recreational and political organizations.

Name the audiences and identify their intersections.

For example, the audience of the Ella Baker Center op-ed included people who care about privacy, abolition and the policymakers who have power to make decisions about police policy. Within this audience an African American or Latino male activist who works with EBC experiences policing and views privacy differently from a white woman. They may care equally but their lived experience will differentiate them.

Acknowledging intersections will be useful when you start to talk about the value of an op-ed and where to place it. Speaking to those who cross the most identity intersections in your audience will ensure that those who cross the least aren't left out. There can still be universality despite a certain level of specificity. Understanding intersections is useful for audience targeting on Twitter, Facebook and other social media platforms.

**How does an audience communicate?** You need to know how an audience accesses and uses information. Learn what they use to share information. Do they join Facebook groups or live on Telegram? Do they use Twitter and share



audience comes from the people in it. Talk to people. Ask questions. Run examples by them. MobLab trains campaigns to use the [Campaign Accelerator](#), a broad framework that incorporates prototyping, testing and feedback. This is one example of prioritizing audience identification and experimenting with an audience to discover the media and messages that move them to action. The Campaign Accelerator is just one framework. What's most important is asking questions, listening, testing and learning.

## Additional Resources

More guidance and tools to help you identify audiences.

- Narrative Initiative's [Audience Worksheet](#).
- See the *Who Are You Messaging For* section in Spitfire's [Mindful Messaging](#) guide.
- [Finding your audience: The basics of video targeting](#) by Resource Media. This material focuses on audience for video projects but is useful for anyone thinking about audience.
- [Four Research Methods for Audience Analysis](#) from the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism.
- [Identifying A Target Audience: A Quick Guide](#) looks at audience targeting through a commercial marketing lens.

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