In our media-saturated environment, how can we teach students to distinguish true statements from those that are false, misleading, or manipulative? How can we help them develop the skills needed to identify biases and stereotypes, determine credibility of sources, and analyze their own thinking and its effect on their perceptions?

In *Teaching Students to Decode the World*, authors Chris Sperry and Cyndy Scheibe tackle these questions as they introduce readers to constructivist media decoding (CMD)—a specific way to lead students through a question-based analysis of media materials, including print and digital documents, videos and films, social media posts, advertisements, and other formats, with an emphasis on critical thinking and collaboration. Drawing from their decades of experience as teachers, consultants, and media literacy advocates, the authors explain how to

- Develop and facilitate CMD activities in the classroom and in virtual teaching environments;
- Implement CMD across the curriculum, at all grade levels;
- Connect CMD with educational approaches such as project-based learning, social-emotional learning, and antiracist education;
- Incorporate CMD into assessments; and
- Promote CMD as a districtwide initiative.

This comprehensive guide explains the theoretical foundations for CMD and offers dozens of real-life examples of its implementation and its powerful impact on students and teachers. Equipped with CMD skills, students will be better able to navigate a complex media landscape, participate in a democratic society, and become productive citizens of the world.
INTRODUCTION

Our Origin Stories

**Chris’s story:** If it had not been for my dad’s Super 8 movie camera, I would not have become a teacher. My teenage experiences making surfing films at the Jersey Shore brought me to college to make movies and then to teach media production at the Lehman Alternative Community School, a progressive public school in Ithaca, New York, where I taught for more than 40 years. The personal empowerment that came with creating and reading media as a teenager enabled me to see myself as a capable communicator. It also helped me to see the capacity in all my students—and prompted me to craft instructional modalities that were accessible to more students. My students provided the inspiration and the continual feedback that made this work possible. Without their insights and trust, we could not have developed this approach to teaching and learning.

**Cyndy’s story:** I first came to media literacy through the mentorship of Professor John Condry when I was a graduate student at Cornell University. John and I were both influenced by FCC commissioner Nicholas Johnson’s statement that “All television is educational television. The question is: what is it teaching?” (Condry, 1989). We started a research lab and archive to study changes in television content over time, interviewing children to assess their understanding of program content and commercials. When I gave talks to parents and teachers, they always wanted to know what could be done to limit the harmful effects of television, and it was through my later collaboration with Faith Rogow that I came to
understand that instead of protecting children, we needed to empower them with skills in critical thinking and media literacy.

The two of us met through our daughters, Alexis and Ariana, who were in the same kindergarten class, and quickly discovered our mutual interest in the relatively new field of media literacy. In 1996, we founded Project Look Sharp, a largely grant-funded initiative at Ithaca College, where Cyndy is a professor of developmental psychology and where Chris graduated from in 1979 with an independent cross-disciplinary major in media literacy. From the start, Project Look Sharp’s mission was to support educators—first locally, then regionally, and now across the globe—in integrating media literacy and critical thinking into their teaching.

**Project Look Sharp and Our Approach**

Shortly after we founded Project Look Sharp, we decided to focus our work on the topic of this book—constructivist media decoding (CMD)—with a strong emphasis on critical thinking and reflection. We initially viewed our primary role as providing professional development using resources created by experts in media literacy. But our ongoing conversations with teachers and librarians led us to two conclusions. First, the successful integration of media literacy into K–12 classrooms required a curriculum-driven approach, with lessons that taught core content along with media literacy skills. Second, educators needed free and easy access to media literacy lessons and media examples that they could use (or adapt) in their classes.

Over the past two decades, Project Look Sharp has gradually built a repository of more than 500 question-based media literacy lessons and activities (including more than 2,000 media examples provided through the fair use exemption to copyright laws), searchable by keyword, grade level, subject area, and learning standard. All these resources—along with handouts, journal articles, and video demonstrations of constructivist media decoding with elementary, high school, and college students—are
available at no charge for educators through our website, www.projectlooksharp.org.

**About This Book**

This book is our attempt to codify the theory, process, and pedagogical complexities of question-based media analysis in the classroom, providing a road map for educators to develop CMD activities of their own. Although it is written for K–12 teachers, librarians, educational leaders, preservice teachers, and media literacy advocates, we believe it will be useful for anyone interested in teaching students of all ages to “decode the world.”

The opening chapter lays out the imperatives for doing this work. Chapter 2 introduces the key frameworks for understanding media literacy, critical thinking, and constructivist media decoding (CMD). Chapter 3 gets readers started with the basics of developing and leading a CMD activity in the classroom, and Chapter 4 goes into greater detail on the specifics of the methodology and implementation. Chapter 5 delves into issues of bias, teaching challenging topics, and students’ meaning making, and Chapter 6 explores assessment and metacognition as they relate to CMD. Chapter 7 looks at pedagogical connections between CMD and other educational initiatives and approaches, including media production, project-based learning, social-emotional learning, cultural competency, and antiracist education. The final chapter explores how to integrate CMD across a school or district and ends with the voices of teachers and students about the impact of this work on their teaching and learning.

The bulk of this book is written in the first-person plural, with *we* referring to the collective voice of Cyndy and Chris, although at times we will tell stories from our individual experiences. It’s important to note at the outset that, although we cannot separate our voices and perspectives from the biases that are reflected in our identities, we have done our best to stay mindful of our own backgrounds, to avoid letting the assumptions and biases rooted in those backgrounds create blind spots in our guidance for educators, and to create a book that is inclusive of other perspectives.
and appropriately contextualized in the current sociopolitical climate that affects students, schools, and learning. We are both White, middle-class, liberal, cisgender, highly educated parents and grandparents, having grown up in the 1960s and ‘70s, and now living in Ithaca, New York. Chris taught in a public school for more than 40 years. Cyndy has been a college professor for more than 30 years and has a daughter, a son-in-law, and grandchildren who are Peruvian–African American. These identities have shaped our views, our approaches to teaching, and the narrative that is this book.

We want to make special note of our capitalization of the word *White* when referring to race. The word *Black* is often capitalized when referring to Black people (Black culture, Black community, and more). This is typically not true for the word *White*, except in the writings of White supremacists who seek to elevate Whiteness to a proper noun. In this book, we have chosen to capitalize racial references to Whiteness for a very different reason. At the core of systemic racism is the invisibility of Whiteness, the unspoken acceptance that Whiteness is the norm and therefore does not need to be named in our language. By capitalizing *White*, we continually remind ourselves that our history, our educational systems, our perspectives, and our language have biases—especially when it comes to race. We want to credit Kwame Anthony Appiah (2020) for his writing on this subject.

**Historical Context**

The other critical context that has shaped our writing is the historical moment we are living through. As we were writing this book, we were in the midst of a global pandemic that shut down schools and forced online learning across the planet. We were also emerging from four years of a Trump presidency that was accompanied by a surge in political polarization, driven in part by changes in media technology and economics. This situation has fed an epistemological crisis regarding what constitutes “truth” that will far outlive this moment. The summer of 2020 also saw
historic protests against White supremacy and for racial equality that are pushing the United States to confront powerful and divisive questions about its history and future. And the raging fires, hurricanes, floods, and droughts of recent years highlight the global climate crisis that will define our children’s future.

We intend for this book—while practical and applied to the realities of today’s classrooms—to be useful in negotiating these big issues with students. We aim for this work to be not only steeped in the imperatives of our moment but also fundamentally grounded in the universal and perennial themes of good teaching. Most importantly, we hope that the resources, methodologies, tips, and stories we share will help educators in their idealistic work to raise generations prepared to tackle the awesome task of human progress.
During the 2011–12 school year, we delivered a series of trainings for teams of librarians and science teachers to support the integration of media literacy and critical thinking into elementary science. At the third and final meeting of the group in March, we heard the following story from one of the teams. After the initial daylong training in September, the elementary teacher had turned to her librarian colleague and said, “What do these people think I am supposed to do with my 1st graders? My 6-year-olds can’t do the kind of critical thinking they are proposing.” The librarian had responded brilliantly: “Well, let’s see what we might do.” She then asked the teacher about her class, her greatest challenges, and her next unit. The teacher explained that she was struggling with a number of boys who seemed to be interested only in violent superheroes. Her next science unit was on matter: liquid, solid, and gas. The librarian went to work looking for the right media document.

A few days later, the librarian showed the teacher a 30-second clip from a Marvel video, *Spider-Man vs. Hydro-Man*. They decided to use it for pre- and post-assessments for the unit on matter. They showed the clip and asked students what was accurate (or true) and what was inaccurate (or
not true) in what the video showed about liquids. In the pre-assessment, the students had no idea. But at the end of the unit, the class was able to give evidence-based responses that demonstrated their understanding of the properties of liquid. In the discussion, one student explained, “Hydro-Man walks around just made of water. That’s wrong because we learned that liquid takes on the shape of whatever it is in.” Another student chimed in with “the vessel.” And another response was “But after Hydro-Man turns into a puddle, we see the sun heats him up and he begins to evaporate.” Another student said, “That can happen because a liquid can turn into a gas when it gets too hot.”

The teacher was delighted that the 1st graders were able to apply their content learning from the unit to the analysis of popular culture. But then the teacher went on to do the kind of media literacy questioning she had learned in the training by asking, “So, you are telling me that the Spider-Man video shows things that are not true—not accurate science? Why would the makers of the video do that?” One student responded, “They didn’t make the video to teach us real science; they made it to be fun.” After some discussion about the purpose of movies and TV shows, the teacher asked, “So what does this exercise teach us about what we need to do when we watch TV?” After a pause, a student said, “We need to be careful not to believe everything we see on TV because not everything on TV is made to be real.”

The most exciting part of the story is what the teacher shared during the debriefing at our final professional development session. She was shocked by her 1st graders’ ability to think so abstractly. This teacher was an experienced and accomplished educator, yet she—like all of us—was subject to prior assumptions and expectations about her students. Other teachers who participated in that series of media literacy trainings shared the same realization:

• “Children can be stretched even further than I expected. They need to be given the opportunity to think and express themselves using concrete information to support their ideas.”
“[From now on] I will not be afraid to let my students think. Too often I direct their thinking to get to the goal I want them to reach. I will let them explore and think more critically about what I am teaching.”

One of the most important reasons to practice question-based media analysis with students is to bring forward their impressive abilities to teach one another complex understandings from their own developmental place. Another reason for this work is to give all students access to the power of literacy and critical thinking. In the words of a 10th grade student when speaking about the impact of media literacy, “It made me realize just how much power people have to change or control things, for better or worse. I, however, am not passive to this change. I can be a part of it and affect it.”

**Enfranchising All Students**

Educators who have been trained in this type of inquiry-based media analysis—what we call *constructivist media decoding*, or CMD—regularly comment on the high level of student engagement in the process. They describe how media decoding brings forward the views of traditionally quiet or disengaged students. Here are a few quotes from the teachers who participated in the initiative for integrating media literacy into the K–12 science curriculum:

- “The kids stayed on and continued the discussion after the bell rang.”
- “This got students involved who have no intrinsic motivation.”
- “It really helps students use a different part of their brain than they’re used to using at school!”
- “Even my ‘trouble’ students raised their hands and had good comments!”

The last observation struck a personal chord for Chris. He describes himself as having been one of those “trouble” students, in part because he
was a terrible speller. Although he was deeply curious about ideas, he could not—and still can’t—keep track of the letters in words. This simple difference in orientation led Chris to believe that he was “stupid.” And when one feels stupid in school, it is typically a torturous place to spend six hours a day. When a middle-class White boy in the 1960s, with lots of privilege, can become alienated from school because he’s a poor speller, it’s no wonder that millions of students without those advantages can feel deeply challenged in traditional classrooms.

One of the primary imperatives for incorporating media literacy into the classroom is the personal empowerment of students. By diversifying the types of texts we use in school—using engaging popular-culture documents for complex classroom analysis, ensuring that we include texts that reflect a variety of perspectives, and varying the modalities we use for assessment and instruction—we enhance the capacity for a greater diversity of students to feel that school is an empowering place. When we do that, all students learn better.

In 1979, when Chris began teaching at the Lehman Alternative Community School (LACS), a progressive public school in Ithaca, New York, he was confronted by the challenge of choosing texts. His wonderful little school drew a broad range of students—and they knew it. On one side of the room, the children of Cornell University and Ithaca College professors, typically confident (or at least comfortable) with academics, sat together. On the other side of the room sat students who, in many cases, came from families for whom school had rarely been empowering. Both groups had multigenerational experience with success or failure linked to the process of schooling.

And at the heart of that experience was the printed word. Chris could see it in their body language when he handed out a reading. The “academic” students were typically interested and intellectually critical. But his alienated students, many from rural and less educated backgrounds, showed discomfort and even anger. When Chris made texts simpler, the change backfired and increased the polarization in the room, as students took offense at the notion that he had “dumbed things down.” As someone
who learned to read through the pictures in comic books and who became a confident communicator through making films about surfing, Chris could empathize with the discomfort of his disgruntled students. More importantly, he could see their brilliance despite their challenges with “traditional” academics.

**Diversifying Texts**

In this context, Chris turned to the very options that provided the key to his own success in school: diverse media forms. He began bringing in photographs and paintings to teach history, video and film clips to teach geography, songs and stories to communicate cultural and historical perspectives. Although he used these various kinds of texts to teach and reinforce social studies knowledge and concepts, he also asked students to analyze the texts: “Who made this and for what purpose?” “What is their perspective and bias, and where do you see it in the document?”

Although Chris first began using question-based media analysis in his media production classes, he soon incorporated it into his social studies and English classes to teach core content as well as critical-thinking skills. This approach made learning more engaging for all of Chris’s students and leveled the classroom playing field. In fact, many of Chris’s students who were the biggest media consumers were often better at analyzing popular-culture messages than their more “academic” peers. For all of the students, it was more fun to engage in a rigorous task—analyzing engaging media documents—than to passively take in the instruction.

In the 1990s, when Chris and Cyndy began training teachers in this approach, the educators shared other reasons why the repurposing of media texts to teach content and literacy was so important. They spoke about how the process connected to the “real lives” of students and prepared them for life in our hypermediated world (even in the 1990s). They saw how it could effectively integrate the teaching of literacy skills and subject-area knowledge and concepts through inquiry. They appreciated its adaptability for use as lesson prompts, for brief activities, for
core instruction, and as assessments. And they gravitated to this process for teaching controversial and emotional topics that benefited from an evidence-based analytical approach.

**Developing Habits of Questioning**

Today’s students have grown up in a mediated world quite different from that of their teachers and the younger students who will follow them. Two constants for all these cohorts are a growth in new media forms and an increase in youth media consumption. Although we cannot know the kinds of media forms that will be ubiquitous for the next generation of students, we can anticipate the skills, attitudes, and habits that will better equip them to have agency in their mediated lives. Students then (as now) will need to recognize the constructed nature of media messages. They will need to continually reflect on the meanings and effects of the media messages they consume, share, and create. They will need to think critically about the forms of media as well as the content. They will need to habitually ask critical questions about authorship, sourcing, credibility, and bias. And they will need to reflect on their own thinking about these messages—and their own preconceived notions—as they negotiate truth in a hyper-mediated world.

To become internalized, these skills and attitudes need to be continually repeated, at all grade levels and in multiple curricular areas. Media literacy needs to be integrated across the curriculum. The crush of new curricular mandates and content makes this goal seem impossible, but the approach to media literacy advocated in this book is methodological. It advocates the repurposing of textbooks, videos, websites, and all the diverse media we use to teach our curriculum to also teach critical thinking and media literacy.

Teaching our students to think critically about mediated messages must not be limited to the most sophisticated higher-order thinking skills relegated to upper-level high school and college classes. We often hear that this work needs to wait until students have the core background knowledge
and sophistication that will enable them to think critically. That view is like saying that we should aim to teach students to read when they are ready to handle Shakespeare. As was indicated in the earlier Spider-Man vs. Hydro-Man example, even young students are capable of thinking critically about authorship, purpose, credibility, and bias—at their own level. Developing these habits cannot wait. It is at the heart of learning.

**Media, Literacy, and Democracy**

It is important to note that U.S. copyright law also plays a major role in supporting this work in schools. In some countries, teachers are not allowed to repurpose copyrighted media documents (video clips, images, songs, etc.) because of restrictive copyright laws. In the United States, copyright law includes a *fair use* clause, an underappreciated policy that enables critical thinking for the nation’s democracy. Currently the fair use doctrine allows the repurposing of copyrighted material for critique and criticism in an educational context without permission from the copyright owner. Therefore, fair use gives educators the right to repurpose media messages in the classroom. Democracy gives us the responsibility to do this continually.

When the founders of American democracy debated about the culture that was necessary to shift from monarchy to rule by citizens, they discussed literacy, education, and the media. They decided not to establish a government newspaper, arguing that was what the British monarchy had done. Instead, they agreed to subsidize the delivery of newspapers to all interested citizens. The postal subsidy was created in part to enable the political media of the day—newspapers—to reach all U.S. citizens. And these papers were overtly political. Most newspapers for the first 80 years of the nation’s history were linked to, if not directly controlled by, political parties (Starr, 2004). The founders recognized that wide-ranging political debate through the media was a core component of democracy.

The founders also recognized that democracy was dependent on an electorate that was capable of understanding the conflicting and complex issues of the day. In 1817, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “An enlightened
citizenry is indispensable for the proper functioning of a republic. Self-government is not possible unless the citizens are educated sufficiently to enable them to exercise oversight” (Arthur, Davies, & Hahn, 2008, p. 403). Within the origins of the United States, the links among literacy, public education, and democracy were drawn.

At the same time, issues of power and control were explicitly connected to literacy, public education, and democracy. After the slave revolt led by Nat Turner in 1831, it became illegal to teach an African American to read and write in most slave states. Frederick Douglass is often quoted as saying, “Once you learn to read, you will be forever free” (Wright, 2019, p. 1). Although the founders saw literacy as essential to democracy, the systems they created denied both literacy and democracy to specific groups of citizens. Today, media literacy can play an enfranchising role in empowering all students to experience the freeing power of 21st century literacy.

**Causes of an Infodemic**

According to the World Health Organization (2020), in addition to being in the midst of a terrible pandemic, “we are also in the midst of a massive global ‘Infodemic’: an overabundance of information—some accurate and some not—that makes it hard for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance when they need it” (p. 2). We are living in a time when one group’s fake news is another group’s certainty, when facts have become arbitrary, and when our identities determine our truths. This epistemological chasm has great implications for democracy and for media literacy. Media—both the messages and the forms of communication—play an ever more important role in shaping public consciousness. It is worth taking the space to explore the mediated factors that led us to this infodemic (Sperry & Scheibe, 2020).

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, the medium of television was a dominant force in public meaning making, especially about political ideas. Radio, the medium that brought voice into living rooms and gave Americans their first “personal president” (Franklin D. Roosevelt),
was replaced by a medium dominated by mass-produced images and sound bites. Television, with its emphasis on looking good, paved the way for John F. Kennedy. In 1960, the young first-term senator defeated a sitting vice president in a close election that may have turned on the first televised presidential debates. If the election had been a decade earlier, before TV had replaced radio as the primary news medium, the result of the election might have been different. The election of 1960 reminds us of Marshall McLuhan’s famous saying, “The medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1994, p. 7).

The 1980s then brought Ronald Reagan, “the great communicator,” to the White House. Reagan’s principal media advisor, Michael Deaver, said, “People absorb impressions rather than substance, particularly in this day and age”; and Reagan, with his background as a film and TV actor, knew all about impressions (PBS, 1999). When Reagan was introduced to the team that created his famous “Morning in America” ads for the 1980 presidential election campaign, the future president said, “If you’re going to sell soap, you ought to see the bar” (Beschloss, 2016, p. 4). Reagan understood that victory would come through selling the right impressions of him—and America—through the medium of TV.

It is important to note that the tendency of the electorate to vote for the candidate who has the best handle on the dominant media of the day preceded the modern era. The 1840 “campaign as spectacle” used parades, sloganeering, popular song, and the Log Cabin newspaper (along with lots of free booze) to enlist the newly enfranchised White farming men of the American West (e.g., Ohio) to vote for William Henry Harrison. Horace Greeley, Harrison’s campaign manager, successfully spun an impression of a hard-drinking working man despite the fact that Harrison was a 68-year-old Washington, D.C., aristocrat (Shafer, 2016).

Fast-forward to 2016, when Donald Trump used his experience with reality TV to dominate both traditional and social media. Despite significant negative coverage, his ability to break through the clutter and galvanize his base vaulted him to the White House, where he broke many norms of presidential behavior, including through the continuous renunciation...
of facts. Although much of the mainstream media played its traditional role as fact checker, much of the country had changed along with its media. The advent of the internet and social media enabled Trump to delegitimize mainstream news (at least for his base) and to present “alternative facts” that reflected his and their views of reality. The shift from the air-ways to fiber-optic communication, from the *New York Times* to Twitter, and from Walter Cronkite to Tucker Carlson, helped create the presidency of Donald Trump.

**Politics, Filter Bubbles, and Echo Chambers**

Broadcast television in the mid-20th century, with its limited number of news channels, needed a huge viewership to be competitive. The ABC, NBC, and CBS networks vied for the attention of the nation by catering to the political middle. The economies of scale in broadcast news helped marginalize “extreme” perspectives as an ethos of “objective” journalism helped keep alternative views out of the mainstream. That situation began to change in the 1980s and '90s, as talk radio and then cable news segmented viewers (and advertising dollars) into factions. The stoking of political and identity-based rage and resentment found new platforms with the advent of the internet. As with traditional media, drama and conflict held eyeballs; but new algorithms, driven by advertising dollars, nudged web users toward more outrageous views. Social media provided the ideal vehicle for propelling polarized politics. Users could now consume news 24/7 through “filter bubbles” that reflected their passions, delegitimized contrary viewpoints, and continually reinforced their views, creating “echo chambers.” This segmenting of our media ecology has had a profound impact on how we perceive truth and those who disagree with our views.
Pause to Reflect

What are your mediated filter bubbles? How do they affect how you see the world? Are you part of any echo chambers? How does this influence how you see (and relate to) those who think differently than you do?

Many other factors contributed to the election of Donald Trump and the identity-fueled polarization of U.S. politics, but changes in media technology and economics have clearly fed the division of citizens into like-minded echo chambers of belief. In our current infodemic, scientific facts are trumped by cultural and political identities, news can become “fake” if it falls outside one’s ideological orientation, and truly fake news (disinformation) can spread virally inside filter bubbles. Although policy decisions and technology fixes may help to limit the impact of this threat to American democracy, we must also use the tools of the Enlightenment (e.g., reason and science) to develop an educated citizenry.

Schools—and public schools in particular—are charged with educating a literate population that is capable of negotiating the barrage of expertly crafted spin, partisan propaganda, and outright lies that characterize U.S. politics. This effort must involve teaching students to understand the role of media in crafting messages—political and otherwise. It must involve slowing down the relentless flood of mediated messages so that young people can begin to take a critical look at the craft of spinning information. It must involve helping students to understand how each media form has its own unique language of construction and its own biases. It must involve helping students to separate impressions from substance and truth from lies. And it must involve helping young people to reflect on the role that their own biases play in determining what they believe to be true. This infodemic within an era of fake news makes it ever clearer that authentic democracy requires us to habitually ask critical questions about all media messages and continually reflect on our own biases.
Thinking About Thinking

In 2017, Joseph Kahne and Benjamin Bowyer published a study of how young people distinguish truth from misinformation in claims about controversial issues. What they found should cause educators to rethink their approach to teaching facts. The researchers disaggregated students with high levels of political knowledge and interest from students with little or none. Common sense would suggest that students who had a lot of knowledge about the subject at hand would be better able to assess true claims and spot misinformation about them. Instead, the study revealed that students who knew a lot of relevant information on the subjects in question were no better able to distinguish truth from fiction than students who knew very little. If our top students—who are highly motivated to learn and who do well on tests—are no better at epistemological assessments than our least informed and engaged students, then we need to rethink our curriculum.

As you may have already guessed, one reason that knowledge alone does not enable students to effectively evaluate truth claims in political media is confirmation bias—the tendency to seek out, validate, and share information and sources that align with one’s views and to dismiss arguments and sources that present opposing views. (In the study just described, students with deeply held political convictions used their knowledge to justify their reasoning about the truthfulness of news.) More facts, including all the important information we fill students with during class time, are unlikely to sway their motivated reasoning toward verifiable facts. But there are ways to help these students—and their less motivated peers—to become better at identifying truth amid misinformation and disinformation.

Kahne and Bowyer studied a range of media literacy programs to assess if they succeeded in helping students more accurately judge truth claims. They found that successful initiatives shared an emphasis on metacognition. Curricula that gave students practice in recognizing and reflecting on their own confirmation biases helped them become better able to evaluate truth claims in the media. Any curriculum that aims to address the
epistemological crisis that confronts our culture needs to teach students of all ages to practice thinking about their own thinking.

**Rx for an Infodemic**

We propose that media literacy, and in particular the use of constructivist media decoding in the classroom, can be a key to fighting the epistemological virus that is threatening U.S. democracy. By teaching our students, from the earliest grades and throughout their schooling, to ask key questions about all media messages, we can prepare them to navigate this world of hyperpolarized politics that spin reality and twist truth. By helping them to develop the habits of critical thinking, we can provide the orientations needed for authentic participation in democracy. By repurposing all types of media messages for critical analysis, we can teach students to have agency in their thinking and their actions. This work aligns with the greatest ideals of liberal education, but it is also solidly situated in the everyday realities of the K–12 public school classroom.

A 10th grade student summed up this view after doing media decoding activities as part of a social studies class: “It is enormously important to learn about the world from many different viewpoints, approaching life with critical thinking and an open mind. We can only really solve problems when we come at them with an open mind. And we can only solve problems if we aren’t afraid to think.”

This book intends to be practical and to provide accessible strategies for integrating media analysis across the curriculum. We developed this approach through our own experience as teachers and, most importantly, our decades-long work that has included listening to educators who sought to effectively integrate media literacy into their teaching. As a result, it responds to the very real constraints of time: time in the curriculum, time during the day, and time for preparation. It addresses the importance of standards, subjects, and assessment. It attempts to address the importance of equity, social-emotional learning, and cultural competence. It builds on the work of project-based learning, Understanding by Design, authentic
assessment, and other essential practices in contemporary education. And it aims to translate our highest aspirations for learning and social transformation into doable, realistic, and practiced methodologies.

The practical methodology of leading question-based media analysis in the classroom models a pedagogical shift from viewing teaching as the expert delivery of information to seeing teaching as the artful facilitation of the learning process. In the 40 years that the two of us have been teaching, a digital revolution in mediated information has necessitated this profound transformation. Our students no longer need their teachers or librarians to give them access to facts, but they do need us to teach them how to navigate the overwhelming and relentless overabundance of information. Our classrooms provide the platform for nurturing shared meaning making, where students with more complex understandings can provoke growth in the thinking of their peers.

To guide this learning, we must know our students well, both individually and collectively. We can facilitate discussions, probe with questions, provoke deliberation, and assess learning in order to help our students grapple with progressively more complex understandings of the world and themselves. Although the methodology presented here may be discrete in its application (that is, the decoding of media messages), it has deep implications for how we see teaching and learning.

At the heart of this work is the belief in the brilliance and the personal empowerment of each of our students. At the heart of this work is the essential role of media literacy in authentic democracy. At the heart of this work is the role that inquiry, reflection, and action play in being fully human.

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970, 1985) wrote most powerfully about the intersection of literacy and power. For Freire, it was essential for humans to learn to decode the social messages that either reinforce the power structure or challenge it. Literacy is a prerequisite for human liberation—for reaching our full potential in the world. At the heart of that process is asking questions about the constructed nature of power. At no time in human history has the importance of literacy—and specifically media literacy—been more evident.
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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Chris Sperry is cofounder and director of curriculum and staff development of Project Look Sharp at Ithaca College. He taught middle and high school social studies, English, and media studies at the Lehman Alternative Community School in Ithaca, New York, for more than 40 years, where he also served as an instructional coach and a mentor for teachers. He is the author and coauthor of many articles, lessons, and curriculum kits for integrating media literacy and critical thinking into the K–12 curriculum. He has delivered hundreds of media literacy workshops, classes, and keynote addresses for educators throughout the United States and around the world. Chris was the recipient of the National Council for the Social Studies 2008 Award for Global Understanding and the 2005 National PTA and Cable's Leaders in Learning Award for Media Literacy. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Ithaca College with a planned studies major in media literacy and a master’s degree in human development from Harvard University.

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Quick Reference Guide Media Literacy in Every Classroom and The Teacher’s Guide to Media Literacy: Critical Thinking in a Multimedia World, both coauthored with Faith Rogow; and the book chapter “Piaget and Pókemon: What Can the Theories of Developmental Psychology Tell Us About Children and Media?” in 20 Questions About Youth and the Media. She has a master’s degree in communications and a PhD in developmental psychology, both from Cornell University.
Related ASCD Resources: Media Literacy and Critical Thinking

At the time of publication, the following resources were available (ASCD stock numbers appear in parentheses).

Print Products

* A Close Look at Close Reading: Teaching Students to Analyze Complex Texts, Grades K–5* by Diane Lapp, Barbara Moss, Maria Grant, and Kelly Johnson (#114008)  
* Complex Text Decoded: How to Design Lessons and Use Strategies That Target Authentic Texts* by Kathy T. Glass (#115006)  
* Cultivating Curiosity in K–12 Classrooms: How to Promote and Sustain Deep Learning* by Wendy L. Ostroff (#116001)  
* EdTech Essentials: The Top 10 Technology Strategies for All Learning Environments* by Monica Burns (#121021)  
* Engaging Students in Reading All Types of Text (Quick Reference Guide)* by Pam Allyn and Monica Burns (#QRG121059)  
* The i5 Approach: Lesson Planning That Teaches Thinking and Fosters Innovation* by Jane E. Pollock with Susan Hensley (#117030)  
* Making Curriculum Matter: How to Build SEL, Equity, and Other Priorities into Daily Instruction* by Angela Di Michele Lalor (#122007)  
* Media Literacy in Every Classroom (Quick Reference Guide)* by Faith Rogow and Cyndy Scheibe (#QRG117107)  
* Questioning for Classroom Discussion: Purposeful Speaking, Engaged Listening, Deep Thinking* by Jackie Acree Walsh and Beth Dankert Sattes (#115012)  
* Researching in a Digital World: How do I teach my students to conduct quality online research (ASCD Arias)* by Erik Palmer (#SF115051)  
* Rise to the Challenge: Designing Rigorous Learning That Maximizes Student Success* by Jeff C. Marshall (#120007)  
* Teaching for Deeper Learning: Tools to Engage Students in Meaning Making* by Jay McTighe and Harvey F. Silver (#120022)  
* What If Building Students’ Problem-Solving Skills Through Complex Challenges* by Ronald A. Beghetto (#118009)

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