

## TV Commercials as Authentic Tools to Teach Communication, Culture and Critical Thinking<sup>1</sup>

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This article discusses the importance of using authentic materials to teach foreign students to communicate in English in a natural way, to teach them about the target culture, and to help them to engage in critical thinking. Since authentic materials have been defined in various ways, this researcher has chosen for this article two definitions which complement each other: Nunan's (1989, p. 54) refers to materials produced for purposes other than teaching; Harmer's (1983, p.146) refers to materials produced for native speakers. The rationale for using a specific type of authentic material, TV commercials, is discussed and a detailed lesson plan included.

After studying the nature and role of authentic materials in teaching and learning, researchers have provided EFL teachers with a wealth of new information over the last fifteen years (e.g., Chavez, 1998; Davis, 1995; Davis, 1998; Furmanovsky, 1997; Mackenzie, 1997; Martinez, 2002; Melvin and Stout, 1987; Miggiacci, 1999; Ryan, 1998; Smith, 1997; Tatsuki, 1998; Taylor, 1994). The choice between using textbooks or authentic materials to help students to communicate in a natural way appears to be a clear one: Classes using only textbooks appear to be question-and-answer sessions while classes using authentic materials with or without textbooks seem more natural and communicative. Karpova (1999, p. 18) affirms: "Many textbooks create a climate for socially isolated learning . . . Teachers need more materials that help students to become thoughtful participants in a socially rich environment for learning and that feature everyday uses of English." Lawrence (1987, p. 837) states that TV commercials "provide a refreshing alternative to the traditional textbook." Karpova (1999), Lawrence (1987), and other researchers have introduced teachers to a variety of authentic materials from print to audio-visual and justified their use. It is fairly evident that authentic materials help students not only to communicate in a natural way but also to learn more about the target culture. In addition, they encourage students to become critical thinkers.

In the literature, teachers find many definitions of authentic materials. Taylor (1994) quotes several writers' on the definition of authentic texts and materials. Nunan's (1989) and Harmer's (1983) appear to be the most appropriate definitions for this article. Nunan defines authentic materials as those that have been produced for purposes other than language teaching, and Harmer states that "they [written or spoken authentic texts] have been produced for native speakers" (quoted in Taylor, 1994, p. 2). This article points out that due to their authenticity, TV commercials produced by and for native speakers can make EFL classes that focus on communication and culture natural, rewarding and fun. To show how to use TV commercial messages in EFL classes, a detailed lesson plan is included.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a refereed article

To justify the use of TV commercials and/or public announcements to teach EFL students, authentic texts/materials, TV commercial messages/public service announcements, culture, and critical thinking are defined next.

### **Authentic Texts/Materials**

Taylor's article (1994) includes several definitions of authentic materials and texts. Morrow's (1977) says that an authentic material can be defined as "a stretch of real language, produced by a real speaker or writer for a real audience and designed to convey a real message of some sort." Both Wilkins' (1976) and Harmer's (1983) refer to an authentic text (written or spoken) as a text made for native speakers of the language, not for language students. Nunan's (1989) states that an authentic text is "any material which has not specifically been produced for the purposes of language teaching" (quoted in Taylor, 1994, p. 2).

In addition, in "Toward wider use of literature in ESL: Why and how," Gajdusek (1988, p. 228) defines authentic texts, when referring to stories, as those which are original, not adapted. Moreover, Karpova (1999, p. 18) defines authentic materials as "items that normally go into a trash can;" for example, tea boxes. She explains how the text from tea boxes can be used. Finally, Martinez (2002, p. 1) quotes Peacock (1977) on the definition of authentic materials: "Materials that have been produced to fulfil some social purpose in the language community."

As teachers can readily understand, authentic texts/materials are produced for the target community, not for language teaching. But, by using them in class, teachers welcome the target culture into their classrooms, making their classes a more natural environment for language learning.

### **TV Commercial Messages and Public Service Announcements**

The purpose of TV commercials is to sell a product or service by a company or manufacturer. In contrast, the goal of public service announcements is to give advice or information about an issue. Unlike TV commercials, public service announcements are produced by the government or by a non-profit organization. Furmanovsky (1997, p. 2) explains:

They can give an additional insight into the culture of the country in which they were made, since they sometimes reflect that culture's societal goals, as well as its [sic] sense of morality. When using public service announcements, instructors should ask students to focus on who the announcement is aimed at and what behavioral change is being promoted.

An example of a public service announcement that shows the government's concern with what happens in the United States is the announcement about crack, "an illegal drug that some people take for pleasure" (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, CD-ROM, 2003), shown from the late 80s to the early 90s. In the announcement there are two African-American boys, a pre-teen and a teen, apparently brothers. The older boy tries to get money from the younger one to buy crack (the viewer's assumption) by pushing his brother around and

hitting him several times. He finds no money on his brother or in his brother's bedroom. When students watch this announcement, they understand the message the American government is trying to convey to those who are already hooked on drugs or are thinking of experimenting with drugs. The government wants kids to stay away from drugs because drugs can lead a person to acts of violence even towards a loved one. Another important point is that this announcement was shown in the afternoons, a time American kids are usually home from school, watching TV. For the message to get across to a certain audience even the time it is shown is an important consideration. When viewing public announcements, students can also discuss why the time public service announcements are shown, if known, is or is not appropriate. Thus, although the emphasis in this article is on TV commercials, public service announcements can be used in the same manner as TV commercials.

As far as the availability of TV commercials is concerned, if teachers work outside an English-speaking country, there are several ways they can have access to TV commercials.

1. They can check a search engine such as [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) for a free download of American commercials. If commercials from the 1980s such as Heinz ketchup, Colgate, Encyclopedia Britannica, etc. are appropriate for their students, they can go to <http://www.x-entertainment.com/downloads> which has ninety-seven commercials for young and older students. Teachers must have Windows Media Player to see the commercials and a CD burner to download them for classes. Also, they can download advertisements for free from <http://cia.univ-omte.fr/english/tvcoms/index.htm> (see Appendix A for information on copyright laws). To view the advertisements, they will need Quicktime. In addition, they can check <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/help/view.html#p5> (see Appendix B for information on copyright laws).
2. They can access English-speaking channels via cable TV or satellite. In many countries, people have access to both. Some of the channels that they may have access to are CNN, BBCE, BBC Prime, etc. Copyright laws may vary from country to country, so before teachers copy commercials on CDs or videotapes, they should get information on the legality of using recorded TV commercials. It is possible that if teachers make only one copy of the commercial for educational purposes, they do not infringe any copyright laws.
3. They can ask friends in the USA or any English-speaking country to make them some videotapes or CDs of commercials. This is the best way because teachers can get up-to-date commercials; they will cost almost nothing; and students and teachers will learn about what is happening in the country in terms of culture, idiomatic expressions and slang. Again, whoever makes the CDs or videotapes should get information about copyright laws.

## **Culture**

Culture refers to beliefs, values, attitudes, and traditions shared by members of a community. No culture is better than other cultures; they just differ from one another. The purpose of teaching culture to EFL students is neither to make them feel that their culture (the first culture) is less important than the target culture (the second culture), nor to impose the target culture on them, nor to make them suffer from culture shock, nor to make them create a third or new culture with characteristics of both their culture and the target culture. Although Zaid (1999), and C. Alptekin and M. Alptekin (1984) disagree with the emphasis on culture when teaching EFL, learning about the target culture helps students to associate the language to its culture. Just as a child learns its first language along with its culture, what researchers call language acquisition, bringing the target culture into the classroom will somehow make the formal environment appear more natural, thereby, bringing learning closer to acquisition. Bex (1994, p. 1) confirms this by saying "It is now widely recognized that in learning their first language children are also learning about the culture of which that language is a constitutive part" (see also Brunet, 1985; Buttjes, 1991; Hasan, 1984; Martin, 1988; and Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986).

This article focuses on American culture since the TV commercials used as examples were produced by and for Americans. Smith and Rawley (1997) affirm that TV commercials give students information about the target culture, and the products advertised help them to understand what is important to the target culture. American TV commercials "present a portrait of a society that requires headache and stomachache relief; automobiles; and products that work fast, preserve a youthful appearance, make life more convenient, and enable users to be more competitive" (p. 2). Smith and Rawley give several examples of American TV commercials to explain what they mean by their statement about Americans. One of them is a 1994 telephone company commercial in which a man pulls up "to a drive-in bank window to request a few extra hours in his day" (p. 2). What viewers assume is that time is very important to Americans, and they request more time even at inappropriate places.

When selecting TV commercials, teachers should choose appropriate ones for their students. In classes at universities in Turkey, there are students who adhere to the practices and values of Islam, those who say they believe in Islam but who are quite uninformed about the religion, and those who observe only the traditional Muslim holidays. TV commercials containing wine, sexuality, or similar issues may be offensive to some Turkish students. Teachers must take into consideration the values of those who are very religious in order to avoid offending these students. In his article, Zaid poses a question (1999, p. 114): ". . . Since Western teenage native-speakers of English spend a part of their time talking about boy/girlfriends and love/sex, should Muslim students of EFL read, discuss, model or role-play such situations alien to their lifestyle, simply because such situations occur in the native English culture?" If teachers get to know their students before selecting materials, they will be able to choose materials in accordance with students' values, beliefs, customs and preferences. Then the selected American TV commercials will not offend students but rather enhance learning in terms of language, culture and critical- thinking skills.

## Critical Thinking

Critical thinking refers to thinking that requires careful judgements and the ability to interpret what one hears, sees or reads. When people watch TV commercials, they judge and interpret what they hear, see and read, for commercials usually have verbal, visual and written images. They encourage critical thinking which is defined by Smith and Rawley (1997, p. 3) as the use of thinking processes to

(1) analyze arguments and generate insight into particular meanings and interpretations; (2) develop cohesive reasoning patterns and understand assumptions and bias underlying particular claims; (3) compare advantages and disadvantages of alternative approaches; (4) determine what additional information is required; and (5) judge the most effective response and be able to justify it.

The use of TV commercials in language instruction offers opportunities for students to analyze what they see, hear and read, develop ideas, and interpret the images. Students also understand what the message is trying to convey and search in their minds for what they already know and compare it with what they are seeing. During the thinking process, students decide what else they want to know about the product, what to say about the product, and how to justify their opinion about the product.

With so much information on critical thinking mostly from areas other than EFL (e.g., Adsit, 1999; Alexander, 1999; Brightman, n.d.; Cheung et. al, 2002; Duldt, 1997; Gocsik, 1997; Halpern, 1999; Howie, 1993; Parker, 1999; Schuman and Post, n.d.; Wright, 2002; Young, 1996), EFL teachers may wonder how critical thinking can help EFL students outside class. According to Halpern (1999), in the year 2000 many colleges and universities in the USA started offering courses designed to foster critical thinking (p. 70). However, while this may have taken place at US colleges and universities, it has not occurred in most schools in many foreign countries. The reality in some foreign countries is that students do not and even should not share their opinions with their peers and teachers; in contrast, their teachers have the right to share their opinions with and even impose them on their students. Oster (1989, p. 86) adds that some traditional educational systems place emphasis on memorization, so students are unfamiliar with critical ways of questioning and analyzing materials.

Upon finishing their Bachelor's Degree in their home countries, some foreign students begin their Master's Degree at American universities. When they start attending classes, they realize that they must overcome a barrier—the way they have been taught to think in the traditional societies of their home countries. Thus, when asked questions in class, foreign students from these societies have difficulty answering questions the way instructors expect them to because they have no idea about appropriate critical-thinking skills; they were taught rote learning only. Their American counterparts, in contrast, are ahead of them since they have already had the necessary training to become critical thinkers.

As a result, it is time for EFL teachers to consider teaching for both the present and the future. They probably know that some of their students will end up either pursuing at least a Master's Degree or seeking employment in the US.

In either case, they will need critical-thinking skills to succeed. Teachers should train their students to develop critical thinking. The focus of this article is on TV commercial lessons that definitely provide more than simply a lesson on the target language and culture; they train students to develop critical-thinking skills as well.

### **Rationale for Using TV Commercial Messages and/or Public Service Announcements**

Several factors justify the use of TV commercials and/or public service announcements produced in the country in which the target language is spoken to teach communication, culture and critical-thinking skills in a foreign setting:

1. They are authentic and can be up-to-date [whenever possible], according to Lutcavage (1992) (quoted in Picken, 1999, p. 250).
2. They are "short, focused, and thematic in content" (Davis, 1995, p. 1) or as Lynch (1985, p. 119) affirms, "Television advertisements display various characteristics (limited duration, verbal repetition, completeness of story)."
3. They use language that exposes learners to "slang, language registers, reduced speech ('wanna,' 'gonna,' 'gotta'), idiomatic expressions, and suprasegmental features of intonation and stress common in the speech of native speakers" (Smith and Rawley, 1997, p. 2). Or, as Picken, (1999) says, [They use language that] ". . . introduces specific vocabulary, such as words of items of clothing . . ." (p. 249).
4. They give learners a chance to hear different accents and dialects (Smith and Rawley, 1997, p. 2).
5. They provide a visual context, making it easier for learners to understand the language, according to Davis (1997) (quoted in Picken, 1999, p. 250).
6. They help learners to connect to native speakers because as Melvin and Stout (1987, p. 52) affirm, they help them to experience places known to native speakers, and capture sounds, sights as well as nonverbal behavior of native speakers.
7. They help learners to understand the values, beliefs, customs and preferences of native speakers.
8. They motivate learners since learners enjoy them. According to the results of a study by Chavez (1998) on learner's perspectives on authenticity, "learners view authentic materials as essential to language learning and enjoyable" (p. 277).
9. They help learners to communicate in the target language in a natural way.
10. They help learners to engage in critical thinking.

**SAMPLE Lesson Plan**

- Level:** High intermediate and advanced levels; and lower levels (more time should be allocated for each activity or the commercial selected should be simple enough for this level)
- Objective:** To help EFL students to express their ideas in English in a natural way, learn about the target culture and become critical thinkers
- Skills:** Listening, speaking, writing and reading; with particular emphasis on listening and speaking
- Time:** 90-100 minutes (high-intermediate and advanced levels); 135-150 minutes (lower levels)
- Material:** Videotapes or CDs of TV commercials and/or public announcements produced by and for native speakers, and the hardware necessary to work with the videos and/or CDs

**PREVIEWING Activities--Focus on the Topic**

*Step 1 -- Previewing activities about what students will see and hear (10-15 minutes)*

Students make predictions about what they will see and hear. The teacher encourages students to say anything that comes to mind; that is, they persuade students to take risks. As future professionals, students will be faced with problems requiring fast thinking. This type of activity helps students to train their minds. In many countries, students are passive learners: They are taught just to listen to their teachers. They refuse to take risks. ". . . Helgesen (1993) states, 'Listening isn't and can't be passive,' so our job must be to activate their listening along with speaking, grammar, writing, and reading skill areas" (quoted in Davis, 1995, p. 3).

Teachers have two choices in Step 1:

1. They tell students what type of product they will see and the name of the product (Davis, 1995, p. 3), and then ask them to get into small groups to discuss the type of target market at which the product is directed. Davis suggests things, such as the "age group, sex of consumers, socioeconomic class . . . [and] the product slogan . . ." (p. 3). Davis' suggestions encourage students to generate ideas. A member of each group writes down the answers to report on them orally or writes them on the board as soon as all groups finish discussing the type of target market. If a member of each group writes the responses on the board, all students, especially the visually-oriented ones, will have the opportunity to see what their peers have thought and compare the responses given by all the groups.
2. They write on the board the name of the product or topic of the commercial students will see and hear without giving any further clues. For example, one of the commercials used by the author was "Robitussin," a cough syrup sold over the counter in US drugstores. Since students had never heard of it, they did not know what the product name meant; as a result, they asked yes/no questions about the product to guess what kind of product they would be seeing.

Yes/no questions can be handled in two ways: 1) Students can get together in small groups and one member of the group writes down questions students plan to ask the teacher. 2) Students take turns asking questions that come to mind, making sure that no question is asked more than once. Once students guess what kind of product it is and finish discussing the type of target market, teachers can move to Step 2.

If they do not guess what the product is, teachers can either tell them or allow them to see/hear the commercial. The lack of familiarity with the product makes the activity fun, for each group thinks of a product other than the real one. They get very curious and excited while trying to guess what kind of product the commercial is promoting.

**Step 2 -- Making predictions about words/phrases/sentences and images**

Davis (1995, p. 3) suggests that at this time students should make predictions about five words that they think they will hear and five images that they believe they will see in the commercial. Teachers can also ask students to make predictions about phrases and/or sentences that they think they will hear and/or read. One member of each group writes down the predictions to report orally or writes them on the board for discussion and subsequent confirmation.

**VIEWING Activities--Focus on Language**

Viewing or listening to the commercial (20-25 minutes)

**Step 1-- Verifying predictions**

Before students confirm their predictions about the product by watching or listening to the commercial once or twice, teachers "can create some sort of information gap by manipulating . . ." [students] (Davis 1995, p. 3). This can be done in several different ways:

1. The sound of the TV or computer can be off, so students can only see the commercial.
2. The TV set or computer can be turned around, so students see only the back of the TV or computer. Thus, they will have to concentrate on what they hear.
3. Davis (1995, p. 3) suggests that half of the students turn their backs to the TV.
4. The TV or computer screen can be half covered (top, bottom or sides).
5. Davis (1995, p. 3) suggests that the TV screen can be covered with construction paper full of holes, so students will see the commercial through the holes.
6. The center of the TV screen can be covered but the edges uncovered. Or the edges can be covered and the center uncovered (Stempleski and Tomalin, 1990, p. 66).



If students only see the commercial, they can verify their predictions about the type of product and target market, and the images that they expected to see. If, on the other hand, they only listen to the commercial, they can verify predictions about the type of product (although this may not be possible if the product is not clearly described or defined), the type of target market, and words, phrases or sentences they expected to hear.

If they listen to the commercial message, but they see only a part of the screen, they can still discuss their predictions in groups or with the whole class about what they hear and maybe what they see. If their predictions have been written on the board, it is easy for each group to look at them and explain what led them to make those predictions.

Then the students watch the full, unadulterated TV commercial twice and talk about their predictions, and if they were actually included in the commercial or not.

**Step 2 -- Understanding unknown written and/or spoken vocabulary**

Now that they have seen and listened to the entire commercial, teachers can ask them to concentrate on the vocabulary. They can ask students what words they do not understand. They can watch the commercial one or two more times, depending on their needs. Then, in groups they make a list of unknown words, and when the list is completed, a member of each group writes the unknown words on the board. At this time, if no one already knows the meaning of the words, the whole class tries to guess their meaning by using contextual clues. If contextual clues do not help them, they can look the words up in a thesaurus or dictionary. If they still do not understand the meaning of the words, the teacher can explain the meaning to them.

**Step 3 -- Transcribing the commercial message**

Students listen to the commercial as many times as they find necessary (two to four times is usually sufficient). After they listen to it, they transcribe it individually and then compare their version with those of other members of their group to see how well they understood the commercial. Another way to transcribe the commercial is by dividing the number of sentences and/or phrases among the members of a group. For instance, if a group is made up of four students watching a commercial with four sentences or phrases, each member can write down one sentence or phrase. They must listen very carefully because sometimes it is hard to know when one sentence or phrase ends and another one begins.

Then each group can read their version of the commercial aloud and compare theirs to other groups' or write their version on the board and then compare. If students disagree, they can listen to the message until they get all of the information clearly. They discuss what they think they heard and why they think what they heard is correct. The students justify their choices by using their knowledge of grammar, for example. After watching a commercial about *Liquid Dial* (a type of liquid soap for washing the hands), the author's students argued about the beginning of a sentence. Some said it began with "The best;" others said it started with "It has." A student insisted he heard "It has" because the sentence ended in "don't"; as in, for example—"It has a refreshing aroma while

the other brands don't." If the discussion seems to be going nowhere, the instructor should help the students.

High-intermediate and advanced students can write the text of most commercial messages by themselves. With lower levels, the teacher can give them a copy of the commercial message with a few blanks for them to complete while listening to it. Teachers must also be sure to choose only commercial messages with few phrases or simple sentences, containing language the students can handle.

#### **Step 4 -- Describing the commercial**

A student pretends that someone who has not seen the commercial has just arrived in class. Or, the teacher can actually ask a student or several students to stay outside until the class gets to this step. One of the students who has seen the commercial describes it, trying to use the five senses, and as many shapes and colors as possible, by talking about these features:

- topic of the commercial,
- type of product being advertised,
- purpose of the commercial,
- people, animals and/or objects used in the commercial,
- spoken or written catchy words or phrases used in the commercial,
- type of target market, etc.

The other students who have seen the commercial, too, listen to the student describing the commercial and then give him/her feedback. The student who has not seen or heard the commercial can ask questions, so he/she can get an accurate idea of the commercial. The commercial can then be played one more time for all students to confirm their interpretations.

### **POSTVIEWING Activities—Focus on Culture**

Discussions (60 minutes)

#### **Step 1-- Comparing commercials produced for the target culture and native culture**

Students watch the commercial once more and discuss either in small groups or as a whole class cultural similarities and differences between the commercial they have seen in the class and one they have seen in their country. The comparison does not have to be between commercials that advertise the same product; it can be any product as long as students find similarities and/or differences between the commercials. For example, the author once showed her students a commercial about *butter*. It emphasized how butter made cookies taste better. Those who liked the taste of and enjoyed baking with butter should use it. A student compared this commercial to one about *margarine* serving the same purpose. Then another student said that probably in the US they needed to advertise butter because they wanted to sell more butter, since people were not consuming enough of it. In their country, butter was a traditional food; margarine, on the other hand, was a modern product that marketers needed to introduce to people in order to sell it.

The similarities and differences can be related to the product itself, the type of target market, the people, animals and/or objects in the commercial, non-verbal

communication, body language, behavior, preferences, etc. These are often, as Davis (1995, p. 4) states, "good points of departure for further discussion which is one way to enhance students' critical-thinking skills. For example, students are asked to write down four examples of non-verbal communication which appear in the commercial, with any verbalizations that accompany them, and then guess the meaning of this non-verbal behavior."

### **Step 2 -- Understanding the target culture**

This step can be combined with the previous one; indeed, oftentimes they overlap. Students talk about what the commercial reveals about its audience: their values, beliefs, behavior, preferences, etc. They compare their culture to the target culture based on what they have understood about the target culture from the commercial. Kramsch (1993, p. 205) states, "Understanding a foreign culture requires putting that culture in relation with one's own . . . . It includes a reflection both on the target and on the native culture." As far as the commercials about *butter* (target community) and *margarine* (native community) were concerned, students said that they thought Americans were very concerned about looking good. Since butter was probably not one of the foods consumed by those on diets, the only solution was to appeal to consumers' traditional values—taste, families spending time together to share coffee and cookies made with butter, etc. In the students' opinion, in their country, since butter was well known and frequently made at home by the people themselves and many families had never heard of margarine, it was time that people found out that margarine was better for their health than butter and started to consume it. They also said the reason many old people in their country were overweight was probably that some people did not know much about diets, did not care about eating healthy foods, or simply preferred the taste of butter.

### **Step 3 -- Becoming a consumer**

This activity is particularly useful for students who are still afraid of taking risks. It gives them a chance to reflect on the product and to respond to some questions:

- (1) Would you buy this product? Why or why not?
- (2) If you wouldn't buy it, who do you think would buy it in your country?
- (3) Why would/wouldn't people be interested in buying it—taking into account people's educational background, socioeconomic class, age, sex, etc.?
- (4) What are the advantages/disadvantages of buying it?
- (5) What are the strong/weak points of this commercial?

### **Conclusion**

Both EFL teachers and students have much to gain from TV commercials. TV commercials have visual, verbal and written images, interesting vocabulary and cultural features, and help students to improve their listening skills and to speak English in a more natural way. But, that is not all; EFL teachers have an obligation to make it possible for students to take risks because taking risks helps students to train their minds to become fast and critical thinkers. Teachers should not forget that some of their students may continue their education in the US; others may find jobs in the US. However, just by considering their students as future professionals, instructors will understand that critical-thinking skills will help them to communicate their ideas better in both the target and native

languages. Wright (2002, p. 258) affirms, "We have to make decisions all the time, and to make reasonable ones, we apply criteria. We can use criteria well or poorly, but we can gain in sophistication in their use through reflective experience and practice."

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## Appendix A

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Université de Franche-Comté

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## Appendix B

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/help/view.html#p5> is the website address of The Library of Congress, American Memory, and this is what they say about downloading TV commercials:

Many American Memory collections contain sound recordings, video, high-resolution images, and enhanced text that require special viewers. Most viewers can be downloaded free from vendor sites.