

21W.016: Designing Meaning Essay 3

A Community of a Thousand Influences

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) is a research institution that constructs many messages about itself through its homepage (mit.edu). Whether it is through words or images, MIT has always associated itself with excellence and innovation because of its ability to educate students and its impressive breakthroughs in various fields. MIT is about knowns and unknowns, learning and researching, and education and discovery. After the exploration of the 2016 homepages, especially the homepages from September 2016 to November 2016, there is another common theme present. Although MIT is an institution full of impressive education and technical research, this institution is also an accessible community that has a magnificent amount of influence on society. This is seen through the use of a “known vs. unknown” concept and an identification mechanism.

At MIT, there are contrasts between known and unknown factors in experiments and



Figure 1: From November 18, 2016: Example of the physical chemical structure and black board writing. (Courtesy of MIT. Used with permission.)

studies, allowing for a “known vs. unknown” concept pair. Concept pairs, as described by Scott Consigny, help a rhetor produce a persuasive point with the correct arrangement of a few ideas (Consigny 182). In the case with MIT, the arrangement of what is “known” at MIT is juxtaposed with what is “unknown,” and this contrast paints a clearer picture of the influence that MIT has on society. MIT shows the “known” side of the concept pair by displaying elements about education. For example, in the image of Professor Jeffrey Grossman teaching solid-state chemistry in a lecture hall from November 18, 2016, knowledge and knowns are seen through the background chalkboards full of chemical formulas and the physical chemical

structures that are present in the photograph (MIT Spotlight). Moreover, the idea of a professor is a metaphor for knowledge, for professors are known to deliver information. Education and knowledge are usually associated with learning and teachers. The use of metaphors is seen throughout many of the other homepages, as metaphors condense large-scale concepts into smaller ones that are more tangible for an audience. Furthermore, the different successful results produced under MIT also display a wide range of knowledge and knowns, for the end products convey the success and skills present at this institution. Thus, it is evident that the “knowns” in the “known vs. unknown” concept pair underscore MIT’s success with faculty and products that are changing people and society.

The wide range of knowns conveyed through the homepages also has another effect, for the knowledge appeals to ethos and establishes credibility for any audience. MIT, as implied by its name, is a research institution that assists its students in developing interests in science,



Figure 2: From November 18, 2016: Professor Grossman is teaching with a smile and hand gestures. (Courtesy of MIT. Used with permission.)

technology, engineering, math, and humanities. By demonstrating its knowledge and excellence through passionate professors, advanced labs, and remarkable products, MIT appeals to ethos. This excellence can be shown through the photograph from November 18 of Professor Grossman teaching from a low and unplanned angle (MIT Spotlight). The genuine smile reveals that the professor teaches with passion and spirit, indicating that the MIT faculty does care about the quality of students’ education and knowledge. Excellence is also displayed through a photograph of an organized laboratory with clean microscopes and white lab coats on October 24, 2016 (MIT Spotlight).

Labs in the photo bring to light the technicality and hard work that is pursued at MIT. The white

and clean conditions in the photo also show the sharpness and focus of MIT's education. These examples of skills and excellence at MIT appeal to ethos because the audience is shown that MIT handles problems very seriously and uses technical approaches to achieve practical solutions. With its finished products, such as an airplane wing or nanosensors, and knowledge spreading all over the world, MIT achieves credibility. This allows the audience to obtain a better sense about the influence this institution has.

However, MIT is not only about "knowns" and achievements, especially because it is mainly the "unknowns" that make MIT a research community. Although MIT is able to obtain multitudes of accomplishments within different fields, those accomplishments have been possible because of the exploration of the "unknowns." The cutting-edge research that occurs on a daily basis along with the uncertainty that comes with problems that MIT researchers face highlight the importance of the "unknown." This uncertainty is seen through many of the homepage images. For instance, the image from October 24 with the two people in the laboratory contains elements that can create a feeling of ambiguity (MIT Spotlight). First, the yellow

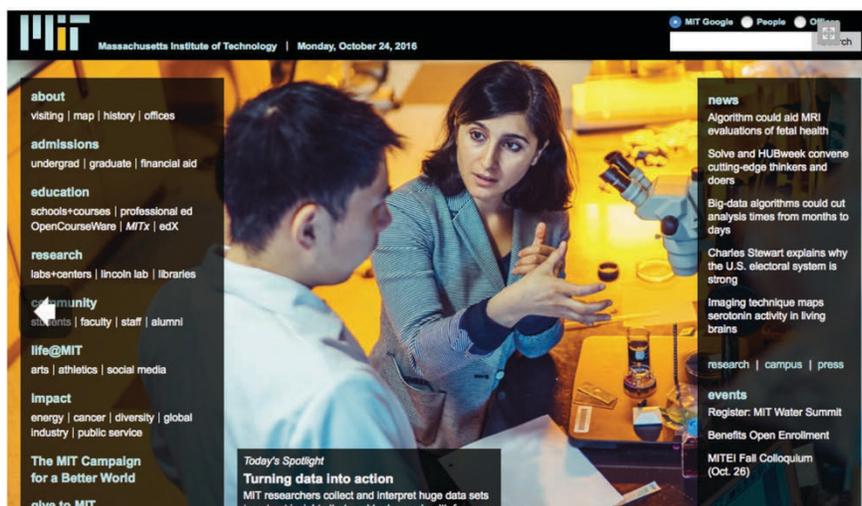


Figure 1: From October 24, 2016: Two researchers are collaborating in a laboratory. (Courtesy of MIT. Used with permission.)

background light provokes questions in an audience's mind, for it would make sense that a laboratory be lit and bright. However, the choice to use a gold-yellow light places the researchers in a more unknown position, and it

contributes to the “unknown” part of the concept pair. Furthermore, the blank lined paper on the table is near the focus of the photograph, and the lack of writing on the paper stimulates more uncertainty. With the light and paper, the laboratory presents many unclear and indefinite feelings of the work done at MIT. The idea of uncertainty is also evident in many of the other homepages. Besides people and research, products are also depicted through animations, such as the one about computer screenings on September 22, 2016. This animation contains a child and mother painted in a dark and intimidating purple, showing the thought-provoking unknowns at MIT (MIT Spotlight). As can be seen, there are also many factors of ambiguity that are present on the MIT homepages.

The ambiguity and uncertainty conveyed on the homepages also serve to convey the communication and influences that MIT embodies.

Although it is effective to show the “knowns” present at MIT to explain how this institution is capable of influencing society through professors and products, it is even more powerful when MIT reveals and works towards the “unknowns” to create a larger impact for other communities. The main reason why the

“unknown” picture creates a stronger message is that

when there are unknowns, there is also the idea of research and communication, and that is the only way that solutions are achieved. For example, in the October 24th photograph of the serious and focused researchers in the lab, the female in the photo is doing a lot of hand gestures to the male in the lab coat. These hand gestures indicate a communication of ideas, which is especially important when there are so many unknowns and problems needed to be solved. Additionally, in



Figure 2: From September 22, 2016: An animation containing two shadows and contrast between dark purple and yellow. (Courtesy of MIT. Used with permission.)

the animation from September 22, there is a speech bubble, and the mother and child are on a floor full of alphabet letters. The child is also pointing to the mother's bag. With the simple speech bubbles, alphabet letters, and pointing from the child, MIT is conveying an idea about children and speaking. This is confirmed by the photo's caption about MIT producing computer systems that may help detect early child speech disorders. MIT is able to successfully show their complex ideas through simple images. From these two examples and many other homepage images, it is evident that the students and faculty at MIT are constantly working together to communicate ideas, and the easy-to-understand animations that are open to the public demonstrate how MIT is an accessible institution that is willing to communicate its knowns and unknowns. MIT does excellent research to influence society with the knowns, while also communicating with and impacting the public through the unknowns.

However, the "knowns" and "unknowns" at MIT are not two separate components of the institution, for they can be connected to paint a clearer picture of MIT as a community. On one hand, MIT is about education; it spreads its wide range of knowledge of definitions and facts about this world. This is the material that the faculty teaches students, whether it is through hand gestures, physical structures, or blackboards. At the same time, there is a research aspect. As a result of all the unknowns at MIT, there is a push for more research and discovery to positively influence society. Uncertainty in certain fields is the reason why there is research at MIT, and research is the linking factor between the unknowns and knowns. MIT is about both teaching and exploration; it a community about both education and research. Whether it is spreading knowledge to students in education or discovering new ideas to help society through research, MIT has a tremendous influence on society. The institution is a community that collaborates to

go from the unknowns to the knowns by emphasizing values such as communication, teamwork, and impact.

As MIT delivers a consistent message about its influence as a community on other communities, the values that MIT emphasizes appeal to the audience in a form of identification. According to Kenneth Burke, rhetoric can work through identification, for rhetoric can connect a rhetor and an audience based on their experiences (Burke). With the different messages about innovation, community, and impact that the MIT conveys about the itself, there are forms of identification that connect MIT and its audience. The idea of communication and influence from MIT is emphasized through idealistic identification. Idealistic identification is identification through values, beliefs, or cultural tastes (Burke). Because MIT has values that allow it to positively impact communities through the use of impeccable communication skills, people also end up acknowledging the importance of MIT's role in society. Communication and influence are ideals that most people value and hope to embody, and the presence of those ideas on the homepage makes MIT more appealing to the audience. This is significant since MIT would want to construct a positive image of itself to the public. Thus, because the public can identify the values that MIT construct on its homepages, MIT is able to effectively deliver messages about community and influence.

As can be seen, whether MIT is a college about education or an institution about research, there is an overwhelming theme about community and influence that ties together everything about MIT on its homepages. This theme is conveyed to the audience through the "known vs. unknown" concept pair that links college and research institution into a large community of communication. These values of community and communication further appeal to the audience, as the audience is able to connect with MIT through idealistic identification. All in all, MIT is a

community of professors influencing students, mentors influencing research, and researchers influencing technology. MIT's positive impact on society is what makes it a top-notch institution.

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