



**General Certificate of Education (A-level)  
January 2012**

**Media Studies**

**MEST1**

**(Specification 2570)**

**Unit 1: Investigating Media**

***Report on the Examination***

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## General

This was the seventh examination on Unit 1 Investigating Media (MEST 1) for the AQA GCE Media Studies specification which has been running since September 2008. There were 3130 candidates who took the examination this series.

### Section A: Texts, Concepts and Contexts

#### Question 1: Media Forms

This was once again the best answered question, with over a half of candidates achieving a level three or above. Many responses showed at least a sound understanding of the design features used by the *i* front page to attract readers, most notably the use of colour, the large central WOB and the left-aligned masthead. Many picked up on the likeness of the product to a home page or magazine front cover.

Media terminology on the whole was used well. Those who had learnt news/magazine terms for print products (e.g. masthead, strapline, copy, deck, puff etc.) were rewarded. Those who had not were still able to suitably adapt their knowledge of other media language terms well. Unfortunately lower marks were usually achieved due to a lack of focus on the question set. These answers often took a more general view of the word 'designed' and included references to the content of the front page in their answers, in turn pre-empting their responses to question two. It is therefore worth reminding candidates that this question is under the heading of Media Forms and as such will primarily assess this key concept area (in this case the notion of design features).

Other less successful answers were able to describe the design features present but found it difficult to link these to the concept of audience and in turn show an understanding of how passing readers were being hailed by the front page. Again the words 'attract' and 'potential' in the question needed to be unpicked and fully focused upon.

#### Question 2: Media Audiences

This question was also fairly well-answered by candidates with just over a third achieving level three or above. These responses showed at least a sound understanding of how the content of the front page would appeal to the target audience. Level four responses were able to cover a wide range of appeals, noting both the focus on hard and soft news, the likely context of reception of the commuter 'fury' story, the topical relevance of the new-media lead story, the interactive potential of the paper and the emphasis on quality. Weaker responses tended to either lack range, with just a fixation on the new-media links of the newspaper, or avoid focusing on the question at hand (often repeating ideas on media language more relevant to question one).

Pleasingly, there was far less evidence of the use of regurgitated and redundant audience theory. Uses and Gratifications proved useful for many candidates though, especially if audience needs were applied to the text rather than just being listed. Effects Theory, however, was far less relevant to this question.

Many higher level candidates utilised the description of the target audience provided by the introductory blurb ((ABC1/15-44/both genders/time poor) to fully engage with the wide range of possible appeals of the front page in a sophisticated way. However, some less successful responses were guilty of falling back on very pre-conceived and generalised views of media audiences. These often relied on assumptions about age and gender; only young men apparently liking football and only older women being interested in cookies. There was

though some acceptance of the fact that older demographics enjoy using technology too. To their detriment some candidates ignored the target audience definition completely insisting that the paper was aiming at a working class audience because of its low price and tabloid size.

### **Question 3: Media Representations**

Unfortunately this was the least well-answered of all the Section A questions with many candidates struggling to show at least a sound understanding of media representations (in this case specifically how news is represented to make it appear more entertaining). Less than a quarter of responses were able to achieve level three or above.

The main problem with most responses was a lack of focus on the actual key concept of Representation. Many candidates preferred to place too much emphasis on ‘entertaining’ and subsequently focused on the audience appeal of the front page stories (again overlapping with question two territory). Many floundered and purely focused on the way in which the news was being offered as more interactive. Perhaps shocked by a representation question not on the stalwarts of gender, age or race, many decided to rehash these ideas anyway and avoid the question at hand.

Those who did show a sound understanding were able to grapple with ideas such as the careful balance offered by the front page between soft and hard news, the use of negativity/disequilibrium, the emphasis on elite persons, the dramatic headlines and the identification offered by the lead stories. There was unfortunately though often a lack of any understanding of the wider contexts of news media and particularly debates about the rise of infotainment and the subsequent dumbing down of news agendas to maintain audiences. Fundamentally level four responses needed to exhibit at least some awareness of how this particular front page at least partly illustrated the increasing trend in which news is mediated to the audience to ultimately represent news values more concerned with providing entertainment (and the right environment for advertisers) than civic journalism which is in the public interest.

### **Question 4: Media Institutions**

There were promising signs this series that many candidates are developing a better understanding of this traditionally challenging key concept. Encouragingly, there was also little evidence that candidates are running out of steam and ideas by question four. Over a quarter of responses achieved a level three or above. The deciding factor was the ability to develop a range of ideas in response to the question. Weaker candidates just focused on the new-media links that the paper had established whereas higher level responses were able to move beyond this to consider a wide range of ways the paper was branding itself. These included its low price, association with *The Independent*, promise of quality, its concision and innovative design features.

Focus on the actual text at hand was also important for success. Stronger responses examined how the actual front page helped to brand the paper rather than imagined online versions. Successful candidates could move beyond what the brand name of the paper suggested in a literal sense to consider the way in which the connotations and associations of the brand (the core values of brevity, interactivity and quality) were actually promoted by the front page.

Some candidates should be warned about just recycling the information from the introductory blurb. Many weaker responses just repeated the aims of the institution as set out by Andrew Mullins. However, there was also much pleasing evidence, presumably gleaned from the cross-media study, that candidates were aware of the decline in print circulations currently occurring and the many attempts by old media institutions to counter this.

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

There was much positive evidence once again this series that centres and their candidates have truly embraced the Cross-Media Study.

Helped by the change in question format, there was far less regurgitated description (of box office, directors, studio names etc.) at the beginning of responses. The three platforms were prevalent in the vast majority of responses (most now being structured around the platforms; aiding clarity and question focus). There was also very little evidence of no cross-media study having been prepared and MEST 2 coursework (or even the unseen Section A text) being used instead. Overall there still seems to be a pleasing range of cross-media studies being developed with enthusiasm and real engagement by candidates ranging from Music, News, TV Fiction, Film Fiction, Documentary and Hybrid Forms and the increasingly popular area of Lifestyle.

However, some issues remain. Many centres still seem to be playing it safe and teaching the cross-media study in a very rigid and controlled way. In these cases responses lacked individuality and most importantly any critical autonomy, running against the spirit of the specification. At its worst this resulted in rote learning and regurgitation with all candidates using exactly the same media products, examples, ideas and even essay structure (e.g. representation of youth on E4, Eminem).

Unfortunately, there is still some evidence of older products being used (9/11 news broadcasts, a potted history of the horror genre, for example) making it very difficult for candidates to individually research related contemporary cross-media products.

It once again needs to be reiterated that a cross-media study does not constitute the study of just one core text and one linked product in each platform. This is far too limited in scope for an AS course and will not provide students with a wider understanding of the whole topic area. A range of contrasting products (in terms of audience and institution) should be encouraged across the platforms thus fostering a greater understanding of the topic area at hand.

Indeed many cross-media studies had little sense of the topic they linked to. Where candidates had this wider topic knowledge and understanding they were more likely to be able to evaluate the reasons why media products are the way they are and in turn achieve much better question focus through the application of the conceptual framework.

### **Question 5**

This question was chosen by approximately forty per cent of candidates with just under forty per cent of them achieving a level three or above and thus exhibiting at least a sound knowledge and understanding of the question focus (in this case an evaluation of the potential audiences have to represent themselves and/or their opinions in media products from across the platforms).

Weaker responses tended to try to rewrite the question and instead focus on how audiences interpret media products or how institutions have to reflect audience interests to be successful. In hindsight these candidates may have been better off opting for question six and it would in turn be worth stressing to students the need to take their time in selecting the question which best suits their cross-media study.

Few candidates, unfortunately, challenged the notion of audience self-representation, many seeing e-media as the holy grail of free interaction. Again centres could be encouraged to

foster a more critical approach towards the illusion of audience power offered by new media institutions. Many candidates found it hard to find examples of audience self-representation in print but stronger responses were able to incorporate this in their evaluation and in turn provide a critique of print media, gatekeeping and producer control.

### **Question 6**

This was the most popular section B question with just over sixty per cent of candidates opting for it. It was generally very well answered with just under sixty per cent of responses gaining a level three or above.

Stronger responses made the effort to provide full question focus and evaluate the success of the promotional strategies used across the platforms (usually via the key concepts of audience and institution). This was made easier when candidates had constructed cross-media studies with contrasting products (in terms of audience and institution). Weaker responses tended just to describe and list the products studied and often repeat the same ideas but with different examples.

Again it was relatively rare for candidates to see a promotion as unsuccessful. Perhaps the study of failed products should be more encouraged to provide contrast and in turn enhance evaluation by further illuminating the reasons for a rival product's success.

### **Mark Ranges and Award of Grades**

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