



## **General Certificate of Education**

# **Media Studies**

**MEST1      Investigating Media**

# **Report on the Examination**

*2009 examination - June series*

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This was the second examination on Unit 1 Investigating Media (MEST1) for the new AQA GCE Media Studies specification which has been running since September 2008. There were 11,370 candidates who took the examination this series.

Overall it was pleasing to see how centres had prepared their candidates for this unit, particularly Section A. The vast majority of candidates managed to navigate themselves well through the processes and protocols of the new examination format. The new narrowly focused Section A questions, as in the January series, seem to have been very student friendly on the whole and provide a fair assessment of candidate ability. Section B also showed some encouraging signs where centres had clearly attempted to find a balance between careful guidance in the teaching of theory and topic issues/debates (relevant to the chosen case study area) and the provision of opportunities for student autonomy (through candidates' own independent choice of media products).

However, there are still misconceptions in some centres as to how best to prepare candidates for this unit, specifically for the Institution question in Section A and for the Cross-Media study in Section B.

### **Section A: Texts, Concepts and Contexts**

The Section A moving image product was a two minute trailer for the launch of Channel 4 +1, shown on E4 during December 2007. It was chosen to signal to centres some of the concerns of the new media specification such as the impact of the digital switch-over on modern television institutions and audiences. Its use proved timely with much debate and discussion within the media having taken place this year over Channel 4's financial crisis and its future status. The product raises many questions over the extent to which Channel 4 is meeting its public service remit whilst also trying to maintain its position within an increasingly competitive marketplace (particularly with the pressure on traditional broadcasting platforms from new media).

The majority of candidates coped admirably with viewing a fast-paced product three times and having to make detailed notes on it in the first fifteen minutes of the examination. Centres had clearly made effective arrangements for the viewing of the product. Some candidates though require further support in making sure they have recorded the specific, close details of media language that they need to support their ideas and arguments (particularly during the third and final viewing). Most candidates though made good use of the three blank pages for notes in the answer booklet. When making notes, candidates should consider the media product shown in detail but also focus on the specifics of the four questions set. In some cases it was evident that candidates had made general MIGRAIN type notes on the clip and then tried to adapt these to the questions. It is very important that invigilators follow the instructions issued carefully and allow candidates at least two minutes before the DVD is started to read not only the introductory paragraphs but also the four questions in detail before they view the product and make notes.

The introductory paragraphs are intended to create a level playing field for all candidates (especially those who have no prior knowledge of the media product shown, its institution, audience or context). The paragraphs are also designed to link with the four questions set and enhance candidate's understanding. In this sense it is vital that candidates are prepared appropriately and take heed of the prompts

provided and use them to their full advantage, particularly during the first note-taking stage.

Stamina seems to be a major issue in Section A. Many candidates are running out of ideas by the time they get to questions three and four. This may be because they focus on more difficult key concepts (particularly Question 3 on Media Institutions) but this is contradicted by the fact that the fourth question was a relatively straightforward one on audience appeal (there is, of course, the possibility that future papers may well change the order of the key concept questions to try to address this issue). Again, candidates need to make the most of their planning and note-making time and ensure that they tackle each question with equal conviction and consistency and also that they don't repeat ideas. Each question is, after all, designed to test the knowledge and understanding of a different concept, and although linkage to other key concepts is encouraged and ultimately necessary, if candidates keep focused on the specifics of each question and remain succinct then there should be very little overlap or need for repetition.

The two pages provided for each written response are also enough in terms of length for candidates to achieve a high level. Candidates should be persuaded that it is better to be clear, succinct and concise and move on to spend equal time on further questions than to persevere with a lengthy answer that has already achieved its potential.

Some centres also need to remind their candidates that whilst the use and application of relevant media theory can enhance knowledge and understanding of a key concept and produce a thorough, confident response it can also be misused and reveal a lack of confidence and understanding. Most frequently responses lose focus and relevance because candidates insist on shoe-horning in regurgitated theory in a futile attempt to impress the examiner. Indeed, it is possible in Section A to achieve full marks without explicitly using theory at all.

### **Question 1: Media Forms**

This was a relatively straightforward question designed to give candidates a comfortable lead into the exam. It demanded that candidates show their knowledge and understanding of the media language used by the trailer, use terminology with confidence to describe it and make detailed references to the text. The vast majority of candidates were able to show at least some knowledge and understanding of media language as a key concept and in turn this was the most successfully answered question. The quality of responses though was often hindered by a superficial treatment of the text itself and/or limited use of media terminology. Referring in detail to a moving image text is a difficult skill to master but one that could be practised more in some centres. Some candidates could also do with a refresher on media terminology and its correct usage to ensure a media studies response is produced rather than a mere description.

Strong responses were able to look at a range of media language used, from the pace of editing, use of sound (music, voice over, diegetic), use of camera (variety of shot types), the reliance on images of iconic characters/celebrities, and even titles/graphics. Weaker candidates tended to focus on just one or two of these areas and thus failed to exhibit a thorough or even sound understanding of media language relevant to moving image analysis as a whole. It was surprising in some centres that many candidates did not fully understand the term 'media language' and chose to

focus on the dialogue of the voice over and offer a purely linguistic deconstruction. This was relevant to the question but was of course only a small part of the media language (camera, lighting, editing, mise en scene, sound) used by the trailer.

Links should be encouraged by centres here to MEST2 production work. Many candidates will have just completed their own video production work (and its subsequent evaluation) and have themselves used a range media language to target and engage their audience. Perhaps this link between production and theory/analysis could be more explicitly promoted by some centres to their candidates.

The best response linked the use of media language by the institution to the specific target audience (as prompted by the question). They were able to show an understanding of the needs of the E4 demographic (young, media-savvy identity-seekers) and how the trailer was constructed to attract their attention and hopefully lead them into viewing C4+1. This is indeed an important lesson for candidates. The consideration of one key concept (in this case Media Forms) should not exclude the consideration and use of other relevant key concepts (in this case Audience). Indeed this linkage can help to further demonstrate secure knowledge and understanding of the key concept at hand. Many candidates though seemed to be led less by the question (i.e. to link use of media language to audience) and more by the section heading (i.e. Media Forms).

It was pleasing to see that most candidates were able to focus on the question asked and not 'waste' ideas in this question that could be used in the next three. There was still some slight evidence though of candidates using a MIGRAIN planning approach and ignoring the question focus completely. There are also a few centres and candidates still over-relying on a purely semiotic approach. Exhaustive lists were in turn provided of denotation and connotation. Sometimes this was fruitful in that it was linked to audience, but often it became a repetitive straightjacket from which responses could not escape. Focus on the question is paramount and it would be more beneficial for candidates to isolate several media language devices and analyse them by commenting critically on how they were used to engage the audience.

Some centres and their candidates are also relying too heavily on theory, either bolting this on to their responses inappropriately or allowing this to lead the entire response and thus lose question focus. Providing candidates with a checklist of theories that must be covered often leads to them making inappropriate and unfocused comments and losing any critical autonomy. Theory is of course useful when relevant but it was debatable in this instance whether the old stalwarts of Propp and Todorov actually aided analysis. Fiske's seven subjectivities and Barthes' enigma code were used with some success, particularly when candidates stopped themselves teaching the examiner and used the approaches quickly and succinctly to aid their analysis. Some theories though, like Neale's Genre theory or even Effects Theory, were largely irrelevant to the question and there seemed little point in candidates tying themselves in knots desperately trying to make them so.

## **Question 2: Media Representations**

The question on Representation was designed to enable candidates to comment on the range of representations of gender offered by the media product and most importantly how these representations were constructed and conveyed through media language.

This seems to be a well-taught key concept area and it was impressive how the majority of candidates coped well with this question, being able to select a variety of detailed examples from the trailer to support their ideas. The best responses focused on such aspects as dialogue, mise-en-scene and use of camera (including the male gaze) to show how the audience was positioned to view these representations (positively or negatively). Candidates writing in this case exhibited a much stronger sense of engagement and critical autonomy as many were able to comment with confidence on the progressive and/or regressive nature of the representations on offer. Theory was often used well here too (particularly Hall's intentional/reflective/constructionist approaches) and some candidates focused on not only the use of stereotypes but also the presence of contradictory ironic and camp portrayals.

Really strong answers were able to effectively place the presence of progressive representations within the context of Channel 4 as an institution (linking to its innovative brand image and its aspirational target audience). Some were also able to offer strong comments on ethnicity and sexuality overlapping appropriately with their observations on gender. Weaker responses, however, tended to just describe the representations in a list-like fashion rather than commenting in detail on the textual construction. The most common and unfortunate mistake made by Level 1 candidates was to misunderstand the question and merely consider the presence of different genders within the trailer and how this therefore attracted male and/or female audiences. Responses in this category also tended to focus bizarrely on representation of the audience rather than the characters/celebrities within the media product itself.

### **Question 3: Media Institutions**

The chosen product hopefully raised some interesting institutional concerns. Whilst the creation of the new +1 channel clearly exploits a further niche audience for increased advertising revenue (at no great extra cost to the institution), it does also provide modern television audiences with the ability to begin to schedule their own viewing more flexibly. The trailer is positioned on its institution's own sister channel, E4, to promote its wares to a young audience who, although beginning to move to other platforms to view moving image products, are loyal to the channel's brand ethos. In an attempt to appeal to such a young demographic the trailer has arguably toned down any remaining vestige of public service values that Channel 4 might still have. It in turn relies on promoting US imports, risk-free generic formulas, an entertainment imperative, and a very limited cultural palette; its universality of coverage being ultimately dependent on access to (expensive) digital technologies.

Question three was therefore designed to enable candidates to consider and perhaps query the public service values of the institution and to what extent they were demonstrated in the media product. This is a demanding area for AS students, but the question repeated in brackets the definition of public service broadcasting relevant to Channel 4 (as given originally in the introductory paragraphs for Section A) to attempt to create a more level playing field. Without this many candidates would have floundered completely. It was disappointing that the concept of institutional values and branding did not seem familiar to many candidates. This is therefore a weak area which many centres should consider further work on.

Indeed the weakest responses tended to just repeat some or all of the prompts given and gave very descriptive/superficial examples from the text to support their ideas on

either innovation, quality, diversity and/or education. Lists were thus provided which showed little understanding of how an institution's values might be demonstrated to an audience through a promotional text. Another weak approach was to merely pick up on the reference to audience range in the question prompt and just simplistically list the potential variety of audiences that each programme would attract (in this case some potential material on audience appeals for Question 4 was under-utilised and/or repeated).

The most successful responses tackled the question effectively by picking up on the limited cultural diversity of the trailer, its reliance on US imports and predictable risk-free genres. Again those who showed this kind of critical autonomy and in some cases were able to move with confidence beyond the text to question and explain why the trailer did not include some of Channel 4's PSB successes (such as the documentary series *Dispatches*) were the most thorough and engaged. Alternatively, some agreed that the trailer positively promoted Channel 4's public service remit and skilfully unpicked each of the elements of the definition making strong, detailed links to the text and also even quickly referring back to points made under the Media Forms and Representation sections to reinforce their answer.

#### **Question 4: Media Audiences**

This question was designed for candidates to move beyond the specific textual details of the trailer itself and consider the wider appeals of Channel 4 + 1 and its programming. In this sense it was very different to question 1, focusing on a wider audience and the Channel itself (and its programming) rather than the trailer.

Many candidates, however, repeated ideas from Question 1 and just focused on the appeals of the trailer itself. In turn they failed to understand that the audience for the new Channel is not limited purely to E4 viewers. They had either not read the question closely enough or ran out of ideas/stamina by this stage in the examination.

Those that did successfully focus on the Channel's appeals were able to do so in a variety of ways. They used audience theory (particularly Uses and Gratifications) to comment effectively on such appeals as independent scheduling provided by the new +1 feature, personal identity through role models and celebrities, surveillance provided by the Reality TV genre and escapism through the soap and sit com featured.

Some candidates are still hampered by the need to constantly classify audience using socio-economic grades (ABC1C2DE). This often hindered any focus on the question and did little else than show some limited knowledge and understanding of audience. More fruitful and relevant to the new specification's concerns is the need to consider audience experience and how the active audience engage with and use the text in a variety of potential ways.

Some candidates also saw the audience section as an opportunity to regurgitate learnt material on audience theory. In turn Effects Theory (the Hypodermic Needle Effect in particular) was often used to little effect as it had no relevance to the question. Once more candidates need to be selective and use theories which will support and enhance their answers, not hinder them.

## **Section B: The Cross-Media Study**

Pleasingly, many centres seem to have prepared their students well for the Cross-Media study. Far fewer candidates this series (in comparison to January 2009) had either no prepared case study, used their MEST2 production work as a case study, or attempted to use the unseen media product from Section A as a case study. Indeed all candidates successfully found their way to Section B. Most are taking heed of the advice given in the third bullet point of each question to use examples from all three media platforms. Whilst there is no need for this to be perfectly balanced, print as a platform does appear to be most neglected. Some centres also need to be reminded that novels are not seen as media texts in this specification (sometimes these were inappropriately used as print examples in Film or Broadcast Fiction-based studies). Candidates rarely give any details of title, writer or date of newspaper or magazine articles and in many cases very hypothetical examples are used (indeed the candidate could be writing about any review or article). Far more detail is required in these cases to reach Level 3 or above (whereby examples are 'thorough' or 'satisfactory'). Generalised and descriptive examples tended to be used by case studies which were far too broad in their scope. Range of examples is required to prevent the study from becoming too narrow but this breadth should not be at the expense of at least some detail and depth. It should be noted by centres that the use of examples on the whole tends to become much more convincing when the candidate has ownership over their own case study.

A minority of students used additional pages to supplement the answer book and it is worth centres reminding candidates that the space provided in the booklet is enough for clear and controlled answers. Most lengthy responses would have gained more marks by spending longer on planning and really thinking carefully about their answers before jumping in. Indeed, many Level 4 responses were written by candidates who had the confidence to omit certain examples/details from their prepared case study because they did not fit the question asked.

The two questions on the Cross-Media study were chosen to directly link with the suggested areas of study suggested in the specification (see bullet points on pp.7-8). The first, Question 5, (which just over 60% of candidates chose to answer) linked to the concept of audience, and particularly one of the major preoccupations of the new specification (and Media Studies 2.0), the audience as producer. This could potentially have been too narrow a focus for candidates whose prepared case study did not fit comfortably with this area, however, the fact that the question asked to what extent it was true that audiences were no longer consumers of media texts but producers too, meant that there was some scope for candidates to dispute this notion and mainly discuss audience consumption not production. The mark scheme allowed for such responses at all levels asking for 'knowledge/understanding of how audiences consume and/or produce media products from the cross-media study'. This is therefore a valuable lesson for candidates to learn in the early stages of their Section B response. Firstly, to spend some time carefully selecting the right question which most comfortably suits their case study and secondly to concentrate on closely examining the wording of the question and developing an appropriate plan and argument.

Indeed, a worrying proportion of candidates are largely ignoring the question and writing down everything they know/remember about their case study. This leads to responses which are either very descriptive or cannot pull themselves beyond level 2 as they only show some knowledge and understanding of the question focus. It is



vital for students to be taught how to deconstruct essay questions carefully and select the appropriate products and media issues/ideas from their case study to support their answer. There is no requirement for them to write down everything they have studied. They need to be 'precise' and/or 'concise' to achieve Level 3 or above. Some candidates spent far too long giving the examiner a very superficial and descriptive account of their study, ignoring the question's requirement to 'provide a brief outline of your case study'. Centres should be reminded that this only needs to be a brief paragraph to help examiners understand what the particular area of study is and also to begin to assess how individualised and engaged the candidate's preparation has been.

A pleasing amount of candidates though did excel with Question 5 (just under a third of answers pushing into Level 3 or above). They were able to provide clear and concise case studies, sound question focus (on audiences as consumers and/or producers) and a satisfactory range of examples from the three media platforms. The most successful responses here ranged from those which used audience theory (particularly Uses and Gratifications) to help explore and explain how active audiences were in response to a variety of media products from across the platforms (e-media in particular was useful here but also broadcast platforms with their increased use of interactivity), to really engaged discussions on how audiences are involved in modern media (print as a platform seen as the poor relation in most cases). The best candidates though questioned the relationship between audiences and producers and suggested that audience empowerment was an illusion and mainly a way of institutions exploiting the audience to gain free advertising and increased revenue.

In comparison, Question 6 was answered by slightly fewer candidates (40%) but those who tackled it on average gained higher marks (well over a third of responses gaining Level 3 or above). The key differentiator here tended to be to what extent candidates could really explain why the codes and conventions of the media products from their case study were similar and/or different. Again, many answers just tended to give a very descriptive overview of the case study, never really pinning down what the codes and conventions were with very little on the reasons why they might be similar and/or different. Candidates with limited case studies (which tended to focus on just one product from each platform) also had difficulties in really understanding the very nature of media products within a platform and therefore had very little scope to compare/contrast products within the platform itself. Those that were more comfortable with what the platform itself could or could not provide for audiences and institutions were in turn able to construct far more effective arguments. Centres need to ensure that they do some introductory work on the platforms (and the media forms within them) at a macro level before they begin the detailed analysis of particular products as required by the case study (see outline Scheme of Work for MEST1 in the Teacher's Resource Bank). The study of individual products should also always be firmly placed within the context of both media form and platform.

Again, many candidates need to spend longer deconstructing the question set and planning relevant and appropriate answers which select carefully from their prepared case study. Taking longer to really think about why products might be the same or different by linking to other relevant key concepts and any other media issues/debates raised by the study would have benefited so many answers.

The most successful approaches to the Cross-Media Study were by far those centres that had enabled their students to research and produce their own case studies. This

led to much greater critical autonomy and candidates finding their own voice and in turn demonstrating much more original thinking in response to the questions set. Some centres, on the contrary, spoon-fed their candidates with all students doing exactly the same texts and failing to go beyond taught areas to consider wider products, contexts or critical debates. Responses in this case may have been 'thorough', as students had learnt examples/theories/ideas by rote, but showed no real understanding or engagement.

Really brave centres got their candidates to choose from any of the cross-media study areas from the specification and their careful guidance and support of this independent research paid dividends. Other centres kept their candidates confined to a particular area of study but insisted that each candidate provide and research their own range of product examples from across the platforms. Another successful approach was also when the teacher had clearly modelled an approach to the case study area, by looking at a range of media products with the group, and then supported and guided students in choosing their own examples and pathways through the study.

Overall, the case study worked well when there was a clear move away from the traditional approach to teaching a media text (i.e. history, themes, conventions etc) to an understanding that the case study is much more about the contemporary media landscape and its issues and debates. Choosing a case study which took into account the need to focus on media debates and issues (particularly audience, institution and technology) rather than starting with the text definitely worked best. Starting with a focus text (i.e. usually a film or broadcast fiction one) always seemed to lead to other platforms being secondary and subsequently the case study became a much more conventional (and MED2-like) analysis of the codes and conventions, genre etc. of one text rather than its presence across (and within) the platforms as a whole.

Historical approaches should also be avoided. A significant minority of centres, particularly under the banner of Documentary and Hybrid Forms and Film (with a genre focus), are spending a long time studying very detailed historical examples (even, for example, *Nanook of the North*) which candidates obviously feel obliged to use in their answers. The case study must focus on contemporary issues and debates (3 years old at most) and historical examples should only be used briefly to illuminate and provide a context for the modern products studied. For example, *The Blair Witch Project*, is useful to explain and contextualise some of the techniques used by *Cloverfield* but should not become an all-encompassing part of a film case study as it is too old.

It seemed much more successful for centres to start with the need to cover three media platforms (therefore avoiding the TV/Film plus two supporting platforms approach). A good example of this was under the cross-media topic area of Lifestyle (Fashion and Makeover working particularly well) where students had been told to choose linked lifestyle texts from each media platform. Further teacher guidance ensured that a range of institutions, audiences and forms were covered to ensure variety and allow for all possible question coverage.

Selecting texts by theme or topic had mixed results. There were real problems where students used topics such as teenage obesity, anorexia, binge drinking etc. as a topic to explore across the platforms. This tended to be led by a documentary (*Channel 4* and *Five* shock docs being most popular), then referred to just one

newspaper article on the same subject and then a website which was often a support group. This tended to lead to more sociological answers focusing on the issue rather than media ideas and debates. However, when a key concept such as Representation was used as the link between products and a lead into the study the results were more promising. For example, representation of the teenager was a fruitful area to explore in Broadcast Fiction; one centre using *Skins* and *City of Men* as a starting point for candidates and thus ensuring coverage of a variety of contexts which highlighted a range of media issues.

Examples of really successful case studies this series often focused on the music industry. Candidates individually chose a particular artist and considered their presentation within and across the platforms for different audiences and by different institutions. There were also some strong film case studies on *The Dark Knight* and *Cloverfield's* viral campaigns which both provided strong material for question five on audience as producers. News also worked very well as a topic across the platforms, especially when students were encouraged to consider how various contemporary stories (that they had tracked and chosen themselves) differed in their presentation dependent on audience and/or institutional influence.

To conclude, the cross-media study needs to be as individualised as possible. Centres need to guide their students through independent selection and autonomous analysis of a range of products from across the platforms (print products in particular being given more emphasis). Above all, as approaches to the analysis of media products are modelled to students, the media issues and debates relevant to the area of study need to be constantly highlighted and reinforced. This will include making the nature of each platform (and the media forms within it), specifically their potential for audiences and producers, very explicit to candidates. Ultimately students need to be constantly persuaded to ask themselves why the media products within their case study are the way they are and what place they have within the modern media landscape. In turn they will become the type of critical media literate consumers that the new specification is aiming to reward.