



General Certificate of Education

Media Studies

MEST1 Investigating Media

Report on the Examination

2010 examination - June series

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General

This was the fourth examination on Unit 1 Investigating Media (MEST 1) for the new AQA GCE Media Studies specification which has been running since September 2008. There were 10685 candidates who took the examination this series.

Pleasingly, the vast majority of candidates responded to the examination extremely positively and it was clear that most centres now appreciate fully how to prepare candidates for this unit. Much progress was observed since last summer especially in section B, The Cross-Media Study, and Section A responses were far more focused on the questions set.

Section A: Texts, Concepts and Contexts

The Section A moving image product was the opening sequence (including title sequence) of the television documentary, Peter Andre: Going It Alone, broadcast on ITV2 during August 2009. The product raised a number of interesting conceptual issues which formed the focus of the four questions. Firstly, how contemporary media products within an increasingly competitive digital television market, gain and maintain the attention of their niche audience(s). Secondly, how contemporary digital television channels create and promote a positive brand image (and consumer loyalty) through their commissioned programming. Thirdly, how the documentary form uses media language in an attempt to control audience response. Fourthly, how the notion of celebrity is constructed and conveyed in contemporary media products.

Most candidates seemed to find the unseen product very accessible and were able and willing in responding to the four questions set. Able candidates used the questions as a springboard to investigate subtler nuances of the reality TV genre and its relationship with audiences. Less confident candidates were still able to make valid comments based on the product's face value.

Question 1: Media Forms

Once again this was the most successfully answered question in Section A. Many candidates managed to access Level 3 of the mark scheme showing sound knowledge and understanding of a range of media techniques used in the sequence to hook and maintain the audience's attention. Indeed, it was the linking of the techniques used with the likely audience response which tended to enable candidates to really exhibit strong understanding and question focus (weaker responses tending to just list the techniques used without necessarily focusing on the audience part of the question). Media terminology was also used well, although for some this was more confident in terms of sound as an element of media language and could be extended across all elements (most notably use of camera and mise-en-scene). Close textual reference was also a key factor in the success of a response. Many candidates at this stage of the examination are confident with this and were able to draw from detailed notes made during the viewing phase.

Several candidates, however, were so enthusiastic with their Question 1 responses that (often running onto additional sheets) they produced lengthy answers at the expense of other Section A responses. Time management could be an issue for some here but also the need to carefully plan a response before rushing headlong into an answer. Very rarely did the extra page written actually add to the quality of the response (or indeed an increase in the mark awarded). Some candidates also need reminding that they need to remember that whilst they are indeed focusing on the specific question set that they are also answering a question tied into a particular key concept and under a specific heading (in this case Media Forms). So for some the use of the news items at the very start of the programme and the appeal of Andre himself were deciding factors in gaining and holding audience attention but these had little to do with media

form(s) or media language and thus failed to exhibit at least some knowledge and understanding of the relevant key concept.

Narrative theory was often used well by candidates to help deconstruct the form of the sequence. Barthes' enigma and action codes and Todorov's disequilibrium/equilibrium were utilised most fruitfully as well as Propp and Levi-Strauss to a lesser extent. There was far less evidence of irrelevant theory just being regurgitated in an attempt to impress the examiner.

Question 2: Media Institutions

The institutions question, which has so far proven to be the most challenging for candidates, was moved this series to nearer the start of the examination to try and reduce the negative impact that a lack of stamina and greater time since the original viewings might have. Pleasingly there was much evidence that many candidates are much more confident with this key concept and indeed a number of interesting and stimulating responses were produced.

Most students seemed very comfortable with the notion of branding and brand image and produced far longer institution responses than last summer. Many were able to link this process well to genre (choosing to focus on the other ITV2 programmes referenced in the initial ITV2 ident). Many also picked up on the positive representation (referencing use of colour and graphics) that this initial sequence created for the channel's brand image. Strong responses also focused on the stress the voice-over gave to the exclusive access that only the channel could offer the audience, the (relatively) high production values of the title sequence, and the (positive) association with the Andre persona.

Candidates that showed an understanding of the ITV2 audience and how the channel and this specific programme catered for their needs (sometimes utilising the Uses and Gratifications approach) also did well commenting on the imperative for institutions to have 'never before' seen footage, behind the scenes access and 'one-off' specials to satiate the audience's desire for celebrity gossip and entertainment. Those with prior knowledge of the previous 'Katie and Peter' ITV2 shows also successfully commented on the extension of the brand and the 'fairness' in the way the channel represented the couple.

Some candidates stumbled though in trying to show off their understanding of intertextuality and synergy by incorrectly claiming that ITV2 had established a commercial relationship with the news providers referenced at the beginning of the sequence. However, some strong responses did pick up on how the initial montage was a successful attempt by the institution to align itself with celebrity gossip magazines such as 'Hello' and a tabloid news agenda. Thorough responses therefore tended to ground their observations firmly in the product itself and in turn provide close textual references (also enabling them to exhibit a secure grasp of media terminology). Less successful answers instead just listed and described the institutional characteristics of the text (often the ITV2 logo) rather than considering the idea of brand image (essentially rooted in the values and ideology of the institution). They also tended to offer far less textual evidence (and in turn media terminology) to support their arguments and assertions.

There was, however, clear knowledge of ITV/ITV2 as an institution (although some candidates would do well to brush up on their knowledge of Public Service Broadcasting) with many showing an impressive understanding of how contemporary media institutions are structured (e.g. multiple channels, catch-up services, niche audiences etc). Some pleasingly used the question as a prompt to critically discuss the brand's troublesome association with the dying genre of reality TV and so-called celebrities, sometimes also raising debates as regards the 'dumbing down' of content in such channels' desperation to serve up niche audiences to

advertisers and sponsors. Indeed, some candidates could be reminded that it is not necessarily a bad thing to critically attack the product at hand.

Question 3: Media Audiences

The audience question asked candidates to analyse how the sequence used media language to attempt to position the audience to feel sympathetic towards Peter Andre. The best responses were able to make detailed references to media language and link this to the likely audience response. Use of camera (the close up of Andre's tattoo), camera angles (to make Andre appear vulnerable), the mise-en-scene (typically the IKEA car park and black cars/costume), editing (slow fades and the changing pace of the sequence) and the use of sound (most notably the anchorage of song lyrics and voice-over) were the most common features discussed. Some candidates though, rather than considering the full range of media language used, tended to focus merely on sound (particularly dialogue/voice-over) and would do well to consider all elements of television language when deconstructing a sequence.

Weaker responses ignored the 'position' of the question and instead focused on how and why the audience would feel sympathy for Andre. Common reasons given were the pain suffered in the break up with Katie Price and the trials and tribulations of his new status as a single father. Such answers tended in turn to become very generalised and not fully focussed on how media language was used, media terminology and reference to the text also losing out here. There was even some evidence of very subjective responses which took sides and just described their 'Team Peter' or 'Team Katie' stance.

Many candidates also ignored the question completely and instead used the heading of 'Media Audiences' as an opportunity to regurgitate demographic and psychographic audience information (some answers being convinced that only single parents in the audience would fully empathise with Andre's plight) or show off their knowledge of audience theory. Such responses moved too far away from the product and in turn were unable to show much textual reference. Some candidates, however, did manage to weave theory successfully into their answers, most usefully Hall's Encoding/Decoding model, in turn questioning the ability of the sequence to manipulate the audience's response. Propp was also used well here to explain how the sequence had constructed character types (Price as villain in particular) through narrative techniques. It's still surprising and disappointing how many candidates hold 'Effects Theory' in such high esteem and would do well to consider more active theories (Gauntlett's criticism of the Effects model would be a useful starting point).

Question 4: Media Representations

The representations question was the least well-handled by many candidates, surprisingly as past series have seen candidates be very comfortable with this concept. In some respects this may have been due to stamina issues (as witnessed in previous series) but most often it seemed to be because candidates did not focus fully on what the question actually asked. Many subconsciously placed an 'a' in front of the term celebrity in the question and tended to focus on how Andre was represented as a celebrity rather than how celebrity as a notion/concept was represented in the sequence. This conflation of celebrity and Peter Andre often lead to responses being held at level 2 or below.

The most successful responses saw celebrity being represented as normal and everyday but also both recognisable and unreachable. The best responses showed how these representations were constructed and conveyed through media language and in turn used close textual reference and media terminology. Many also saw celebrity as glamorous focusing well on the mise-en-scene (helicopters, big black cars) and the title sequence itself (referring to the

diamond motif and intertextual references to crooners from the past). Some also picked up on the lack of privacy and interestingly touched on contemporary debates about press intrusion and paparazzi.

Again it was refreshing to see some more critical answers that questioned Andre's celebrity status and were suspicious of the low-budget and rather tawdry and tacky feel of the programme. Debates surrounding 'dumbing down' and the role of reality TV in the construction of celebrity (some successfully recalling ITV1's 'I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here') were also highlighted and addressed by some level four responses.

Section B: The Cross-Media Study

There was clear evidence this series that the majority of centres have got to grips with the Cross-Media Study. Nearly all candidates were able to tackle the questions and to draw on examples from across the three media platforms. There was far less evidence of candidates merely describing their cross-media studies. With the exception of some Film responses, very few wasted time regurgitating factual information on budgets, credits and plot outlines. There was also very little evidence of candidates with no prepared cross-media study or who tried to use their MEST2 production work as a case study or indeed the unseen product from Section A.

The majority of cross-media studies are also now taking a contemporary focus. There were very few centres who had taught their students a potted history of a particular genre. However, some centres will want to refresh the core products that they model initially to students (for example, *Cloverfield*, although an excellent example of cross-media distribution and consumption, is now becoming dated).

Candidates now seem far more aware of the nature of each platform and what it can offer both audiences and institutions. Many responses are now organised around the three platforms (rather than the core products) which tends to work well and helps to avoid repetition. Most candidates are also now more comfortable with using examples from the print platform. These are becoming less generalised and using more specific details tied into audience and the aims of the institution. Centres should be reminded though that novels (often used in Film cross-media studies) are not seen to be media products by this specification. Broadcast is the platform that students seem most comfortable with (particularly film and television) but radio is still the poor relation and perhaps centres could persuade candidates to also incorporate this popular medium into their cross-media studies. Web-based products are also exemplified well on the whole, although some responses needed to be careful not to use generalised examples and use specific details of forums, blogs etc. Video games also seem surprisingly under-utilised and are again an area which students could be encouraged to research more.

There are still, pleasingly, a range of approaches being taken towards the cross-media study. Some connect the core products of the topic study through genre, some through the work of an auteur (e.g. Michael Moore and documentary) and some through representation or an issue. These can all lead to fruitful studies as long as the core products have enough breadth in terms of audience and institution and in turn enable the candidate to explore the topic area fully. So, for example, the vampire genre was unsurprisingly very popular this year. Candidates though who just looked at one core product (e.g. *Twilight*) often lacked a wider understanding of how and why films are presented across the platforms. These candidates have strong textual knowledge but their understanding of the over-arching topic (i.e. Film across the media) is poor and this also leads to weaker conceptual knowledge and understanding and poor question focus. Those candidates who had looked at a range of core products (for example in Broadcast Fiction, *Being Human*, *True Blood* and *The Vampire Diaries*) were able to exhibit a far better

topic understanding of how a range of broadcast fiction products (for different audiences and from different institutions) work across the platforms.

Centres should therefore be reminded that the study of a single core product with one or two links in other platforms does not constitute a cross-media study. Franchises of particular films should also be avoided (James Bond and Indiana Jones the most popular here) as they also lead to a very narrow focus. In selecting a range of core products for a cross-media study it can be useful for some candidates to have a link between the products but ultimately they should be reminded that the ultimate link is the topic heading itself (i.e. Music, Sport, Film etc) and in turn a range of contrasting core cross-media products should be advised.

Indeed, many centres still seem to be playing it safe with the cross-media study, making all students cover the same topic area and often products. Again it should be reiterated that the cross-media study is intended to be as individualised as possible. Engaged and confident (level 4) responses are usually by candidates who have invested their own time and enthusiasm in their own researched study. This kind of critical autonomy and ownership of the study needs to be further encouraged. Many centres are modelling one core product (and its cross-media presence) to students and then enabling them to find their own contrasting core products. This approach works well but on the whole it is when candidates have complete freedom (obviously still being closely monitored and guided) which produces the most original and engaged responses.

The topic areas which proved most successful were the Music Industry, Documentary and Hybrid Forms and News. Music studies worked well when candidates chose two or three (sometimes contrasting) artists and showed how and why they had a cross-media presence. Many News answers used specific stories as a focus and many showed strong knowledge and understanding of a range of institutions. Documentary studies, when contemporary, also successfully made links to the other platforms. All of these topic areas enabled able candidates to focus on relevant contexts and critical debates such as falling print circulations in News, illegal downloading in the music industry and 'dumbing down' in the modern documentary. This approach should be encouraged and centres should ensure that they facilitate students to access the issues/debates that are relevant to specific topic areas.

Film studies are still problematic in the sense that many are limited to the marketing of the film across the media. This can be successful especially when the campaign is viral, but centres should try to push students to also explore swedging, mashups and any other forms of user-generated content. Video games can also provide another avenue for how the narrative of the original film is presented on another platform.

A small minority of centres are still taking too much of an issue-based project type approach to the cross-media study (e.g. body image in the media). This tends to lead to a more sociological response than a media studies one and can move students away from the most relevant key concepts of audience and institution. This is best avoided.

Question 5

This was by far the most popular Section B question. Nearly all responses were able to give a range of examples of how audiences use and respond to media products. Many focused on interactivity, how audiences can increasingly control and manipulate time in relation to media platforms, user-generated content, viral marketing, use of the red-button and online voting. Even those who could not quite adapt their prepared cross-media study to the specific demands of the question were able to successfully respond by taking a more conceptual approach. They

argued that without an audience the product would not in fact exist at all and focused on how in a competitive market place institutions have to respond to audience needs to be successful. The best responses, however, were those that evaluated the quotation in the question and often challenged the notion that audiences do in fact now have more power to shape and control media content. They were able to weigh platforms against each other (for example web versus print) and conclude that there were some areas where audiences were gaining more direct access but perhaps only because this ultimately served the institution's needs.

Indeed, many candidates would benefit from not rushing headlong into their response but taking the time to deconstruct the question and plan an appropriate argument. Many answers unnecessarily ran onto additional sheets (not really gaining many more marks) and time could have been spent more effectively planning a more critical and engaged response. Refreshingly, there were some stunning responses offered by students who understood the premise of the question, explored it carefully and then rejected it absolutely.

Question 6

Very few candidates opted for Question 6. Those candidates who had prepared a cross-media study with a strong institutions focus did well here whilst others unfortunately floundered and offered a very descriptive response. Music, News and Sport cross-media studies worked very well for this question. Specific institutions and the way they had responded to the challenges of new-media developments were discussed and referenced in detail in the best responses. For example, how News and Sports institutions have had to adopt a cross-media presence to enable audiences to be far more interactive and how record labels have had to use social networking sites to virally market their artists.

There were some successful Film responses which focused on how the industry had had to use technological advances to maintain cinema audiences (most notably 3-D in *Avatar*). Some film genre responses, however, tended to focus on social and historical change and how films reflected this (reminiscent of the legacy specification's MED4). This worked well for the core broadcast platform but responses soon floundered when trying to use the same argument for print and new media.

Some candidates unfortunately drifted off into merely considering audience (and how it had changed) their responses becoming almost indistinguishable from an answer to Question 5. Again, it should be highlighted to candidates that they must spend ample time choosing the right question which suits their cross-media study and planning an appropriate response which fully engages with the three bullet points.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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