Media Literacy: Analyzing Political Commercials

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The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) has called for the development of a media literacy framework that goes beyond content analysis into investigating media forms. The M.I.T.S. framework, which stands for main ideas, images, text, and sounds, is inspired by the conceptual work of Marshall McLuhan (1964) and other media ecologists, who recognize screen media tends to generate different sensory responses from audiences when compared to print. The framework encourages students to carefully analyze the various aspects of screen media by isolating each dimension and examining it separately. The goal of the analysis is to foster students’ awareness of how screen technology may evoke unique responses compared to print by playing upon different sensory perceptions. Ultimately, this can facilitate students taking a more critical perspective toward screen media and the various persuasive devices they regularly encounter. Recent political commercials are used to introduce the framework. Extensions and other practical concerns for implementation are also discussed.

Keywords: media literacy, citizenship, social studies, technology, politics, elections

In “Media Literacy: A Position Statement of the National Council for the Social Studies,” NCSS (2009) defined media literacy as a pedagogical approach promoting the use of diverse types of media and information communication technology (from crayons to websites) to question the roles of media and society and the multiple meanings of all types of messages. Analysis of media content is combined with inquiry into the medium. (p. 187)

This position statement affirms the importance of media education in social studies. NCSS (2009) argues, with the increasing proliferation of media in the lives of students, media literacy must become a crucial facet of democratic citizenship education, as the job of social studies educators is to “prepare [students] to be able to critically participate as active citizens with the abilities to intelligently and compassionately shape democracy in the new millennium” (p. 187). This can be achieved, according to NCSS, by teaching students to critically analyze media messages, understand the workings of different media forms, and by having students create their own media products.

Independent scholarship supports the connection between media literacy and democratic citizenship education. Media, according to Laura Stein & Anita Prewett (2009), is the “primary sphere of public communication in modern societies,” and contributes to the shaping of attitudes and beliefs about social issues, politics, and history (p. 134). Most information about current elections and politics comes from mass media, thus “in a representative democracy, people must be educated in all forms of contemporary mediated expression and well beyond the print media” (Kubey, 2004, p. 69). Along these lines, Wayne Journell (2009) states students “must learn to decipher ways politicians manipulate media” (p. 325) as part of being active, informed citizens. Media literacy for citizenship education must “teach kids not only how to use media but how the media uses them. Kids need to know how particular messages get crafted and why, what devices
are used to hold their attention, and what ideas are left out” (Considine, 2009, p. 66). From these perspectives, being an active and informed citizen in the 21st century requires one to intelligently navigate a multitude of information sources, to critically examine media messages and understand issues from multiple perspectives while recognizing the positionality of media-generated texts in both written and visual modes of communication.

There is strong support among scholars for including media literacy within citizenship education, and some useful questioning frameworks have been created for practicing teachers (see Considine, 2009; Sperry & Sperry, 2007; Youngbauer, 2013). The general focus of these frameworks, however, is content analysis, leaving comparatively little emphasis on examining media forms. While analyzing content is vital, the call by NCSS to examine medium has largely gone unanswered. A central argument for media literacy inclusion is that visually oriented media, such as television or the Internet, require new skills in order to be used intelligently (NCSS, 2009). A questioning framework treating screen media as a unique form and explores its particular conventions and biases is warranted.

Screen technology provides a unique sensory experience compared to print. As explained in McLuhan and Quentin Fiore (1967) “in television there occurs an extension of the sense of active, exploratory touch which involves all of the senses simultaneously…in all electric phenomena the visual is only one component in a complex interplay” (p. 125). By comparison, the sensory experience of print is limited to the visual domain, which separates the knower from the known. This experience produces the concept of objectivity or the premise ideas can be separated from people and understood entirely in the abstract. By contrast, the multi-sensory experience of the screen “demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being” (McLuhan & Fiore, p. 125). The single-sense experience of print fosters psychological distance and encourages reflection, whereas television’s combination of motion and sound create a “phenomenology of closeness” for the viewer (Hart, 1994, p. 64). Consequently, people tend to offer more emotional responses to screen information than they would similar information in print form.

As television has become “our culture’s principle mode of knowing about itself” (Postman, 1985/2005, p. 92), it has become an invisible part of the American cultural background. These phenomena have resulted in a particular significance for how politics is understood by citizens. Television, according to Roderick Hart (1994) “changes how we treat political information (by emphasizing personality) and thus how we make political decisions” (p. 67). Newspaper readers, when compared to television viewers, are more likely to be concerned with the personalities of national political candidates, rather than their policy positions (Hart, 1994; Meyrowitz, 1997). For students to become active and informed citizens, they must not only consider the messages of screen media, they must also consciously reflect upon how screen media plays upon sensory perceptions in ways that often escape conscious recognition. Reflective exercises such as the one ahead bring these perceptions to conscious attention. This allows students to become more critical and discerning citizens by recognizing how politicians, corporations, and other media entities use screen conventions to elicit particular emotional reactions from viewers. The following strategy can help bring television dynamics from the invisible background into the visible foreground for students, allowing them to see how screens tend to position viewers with respect to messages and information. As Neil Postman (1985/2005) asserts, “no medium is excessively dangerous if its users understand what its dangers are” (p. 161). The significance of the following activity extends beyond television into
newer mobile digital screen technologies, as these devices and other features of Web 2.0 increasingly “[present] information in a multimedia format of sight, sound, color, and motion” (Barnes, 2005), and continue the biases the telegraphic discourse featured on television (Strate, 2014).

### Overview of Framework Dimensions

This article introduces the Main Ideas, Images, Text, and Sounds (M.I.T.S.) framework (see Table 1). Designed to be a comprehensive framework for screen media analysis, M.I.T.S.’ purpose is to isolate the various facets of screen media that coalesce to form narratives. Because political advertisements are a popular choice for analysis by social studies teachers, I have focused upon two political commercials in order to explicate the strategy. While the purpose of a political ad is straightforward, the images, sounds, and written text that comprise the content often are complex and carefully orchestrated to produce targeted results. Due to both its brevity and overwhelming sensory experience, “a commercial’s prime intention is to impress the viewer with the product and leave him/her a vivid visualization of it” (Hezfallah, 1987, p. 105), rather than provide complex statements or propositional arguments. The general intent of political commercials is to use screen conventions to evoke emotional reactions that will convince viewers to sympathize with their candidate or position on an issue.

The first example is a commercial for Terry McAuliffe’s successful bid for the Virginia state Governorship in 2013. The other is a commercial for the 2014 re-election campaign for John Cornyn, U.S. Senator from Texas. Each ad effectively combines images, text, and sounds in unique ways, and both are available on YouTube™ as of this writing. Both ads illustrate how creators carefully craft screen conventions to evoke specific effects that relate to the particular social context surrounding each election.

### Table 1

**M.I.T.S. Framework for Screen Media Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>Guiding Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main Ideas</td>
<td>Purpose</td>
<td>Who created this ad and for what purpose?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Audience</td>
<td>How are specific audiences targeted?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narrative Structure</td>
<td>How does the commercial tell a story?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appeal</td>
<td>How does the ad make emotional appeals?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Demonstration</td>
<td>How is the product shown in action?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Association</td>
<td>How is the product associated with specific attributes?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Testimonial</td>
<td>How do individuals express what product or service does for them?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Images</td>
<td>Camera angles</td>
<td>How do camera angles affect the message?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Editing techniques</td>
<td>How is fast-editing or slow-motion used?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close-ups</td>
<td>How are close-ups utilized?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focusing</td>
<td>Why are certain images focused upon?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image sequence</td>
<td>What story do the images tell?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Camera techniques</td>
<td>How do panning and zooming contribute?</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Text**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Why are certain terms or ideas repeated?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description</td>
<td>How do written claims offer rational descriptions or make emotional appeals?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sounds**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spoken language</th>
<th>How does language affect images and text?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>How does music contribute to the message?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound effects</td>
<td>How and why are sound effects used?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The intended purpose of M.I.T.S. is to help teachers move beyond mere content analysis into having students examine how screen mechanics are utilized to craft messages that play upon viewer perceptions. In order to achieve this purpose, it is important to first gain a basic understanding of the content within the advertisement. A good place to start is by having students identify the creators of the message and the target audience, along with the narrative being portrayed. Commercial narratives often contain a three-act structure identifying the problem, offering a solution, and showing the benefits of using the solution in respective acts. As contemporary screen ads are only 15-30 seconds long, this formula is frequently abbreviated. The problem may simply be assumed or implied, and the solution and its benefits emphasized. While narrative structures of commercials can be complex, political advertisements tend to offer straightforward narratives, making them useful for introducing this concept to students.

It can also be useful to identify some of the most obvious techniques in the ad before delving deeper into the particulars. In political commercials, demonstrations are common, which show the product (often the candidate) in action (Zinkham, Johnson, & Zinkham, 1992, pp. 61-62). Associations are also commonly employed, in which the product is associated with desirable groups (Butler, 2012, p. 177). In the case of political advertisements, candidates will often be shown in environments or scenarios offering favorable impressions to targeted voting demographics.

With respect to the particular dimensions of analysis, images are generally the most easily identifiable on the screen. In political commercials, the image sequence will often carry the narrative structure, with support from written text and spoken language. The intricacies of the camerawork become important here, as the angles of the camera and editing techniques contribute to creating particular impressions for the viewer. The power of the screen is “in its ability to intensify, abridge, and reorganize the world, focusing attention of an audience on significant details, moving the spectator through an arranged and selected sequence of visual cues” (Hezfallah, 1987, p. 29). Fast editing can be used to create a sense of speed, or merely to leave an impression upon the viewer by not allowing time to contemplate a rapidly changing sequence of images. Camera panning or zooming can be used to emphasize certain images (Hezfallah) and focusing upon a particular image at the end of a panning or zooming sequence can enhance this effect (Butler, 2012). Considering why certain images are emphasized will help students develop a deeper understanding of how screens work to persuade viewers, while also helping them gaining further insight into contemporary politics.
Written text is generally used in screen advertisements to highlight the main points, often in conjunction with sounds, which may include spoken language, music, and sound effects. Repetition of certain terms is commonly used to reinforce key campaign messages (Butler, 2012, p. 183). Students should examine the ads for rational descriptions as well as emotional appeals within the written text and spoken language. As a multi-sensory medium (McLuhan, 1964), screen products tend to seamlessly integrate rational and emotional elements in ways that can be difficult to separate analytically, so discussions with students about these elements would be beneficial. The goal should not be for students to derive definitive conclusions about what is rational or emotional in the ad. Students, instead, should come to recognize screens invite the integration of rational and emotional content in ways often quite distinct from purely written material. In this way, students can begin to understand how screens work to persuade viewers in unique ways compared to print. Music, another dimension of sound, is also important in crafting the emotional dimensions of political ads, setting a particular tone and offering hints to viewers as to how the ad creators would like them to feel about the information being presented. Screen media is largely image-driven; thus, screen imagery offers connotative messages that depend upon the common cultural understandings of viewers. Teachers can leverage these common understandings and take a Socratic approach (posing questions to students and having them work through the idea(s) in pairs or small groups) to questioning. Teachers may need to scaffold students’ understandings along the way, and I will also offer suggestions and alternative activities ahead that may be useful when guiding students through these exercises.

Teachers will want to isolate each dimension of the ad and analyze it separately with students using guiding questions from Table 1. As suggested earlier, teachers should show the entire ad once and discuss main ideas. Subsequent viewing should focus on each dimension of analysis in turn, with small group or whole class discussion following each viewing. As such, the example analyses will proceed in four stages using the M.I.T.S. framework as a guide for each dimension.

Example 1: Terry McAuliffe for Virginia Governor 2013
“Youngest of Four”

Dimension 1: Main Ideas
Upon first viewing the ad, the immediate goal should be for students to ascertain the main ideas. It may be helpful for teachers to discuss each of the main idea questions with students before viewing. If time permits, teachers may wish to find prime examples of key questions, all of which are common features of readily available commercials on YouTube™. After adequate preparation, teachers may wish to show the video one time for each question, asking students to focus in on the particulars of one question before each viewing. It may also help to have students discuss their initial impressions in pairs before eliciting whole-class feedback.

In the McAuliffe ad, the creators and purpose are apparent: it was created by the McAuliffe for Governor Campaign in order to sway Virginia voters. The video has an identifiable narrative structure that tells a concise story of McAuliffe’s life, depicting him as a self-made businessman and a dedicated family man. As for making a rational or emotional appeal, the immediate sensory experience is primarily emotional. No rational claims are made beyond identifying what type of person McAuliffe is, or wants to portray.
The tactic of demonstration is also evident. The product shown in action is the candidate himself, who is shown in old home videos with his family, along with staged film of him interacting at various businesses. Here, the strategy of association as a family man and businessman is also apparent. Teachers might ask students to consider why these associations would be favorable for the candidate. Political ads are crafted to appeal to common cultural sensibilities, as such, the connotative associations will likely be readily understood by students. If this is not the case, teachers can revisit the matter with students in the upcoming sections, as students will be able to build stronger understandings as each category is analyzed.

Dimension 2: Images

While the first stage of analysis engages general content, the second showing should allow students to focus on a particular dimension of screen media. A good place to start is with images. It would be beneficial to silence the audio for this viewing. Instruct students to pay attention to the camera angles, camera movements (panning and zooming) and editing techniques (fast editing, slow motion, close-ups), as well as the image sequence. Teachers may need to explain these camera techniques to students and show basic examples as necessary.

The McAuliffe commercial uses a fast moving image sequence to create a three-act structure that begins with McAuliffe’s life as a youth in the first act, as an adult family man in the second, and as a businessman in the third. Fast editing allows the creators to intersperse real photographs with staged shots of the candidate in the kitchen with his family and interacting with people at various business venues. If the editing had been slower, the artificial construction of some images would be more apparent and likely have less emotional appeal. Teachers may find it beneficial to stop the video every few seconds so students can recognize how the images and camera work coalesce to help construct the narrative. Teachers should note that most of the images would escape conscious recognition if the video is not stopped repeatedly, demonstrating the aforementioned point that these images are designed to leave an impression on the viewer, rather than make any definitive assertions.

Dimension 3: Text

Text is best examined with the sound muted to minimize distraction. Written text is often an important facet of political ads, but plays only a minor role here. Viewers see the candidate’s name at the beginning (“Terry McAuliffe”), and his name, purpose (“For Virginia Governor”) and slogan (“Putting Jobs First”) at the end. The slogan connects to the commercial’s visual imagery regarding business interactions. One other piece of written text is in the form of an old sign from McAuliffe’s first business, “McAuliffe’s Driveway Maintenance.” The aim is to establish the candidate as someone who has had an entrepreneurial spirit all of his life. This association with business implies that McAuliffe will be an asset in bringing jobs to Virginia. Using paired discussion, teachers might ask students to consider why the McAuliffe campaign would find it useful to tell viewers about his childhood business, and why multiple images show McAuliffe at various business sites. The purpose here is to encourage students to identify how the written text and images work together to create the impression of McAuliffe as a job creator.

Dimension 4: Sounds

Sounds often align closely with written text in commercials, and in this case, sounds play a significant role. Teachers may find it beneficial to focus on the spoken language and music in separate viewings. Spoken words are offered throughout the commercial by the candidate himself, who tells his story of being the youngest of four children, starting a business as a teenager, living in Virginia for 20 years, and raising a family with his wife. McAuliffe offers the
last two points as a justification for understanding the importance of creating jobs in Virginia. Teachers might ask students to think about other questions voters may want answered before accepting this assertion.

Music also figures prominently and is carefully constructed to align with visual imagery and spoken language. A soft, melodic guitar accompanies the images of McAuliffe growing up, starting a business, and raising a family. As the commercial transitions to the third act, the music shifts to a more energetic, strumming guitar, which adds rhythm to the earlier melody. This music is timed to accompany more active visual images, as the candidate is shown in active motion in numerous business environments. The ad implies the past has prepared McAuliffe for the role of Governor, and he will bring jobs to Virginia if elected. If this understanding is not readily apparent to students, teachers may want to silence the audio and read the spoken word text in time as the commercial plays, after which the ad can be played again with the audio on. This should bring the music’s contribution into clearer focus for students, and the teacher can support this by having students discuss how the music contributes to the emotional appeal of the commercial.

**Context of Commercials**

It is important for students to consider the particular context of any political campaign. This ad does not identify McAuliffe’s political affiliation, the Democratic Party. Viewers may infer from the omission that the ad is targeted at swing voters. Virginia is a state in which swing voters regularly deciding statewide elections. The content of the commercial and the omission of political party indicate a desire to offer a non-offensive impression that will be appealing to a wide swath of voters. The context of the above ad contrasts sharply with the second example, an early commercial for John Cornyn’s U.S. Senate re-election campaign for Texas in 2014. Here, the conservative nature of the state and, perhaps more importantly, the surprise victory of Tea Party candidate Ted Cruz in the 2012 U.S. Senate race in Texas combined with another Tea Party challenger in the spring primary, has led the Cornyn campaign to produce a commercial that bolsters his conservative credentials.

**Example 2: John Cornyn for U.S. Senate 2014**

**“Texas Conservative”**

**Dimension 1: Main Ideas**

The second commercial repeatedly makes one claim: John Cornyn is a conservative, hence, the word conservative appears several times throughout the ad. This commercial is aimed at the Republican Party’s base of conservative voters ahead of the Republican primary. The narrative structure centers on evaluations of Cornyn by conservative political groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA). The appeal is arguably rational rather than emotional, as the evaluations presumably reflect a demonstrable trend in Cornyn’s voting record. Though the various facets, like most visual ads, are ultimately intended to evoke an emotional response from viewers.

**Dimension 2: Images**

In the Cornyn ad, a sequence of images is foregrounded alongside a series of written text statements on the screen. The first image is an American flag, shown up-close and waving in slow-motion on a black background. The camera pans slowly around the flag and comes to a
stop as written text appears on the screen. After a few seconds, the text dissolves and the camera pans around the flag until it stops as the next text statement materializes. The slow-motion technique is intended to inspire a sense of awe, and stopping the camera’s motion as the text appears helps to focus viewer attention on the written text. Teachers may need to show this initial sequence multiple times, and may also need to point out certain features to students, such as the camera motion stopping as the text appears on the screen. Paired discussion may be useful here so students can deliberate about why the ad creators might have chosen these particular camera techniques.

The second image is shown up close so only a portion of the object is viewable, as the camera pans around it. After a few seconds, the camera zooms out revealing a Sheriff’s Silver Star, one that might be worn by a Texas Ranger. This image is foregrounded alongside more text citing Cornyn’s favorable ratings by conservative groups. With the head-on shot of the star, the background shifts from black to dark wood paneling. In subsequent images, including an up close, upright rifle bullet followed by a handgun lying on a table next to another upright bullet, it becomes apparent that the setting is the interior of a cabin. The final image has the camera pan away from the exterior of the cabin and onto Cornyn himself. He is shown waist-up in a casual blue button-down shirt. His hands are on his hips, and he is staring off at an angle past the camera, as trees are shown in the background next to the cabin. The look on Cornyn’s face might best be described as stern or resolute. The image sequence is carefully constructed to imply Cornyn is the occupant of this backwoods cabin, exemplifying an independent and self-reliant man ready to tame the wild, literally as well as metaphorically. Stopping the video to examine each image is recommended so students can evaluate the significance of the image sequence as it contributes to building the narrative. In particular, it may be useful to stop the video at the particular moment Cornyn’s image comes into clear focus. Teachers could ask students to discuss the various visual connotations, including the look on Cornyn’s face, his body posture, and the possible meanings of the background images.

**Dimension 3: Text**

The images in the commercial are closely accompanied by text, which, in clear and succinct description, highlights Cornyn’s reviews from conservative action groups. Viewers learn Cornyn was labeled a “taxpayer hero” by Citizens Against Government Waste. He was further heralded with an “A+” rating by Gun Owners of America and the Americans for Tax Reform and National Right to Life gave him a score of 100%. Repetition is used to reinforce the main point of the ad. The commercial begins by identifying Cornyn as the second most conservative U.S. Senator. This is bookended at the end of the piece by two additional uses of the term conservative; one as the image of Cornyn emerges, the other in the final shot, which includes the words “John Cornyn: U.S. Senator, Texas Conservative” shown against the cabin background. If it has not been discussed previously, teachers may wish to ask students to consider why the ad creators want to emphasize Cornyn’s conservatism.

**Dimension 4: Sounds**

The Cornyn ad is rather unique for a political commercial in that it uses no spoken language. The message, instead, is carried by images and text, with assistance from music and sound effects. The ad uses orchestrated music, like one would hear in a western movie as cowboys cross the prairie. This is meant to inspire awe in the viewer by providing (in conjunction with images and text) a feeling of grandeur about the content, which would likely be viewed as positive achievements to conservative viewers. Sound effects are also utilized. A bell
rings loudly as the initial text touting Cornyn’s conservatism emerges. The ringing bell, like that from a boxing match, is repeated at the end of the ad as the aforementioned final text emerges against the cabin. The bell’s correspondence with the repetitive text is designed to bring further emphasis to the assertion that Cornyn is a conservative, and the association with boxing reinforces the tough and rugged image of the candidate.

As with the McAuliffe commercial, playing the ad through with the sound muted can help illustrate how important the music is for creating the overall impression of the piece. Another useful technique would be to turn off the projector and play the commercial through so only the audio is heard, after which the teacher could elicit reactions from students about what the sounds evoke from their knowledge of movies and popular culture. This will help students make connections to the associative connotations of the music within the ad.

Conclusion

Having students conduct a specific, focused, and detailed analysis takes time and multiple viewings. Teachers may need to show the ads multiple times at each stage for students to tease out a majority of the significant information. The investment of time would be well worth it as students would come away with a better understanding of how various dimensions of screen media come together to communicate messages often felt, but not fully understood in an analytical sense. A useful follow-up would be to assign an additional commercial to analyze as homework, particularly as an election season draws near. Such ads could be investigated within a unit on upcoming elections or could be done as an isolated activity.

It is important for teachers to promote discussion after viewing any ad, and conclusions may need to be explored through teacher questioning, such as “What did we learn about how visual imagery is used in commercials?” or “How did the sound contribute to the overall message of the ads?” It may also help to have students consider how the ad might change if done in a different format such as radio. Comparing a print, radio, and TV commercial from the same campaign would be a powerful extension to this lesson. The M.I.T.S. framework can be used to help students compare how the conventions of each media form are used to influence the audience in unique ways. During discussion, it would be beneficial to have students compare their initial reactions before using the M.I.T.S. framework to their reactions after working through the analysis. Students’ immediate reactions may help teachers reinforce a crucial point about screen media in later discussion; it is intended to influence by leaving a felt impression rather than a critical consideration. Having students recognize this tendency of screen media is a crucial goal of media literacy, particularly in the contemporary image-saturated media environment, in which media engagement by youth now averages 7.5 hours per day (Rideout, Foehr, & Roberts, 2010).

Teachers may choose to have students analyze local or state elections in their own districts, in which case the McAuliffe and Cornyn ads can be used for schema-building with students so that they better understand the questions and techniques. In such cases, it would be useful to review and discuss basic information about the pertinent district or statewide races so students have a solid informational grounding in the particular campaigns. The M.I.T.S. framework is flexible enough to work with most commercials, though if teachers choose their own commercials, it would be useful to preview them and decide which questions from the framework best fit the given ads. Most ads will not use all of the techniques from the main ideas.
portion of the framework; others will not include any written text. Still others may not utilize spoken language, or music.

The M.I.T.S. strategy need not be limited to political ads. A similar examination could be performed on consumer products marketed at teens, or could be used to examine news coverage or TV shows. If teachers are willing to invest the necessary time with M.I.T.S., their students can become more critical and conscientious consumers of screen media.

While there is strong support for including media literacy within democratic citizenship education, it is important to have students deeply examine media messages. Students should be challenged also to consider the unique characteristics of media forms, each of which tends to evoke particular experiences through usage. Due to the increasing prevalence of screen media, citizenship educators should consider engaging students in a critical examination of screens, and the M.I.T.S. framework can help teachers begin this process.

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