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General Certificate of Education

Media Studies

MEST1   Investigating Media

Report on the Examination

2009 examination - January series

MEST 1: Investigating Media

This was the first examination on Unit 1 Investigating Media (MEST1) for the new AQA GCE Media Studies specification which has been running since September 2008. There were 970 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 MEST1 questions are more narrowly focused than previously and seem to have been very student friendly. Many responses were commendably succinct. One problem with MED1 print sources (from the legacy specification) was that they tended to encourage less able students to simply describe the text or name parts. The four questions in Section A, for all but the weakest students, however, did encourage more focused concentration on issues of Form, Representation, Audience and Institution. 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 and the provision of opportunities for student autonomy.

However, there are still some misconceptions in some centres as to how best to prepare candidates for this Unit, specifically the new short answer format in Section A and the nature of the Cross-Media study in Section B. Such shortcomings though may well be mainly due to the relatively short time centres have had to deliver this Unit, particularly in the context of the increased demands of the MEST2 production unit (Creating Media).

Section A: Texts, Concepts and Contexts

The Section A unseen text was a print-based A3 advertisement for *Microsoft's Xbox 360* games console, published in the *Guardian's* Weekend magazine supplement in the run up to Christmas (on Saturday, 24 November, 2007). Whilst the text was a relatively safe option (an advertisement from an 'old' media platform) for this first examination, it was chosen to signal to centres and candidates some of the preoccupations of the new specification such as media convergence and new media technologies. The text also raised interesting questions about the repositioning of the *Xbox* brand in response to the (then) recent *Nintendo Wii* and *DS Lite* campaigns in particular, and also the reinvention (and broadening) of the target audience of games consoles more generally (even *Guardian* readers no longer being safe from their direct advertising). This also linked well to the recent flux in representational terms of the stereotypical games console user, and the use of more physically interactive and educational formats targeted at families and older generations.

Section A followed the new short question and answer format under the four key concept headings of Media Forms, Media Representations, Media Institutions and Media Audiences. Specific questions linked to the text were asked in relation to each of these key concept areas. This new approach demanded that, to be successful, candidates had to think on their feet and apply their knowledge and understanding of each key concept to the text and question in hand rather than falling back on rehearsed or tired semiotic approaches. Candidates sitting the legacy specification (in MED1, Reading the Media) had tended to regurgitate answers in a formulaic way

and inappropriately apply this knowledge to an unseen text no matter what its specific concerns.

Candidates were also provided (through brief lead-in paragraphs) with lots of information on the text's context, purpose and institutional source. Interestingly, however, not all candidates picked up on these prompts and used them to their full advantage. They are present to create a level playing field for candidates who may not be aware of the text's immediate contexts and institutional source. The lead-ins should be used to aid responses to the four questions.

Candidates should be reminded to use the fifteen minutes preparation time wisely and ensure that their notes and initial ideas are in response to the four questions asked (printed at the beginning of the exam paper for this very purpose). In turn candidates should ensure that there is no overlap or unnecessary repetition in their four responses and also that they maintain their consistency and momentum within Section A. All questions are worth equal marks after all. Some candidates lacked the necessary stamina here and frustratingly ran out of steam by questions three and four.

Question focus is paramount now in Section A and again centres need to remind their candidates of this. More than one key concept can of course be used in tackling a question and under the heading of another. Pleasingly, very few candidates wrote inappropriately on a key concept in response to the 'wrong' question.

Centres also need to be wary when delivering media theory. All too often rather than empowering candidates' responses, the use of theoretical responses impeded and confused their answers. There was some evidence that candidates had been given a checklist of theories to use and were instructed to incorporate them into their responses at whatever cost. This lead to inappropriate use of theories which were created to aid the analysis of other forms of media in very different contexts. For example, the use of Propp to describe the *Xbox* console as the hero in the text's narrative is imaginative but far-fetched. Steven Neale's *Genre Theory* is also more appropriate for cinema texts. Candidates would be better served in trying to respond autonomously to the text and questions at hand rather than regurgitating theory.

Some candidates are also merely using a semiotic approach to their analysis and going through various examples of denotation/connotation in the text. This was problematic when question focus was lost. Refreshingly, however, few candidates merely described the text. Some are still harking back to the MIGRAIN planning approach which due to the new nature of the exam is not always fruitful. Candidates would do better to focus on planning a direct response to the question at hand and linking to only relevant key concepts.

Question 1: Media Forms

This was a straightforward question designed to give candidates a comfortable lead into the exam. It demanded that candidates show their knowledge and understanding of magazine layout devices, use terminology effectively to describe them, and refer in detail to their use in the text. Some stronger candidates were also able to offer explanations as to why the devices had been used. On the other hand, many candidates failed to maintain a sustained focus on the question and instead offered a

semiotic analysis of the text or a MED1 full MIGRAIN approach. Others took a theory-lead approach and again their responses lacked the necessary focus. Terminology on the whole was used appropriately, but some centres need to reinforce its use. Most candidates were comfortable with basic terms such as headline, column, font, caption etc. However, there was some inappropriate use of terms such as masthead, strapline and standfirst. Of course, there are useful links to be made here with MEST2 (Creating Media) production work. Some candidates also need to be reminded that their comments need to be firmly rooted in the text at hand and refer in detail to specific textual elements. Some responses implied that the text followed the general characteristics of a magazine feature article rather than showing exactly how.

Question 2: Media Representations

The question on representations in the text was designed to enable candidates to comment on how the *Xbox* advertisement was moving away from the stereotypical notion of the lone teenage male games console user and instead emphasising the active engagement, communal participation (both real and virtual), intense enjoyment, interaction and inclusivity that the brand claims to offer. Many candidates picked up on this and very strong responses also suggested how this offer of inclusivity ('Fun for Everyone') was actually contradicted in the advertisement by a very exclusive and restrictive representation of the family.

Some candidates failed to pick up on the hook provided in the question (and the lead-in paragraphs) and instead commented on more general notions of representation such as race, age and gender. This approach still enabled them to access the higher levels of the mark scheme depending on the level of knowledge and understanding of the key concept of representation exhibited.

Again close reference to the text is paramount. Some weaker candidates just offered a generalised overview of how games console users were represented rather than an analysis of how these representations were constructed through the use of media language. Providing an image analysis and/or deconstruction of the copy to support claims made about representations enabled candidates to show fully how representations were constructed and conveyed in the text as well as use media terminology.

Question 3: Media Institutions

The question on Institutions was designed to enable candidates to show their knowledge and understanding of how brand values are communicated and conveyed through direct advertising. The *Xbox 360* brand was repositioned in the advertisement to target a (female) family consumer in the run up to Christmas. Many candidates were successful in highlighting the brand values and experiences promoted such as fun, accessibility, inclusivity, value for money and technological innovation (allowing for multi-media convergence) through the media language utilised in the advertisement.

Despite the concern that many students might struggle with the new demand to have to focus on the more challenging key concept of Institution, responses on the whole were very positive and showed no real disparity with the other three questions in Section A. Some candidates, however, had difficulty with the notion of brand value and merely fell back on a description/list of the experiences offered. Once more the most successful answers rooted their responses in details from the text (i.e. how brand and experience is communicated through media language) and in turn were able to use media terminology effectively. Again, question focus was paramount and better responses ensured that they commented on both brand and experience (not necessarily in equal measure).

Question 4: Media Audiences

The question on Audience was designed to test candidates' knowledge and understanding of the techniques used to target one segment of the *Guardian* readership (i.e. middle-class professionals). *Microsoft* was arguably attempting to reach this audience in their leisure time through positioning the advertisement in the *Guardian's Weekend* magazine supplement. Many candidates successfully commented on a range of techniques such as:

- the use of magazine layout devices (linking to Question 1) to catch and hold the reader's attention (the middle class professional perhaps being cynical towards traditional direct advertising)
- the emphasis on the interactive, participatory, co-operative and even educational nature of the games experience (altering the middle-class professional's prejudice towards computer-gaming stereotypes)
- the emphasis on family values
- the promotion of multi-media convergence and new technologies (appealing to the middle-class professionals materialistic/aspirational values)

Responses were most successful when candidates could make explicit links between the technique used and the middle-class profile/lifestyle/values of the audience segment. Some candidates, however, had difficulties with the notion of class and failed to fully understand that this audience is only one segment of the *Guardian* readership. In turn, candidates failed to pick up on the prompt in the question and considered *Guardian* readers or even broadsheet readers as a general group. In turn, there were often some sweeping generalisations made such as that broadsheets are only read by business men on trains.

Some candidates also just described the content of the advertisement (e.g. the price of the console) rather than isolating the actual techniques used. The separation of *The Guardian* as the institution in which the advertisement was placed from the actual advertising agency who produced and positioned the advertisement was also problematic for some candidates and lead to some confusion (many thinking that the advertisement had been created solely for or even by *The Guardian* itself). Indeed this was one key technique often overlooked by candidates (the very positioning of the advertisement within *The Guardian Weekend* magazine supplement, an environment actively promoting the entertainment/culture industries).

Section B: The Cross-Media Study

The two questions on the Cross-Media study were designed to be generic enough to allow all candidates to respond individually using their prepared case study (chosen from the suggested cross-media topic areas of study in the specification (page 7). Both questions linked to the suggested approaches to study (fundamentally the key concepts and relevant issues, debates, contexts) bullet-pointed on pages 7 to 8 of the new specification. Question 5 focused on the concept of audience and allowed candidates to explore not only the positive values of the media products in their case study such as information and education but also consider the opportunities for interaction and participation offered by new digital media (including the notion of audiences as producers). Question 6 took an institutions approach asking candidates to consider why products are present across the platforms and what advantages this offered to producers.

All candidates found their way through the paper to Section B successfully, following the instructions on the paper. Some need to remember to state which question they are responding to and not leave this up to the examiner to decide for them. Candidates responded very well to the bullet points provided for each question. The vast majority gave a succinct outline of their cross-media study which gave a very useful guide to examiners of the quality and nature of the cross-media study undertaken. Most also took the hint to make sure that all three platforms were referenced and successful candidates managed to think on their feet and steer their prepared case study clearly in the direction of the question set. Print, as a platform, however, was the most problematic for candidates to exemplify. This may be a sign of the times but does signal the need for candidates to ensure they have solid, detailed examples prepared from each platform.

However, there was a concerning amount of problems with many responses in Section B. Case studies tended to be either far too narrow (i.e. consider just one core text and one cross-media link in each platform) or far too broad. In the latter case often hypothetical and generalised examples were used from across the platforms which could in essence have been linked to any media text. Print seemed to be the platform which suffered most from the use of hypothetical or very thin examples.

Centres need to ensure that their candidates have studied and prepared the necessary range of examples (at least three texts/products in each platform is recommended in the Teacher Resource Bank) but also are able to go into depth/detail when required. This need for breadth and depth is very challenging but centres are reminded that this part of the examination does amount to 20% of the full AS award. Candidates also need to be aware that cross-media links are not just about cross-promotion. Many Film case studies (particularly on the new *Bond* movies) took this approach and in turn responses, particularly to Question 6, were limited in their scope.

Some candidates took very bizarre approaches to the cross-media study. Some used the *Xbox* advertisement from Section A and were clearly unprepared whilst others even commented on their own production work from MEST2 (Creating Media) as evidence from their case study. Some centres also completely avoided the suggested cross-media topic areas recommended in the specification and invented their own dubious studies (e.g. Science, the *iPod*, Home Computers, The Internet). Advice should be sought from AQA on the suitability of a topic before candidates are lead up unfruitful and incorrect paths of study.

Centres should also be reminded that the media products and texts selected for the cross-media study should be as contemporary as possible (no more than three years old at the latest). This will enable the easy gathering of cross-media links and make the study relevant to the latest developments within the topic area. Non-contemporary approaches were often exacerbated by centres preparing candidates in the study of a film genre (most commonly Horror). Again, centres should be reminded that there is no requirement to link the film texts studied in the cross-media study by genre. This may actually have the negative effect of narrowing the case study too much. The link between the texts in the Film cross-media study is that they are all film products and that they use narrative techniques through the medium of moving image. Candidates might therefore be better served by examining different contemporary film texts developed for different audiences within different institutional contexts (i.e. Hollywood blockbuster, independent foreign art-house and low budget British). This contrasting approach to the case study would in turn enable candidates to explore a far greater range of concepts and contexts and prepare them more fully for A2 level.

Some centres also merely took a MED2 (legacy specification) approach, particularly noticeable with some Documentary and Film case studies. In this case no cross-media links in the other platforms were studied or prepared and this automatically meant that these candidates could only access the lower levels of the mark scheme.

There were some good cross-media studies prepared, however. The study of Reality TV (linked to the topic area of Documentary and Hybrid Forms) enabled candidates to draw from a range of contemporary examples from across the platforms. Lifestyle as a cross-media topic was also well-prepared (one core text being initially taken from each platform here and then its cross-media links being examined). There was also evidence of some strong cross-media studies on the Music Industry. In this case candidates were able to produce their own individualised cross-media studies by examining how a particular genre (and associated artists) of music was presented across the media through a vast range of different products and platforms. Indeed, the more individualised the cross-media study then the more engaged was the examination response likely to be.

Hopefully the largely poor response to Section B was due mainly to a lack of preparation and time on the part of centres and their candidates. After all, a January entry for this Unit is very early, particularly when considering the extra demands of MEST2 (Creating Media). It is hoped that by the summer examination series centres and their candidates will be more thoroughly prepared. The cross-media study is after all a very challenging element of the AS course. Candidates need to have studied a range of texts from across the platforms, demonstrating both breadth and depth. They need to have an understanding of the overall topic area, the key concepts and relevant contexts, issues and debates. They need to think on their feet under examination conditions and adapt their knowledge and understanding to the demands of a generic question. Ultimately, they need to exhibit autonomy and engagement with the topic through an individualised approach, using their own texts and informed opinions. This is a challenge for centres and their candidates, but one that has been largely met before through much successful teaching of MED2. Section B of MEST1 allows for a more future-proof approach.

Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the **Results statistics** page of the AQA Website.