General

The unseen extracts in this year’s exam were a moving image advertisement for Redrow Homes and an extract from a ‘Trews’ report on housing in East London, with both texts providing a range of points for analysis. Students across the ability range were able to access the products, and provided a range of responses that showed some real engagement with the unseen material. The detail in the majority of the responses suggests that students were well prepared for the examination in terms of understanding, with the quality of note taking skills in evidence being very impressive.

Equally, the vast majority of students had prepared interesting and engaging case studies around which to base their responses in Section B. It was evident that much time and effort had gone into preparing for the exam, with many students showing the ability to write in a sophisticated manner about a range of different example products, while simultaneously applying media theory effectively and exploring relevant wider contexts.

It was pleasing to note that the majority of case studies in this year’s exam included a focus on contemporary products (those released within the last 5 years or so) with few examples of more historical products being used, particularly as a central product in student responses. Additionally, there were fewer examples of students basing their case study on just one media product; the number of students who took this approach, which is clearly problematic, was notably smaller than last year.

Whilst it was also refreshing to see fewer ‘taught case studies’ this year, in which students simply appeared to be regurgitating teacher notes, a number of case studies were incredibly diverse, with links between products that were very difficult to spot. For example, one case study made reference to the move to online of BBC Three, Kim Kardashian as a celebrity, the emergence and media use of ISIS and the beliefs of David Icke. Including such a broad range of example products and ideas led to particularly fragmented responses.

The main frustration with responses from this year’s cohort was undoubtedly the poor quality of hand-writing. The exam board is very aware of the clear irony at play here; Section B of the exam encourages students to respond to questions on New/Digital Media, and thus explore a world in which perhaps hand-writing is perhaps of less importance than using technological devices, but some very real issues emerged. A number of students had writing that verged on being entirely illegible. As a result, it was very difficult to accurately assess the answers they had written in the exam. It is accepted that there is a lot of material to be covered in a short amount of time, and that students are clearly under a lot of pressure in an examination situation, but centres are expressly reminded to make clear to students that it is of utmost importance that an examiner can actually read responses. If the examiner is unable to read what is written, then it matters little how good the argument that is being presented is.
Section A

The focus of the 3 questions is:

Question 1 - Media concepts
Question 2 - Media issues and debates
Question 3 - Wider contexts

Question 1:

What media language techniques are used to make each product appear authoritative and trustworthy?

The question asked students to engage solely with the unseen extracts that were shown at the start of the examination. It provided the opportunity to show how they had developed their analytical ability from the AS examination, where they are asked to respond to just one unseen media product. Most students answered this question fairly well, but there were a number of recurring features in responses.

- Firstly, a number of students misread the question and ignored the word ‘media’. As a result, the focus of their response was on the type of spoken language used in each extract, with responses perhaps reading more like an English Language script. In these answers, no media language terminology or analysis was present, which meant that the question itself was not fully answered; accordingly it was very difficult to give these students a grade higher than that at the bottom of Level 2.
- Secondly, many students described what happened in each extract; there is absolutely no need for students to do this, primarily as examiners have already seen the extracts too.
- Thirdly, a number of students made the point that the name ‘The Trews’ was a portmanteau, possibly thinking they had come up with an insightful sentence or two. However, that information was given to them in the question paper and thus earned very little credit.

The better responses were the ones where students differentiated between 'authoritative' and 'trustworthy', seeing that some of the techniques used in each of the products may have made it trustworthy, but not necessarily authoritative and vice versa. Some very good analysis was seen, with points that explored the use of editing, camerawork and sound in each extract being of most value and quality. Weaker answers tended to focus on just one or two media language techniques, such as the use of close-up shots or non-diegetic voiceover in the Redrow advert. Equally, many students responded with a clear imbalance in the amount of detail in their answer; far greater comment was passed about the first product (the Redrow advert) than the second (the ‘Trews’ report).

When preparing students for this question, it is useful to remind them that the question will primarily focus on how the two unseen extracts have been constructed. While obviously paying specific attention to the wording of the question in each exam itself, students should focus on how the extracts that they are provided with use features such as camera, editing, sound, lighting etc in order to create an impact upon an audience.
Question 2:

**How do media products encourage audiences to agree with a certain set of values and beliefs? You may refer to other media products to support your answer.**

This question encouraged students to start to make use of their own media product examples, and the students who attained the higher marks did exactly that, rather than just making reference to the two products given in the exam itself. The better responses were ones that made detailed use of theoretical standpoints. These responses examined how audiences are encouraged to agree with a set of values, perhaps through a Marxist or pluralist perspective. Such answers made extensive use of particular examples ranging from the BBC to Rupert Murdoch to Stephen Fry.

Students who did refer to just the two products often found it difficult to move out of Level 2 in the mark scheme, thus hampering their chances of attaining a high grade overall. Many answers felt like extensions of question one, with more media language analysis of the two unseen products. Ironically, some students who took this approach made a better job of answering the question one task in their question two answer!

While a number of students argued that Russell Brand was an opinion leader and that Two-Step Flow as a theory could thus be applied, not all of these points were developed to include consideration of how audiences might respond to the influence the media can have. There is the lingering sentiment that some students attempt to shoe-horn theoretical references into their responses, perhaps believing that doing so will earn them credit. In order to be rewarded, students really do need to be applying media theory, rather than just naming it.

Weaker students tended to misread the language of the question, ignoring the word ‘do’. This changed their response to one that focused on “How media products encourage audiences...” which is a different question to the one actually set. Again, it is useful to spend preparatory lesson time with students specifically exploring what questions are asking students to do. Questions are not designed with the intention of catching students out, but are intended to enable a fair judgement of their knowledge, understanding and ability. To accurately assess this, students need to respond to the wording of each question as it appears in the exam paper.

Question 3:

**Should the media provide accessible platforms for alternative or oppositional voices? You should refer to other media products to support your answer.**

This question encouraged students to consider the role of the media in contemporary society, and gave them the opportunity to explore issues of control, dissent and individuality. This question proved to be a real differentiator. If a student provided an engaging, thoughtful and critically autonomous response to question 3, and particularly if they achieved a Level 4 mark, then examiners were confident that those students would also have a good Section B response in them.

The better responses were ones where there was a sense of evaluation embedded in the analysis. Such answers would take a standpoint, primarily arguing that the media 'should' provide platforms for alternative or oppositional voices, before then giving detailed and thoughtfully considered reasons as to why this should be the case. Even stronger responses additionally included a balance in their argument, with consideration of why ‘the media’ should perhaps exert control over the platforms available and the ways in which individuals could express their voice, before arriving at a conclusion.
However, a large number of students ignored the 'should' part of the question completely, and these students wrote much weaker responses. Such responses tended to make reference to the platforms that do exist, such as Tumblr, Twitter or Facebook, but did not then explore the ways in which such platforms are used by audiences, the impact that such platforms have upon society at large or the ways in which the voicing of alternative or oppositional views might be problematic.

Section B

Students had the choice of four questions, of which two were on New/Digital Media and two were on Identities and the Media. Though this was the second exam that included Identities and the Media as a specific topic area, it was noted that a large number of students wrote answers that were largely based around Representation as a concept. Though there are clear similarities between the two topics, Representation and Identity should not be viewed as the same thing.

As with the 2015 exam, there remain some clear issues that centres should encourage students to avoid. Such issues fall into one or more of the following:

- Case studies do not always have a clear and evident link to the impact of either New/Digital Media or Identities and the Media.
- Some students had case studies that could be best described as sprawling (see the example provided in the general introduction to this report). It remains difficult to create a coherent and logical argument when making reference to such disparate products.

Equally, some students had case studies that were self-limiting, as referred to previously, by virtue of making reference to just one media product.

Question 4:

"Popular ideas about the self in society have changed, so that identity is today seen as more fluid and transformable than ever before." David Gauntlett

Use your case study to explore this idea.

This was a very popular question, maybe because so many students recognised Gauntlett as a media theorist. Many responses to this question made good use of contemporary case studies, with the Kardashians, Miley Cyrus and Caitlyn Jenner repeatedly appearing. It was particularly pleasing to note that a number of answers focused upon increased societal acceptance of LBGTQ identities, with students exploring the ways in which non-binary portrayals of gender have become accepted. As such, theorists such as Judith Butler appeared in the work of many students, highlighting the way in which many centres have adapted to the recent change from Representation to Identities and the Media.

Some students took an oppositional perspective, and then wrote about case studies from non-Western societies. This approach was largely effective, with students exploring values and beliefs tied to religious and cultural views in a mature and sensitive manner. Equally, some students made specific use of their own experiences. Indeed, one student provided a very heart-felt discussion of their own use of Second Life, Tumblr, Twitter and Instagram when coming to terms with their own sexuality; while this approach was very individualised, it did give rise to some fantastic
consideration of the ways in which the changing media landscape has provided opportunities that were simply not available a generation ago.

Weaker students tended to rely on description, making fairly simplistic points and limiting their case study references to one or two central products or individuals. Such responses referred to the increased opportunity for individuals to express themselves, primarily via social media and platforms such as YouTube, as a result of developments in technology and cultural values and beliefs, but did not then consider the ‘fluid and transformable’ element of the question wording. Again, students should be encouraged to respond specifically to the full wording of each question as it is presented to them, rather than just recount their case study and make passing reference to the question they would like to be answering.

Question 5:

“In an increasingly globalised world, the ability to create an ‘alternative’ identity is becoming more difficult.” Does your case study support this view?

The wording of this question was very deliberately expressed in two distinct halves. The first part of the sentence asked students to consider the idea and concept of globalisation while the second half focused on the idea of ‘alternative’ identities. It is entirely accepted, therefore, that this question expected students to do a lot, particularly given the time available and the conditions of the examination. However, the majority of responses tended to ignore the first part of the question almost entirely, paying little regard to the concept of globalisation or the impact it might have upon national, regional or local communities and identities. As a result, while this question was very popular, many students struggled to access the higher levels of the mark scheme; their responses were interesting, relevant and engaging in their discussion of how individuals might struggle to show their alternative identity, but paid little attention to the context behind why this might be the case.

Stronger responses drew on wide ranging case studies, with reference to products such as Dapper Laughs, Catfish, vloggers on YouTube and the global appeal of American television series such as The Big Bang Theory. Perceptive application of theorists such as Sherry Turkle, Clay Shirky, Tessa Perkins and Andy Medhurst was evident in a number of strong responses, while students actively debated the viewpoint posited in the question.

In contrast, weaker students largely stated that alternative identities do exist, and failed to engage with the concept that values, beliefs and opportunities for expression can change over time. As a result, these students were unable to fully engage with the wording of the question, and relied on descriptions of characters in media products rather than an analysis of case study examples and their impact upon audiences and social values.

Question 6:

“As a result of developments in new and digital media, traditional media institutions face a struggle to survive.”

Use your case study to discuss this statement.

This was the more popular of the two questions available on New/Digital Media, and a number of students provided particularly engaging responses. Many of them referred to very contemporary products, with case studies exploring the move of BBC3 to an online platform (specifically with a
view to appeal to a younger audience), the birth and demise of “The New Day”, the disappearance of The Independent as a physical artefact newspaper, and the on-going debate concerning the use of pay-walls on newspaper websites. Responses showed excellent engagement with what is happening in the world and media in 2016, and revealed a cohort with genuine concerns about how their future might be affected by a changing media landscape. Equally, there was a sense of ‘excitement’ about the possible futures offered by changing technologies, especially once the ‘older generation’ were no longer with us, though it was disconcerting to repeatedly be advised that the ‘older generation’ was anyone over the age of 30.

This was a question which perhaps did not rely on students’ knowledge of media theory, and indeed many students made very little reference to any theory at all. However, it was a question which required a strong awareness of wider contexts in order to access the higher levels of the mark scheme. Better performing students, therefore, made excellent reference to the ways in which a range of industries are being affected by changing audience habits, with some superb work seen on the music industry, the emergence of platforms such as Spotify, Tidal and Deezer, and the views of people such as Radiohead’s Thom Yorke. Case studies were often complex and broad, but students who answered this question effectively were able to draw on material from a range of industries and perspectives.

Weaker responses tended to focus on just the one industry, often making use of one main media product or individual. Such answers remained fairly one-dimensional, with consideration of some technological developments, but no real debate about what the media might look like in the future, and what impact this might have on audiences.

Question 7:

Data is "retained and subsequently used without the subscriber or registered user being informed… private lives are the subject of constant surveillance". European Court of Justice - April 2014

With reference to your case study, discuss the extent to which you agree that ‘private lives are the subject of constant surveillance’.

This question was responded to by few students, and was the least popular Section B question by some considerable distance.

Students who did respond to this question largely did so effectively, showing good knowledge and understanding of the development of social media, the role and presence of CCTV, the concept of the proposed ‘Snoopers’ Charter’ and the impact of such surveillance on individuals. Students considered celebrities who had had aspects of their private lives exposed in the name of ‘journalism’, and there were interesting discussions about Britney Spears, the role played by TMZ in the aftermath of the death of Michael Jackson and the Guardian’s exposé of documents obtained by Edward Snowden. Students made good use of theorists such as Baudrillard, Henry Jenkins and Marx.

Verbal feedback from some centres, and individual students, suggests that this question was seen as a ‘bit of a curveball’, and that the majority of students discounted it because of the topic that it centred upon. In its own way, this was very disappointing given that issues of surveillance and control are so prevalent when considering the impact of New/Digital Media on our everyday lives. Indeed, question 3 in Section A had provided the opportunity for students to start considering very similar issues.
Centres are reminded that a list of possible topic areas, from which any future exam question may be taken, is provided on page 15 of the Media Studies specification. It is important to prepare students for possible questions in each of these topic areas, in order to maximise their chances of selecting the most appropriate question for their individual case study.

**Summary**

The responses seen to this year’s MEST3 exam suggest that the vast majority of students are fully engaged in their own independent case studies. Lots of good practice was seen in terms of research, understanding of relevant media theory and the contemporary media landscape. Additionally, it was pleasing to note that most students are engaged with the concept of Identities and the Media, and that their answers are phrased in a way that means they are more than simply Representation responses. Students are also making good reference to Wider Contexts in responses, particularly in Section B. With only a couple of years of this particular exam remaining, it is hoped that students continue to reveal their own autonomous understanding of work covered; it is this approach, where students are encouraged to think for themselves and develop their own viewpoints, perspectives and beliefs, that will best prepare them for life after A-level.
Mark Ranges and Award of Grades

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

Converting Marks into UMS marks

Convert raw marks into Uniform Mark Scale (UMS) marks by using the link below.

UMS conversion calculator