A-level
MEDIA STUDIES
MEST1 Investigating Media
Report on the Examination

2570/MEST1
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General

The unseen product, a trailer for the ITV series *The Halcyon*, presented students with a variety of ways to approach the analysis of media concepts and they responded thoughtfully and at times enthusiastically to the chance to ‘check-in to our hotel’. As in previous years, the level of detailed reference that students were able to make to the product under exam conditions was impressive. The responses suggest that students are well prepared for this exam in terms of understanding the media concepts as well as the skills of effective note taking. The contextual information on the exam paper is now minimal and this meant that students didn’t waste time repeating it and focused directly on the questions.

It was notable that far more explicit theory was being brought in to the responses than has been evident in previous years, much of it named theorists from the new A-level Media Studies specification. As always, theory which is well integrated and develops analysis is a welcome addition, but the listing of theory has no value in itself.

Question focus (in both Section A and B) is an important discriminator. In Section A, students should make sure they are addressing the specific questions set within the context of the question heading (Forms, Representation, Audience and Institution). Question focus is also an integral part of the assessment in Section B; descriptions of cross media studies and rote responses based on whole class teaching (often on film marketing and Reality TV) do not allow the student to reach the higher levels of the mark scheme. Question focus has certainly improved over the life of the specification but is still worth reiterating.

Section A

Question 1

This was successfully answered with students making lots of detailed reference to the use of sound, editing and the relationship between the two. Students didn’t need to discuss the forms equally, but they did have to refer to both. It was also important to note the other aspect of the question which referred to audience engagement. Students picked out the use of different paced editing to construct suspense and enigma and discussed its function as part of the teaser element of the trailer. Diegetic and non-diegetic sound was analysed confidently, referring to the use of explosions, the pointed dialogue found in the voice-over as well as the song lyrics. All these were clearly linked in the strongest answers to addressing and engaging the audience. However, despite the good responses here it was apparent that some students were confused in their definition of editing, often focusing on cinematography instead.

Question 2

This question threw up some issues for students due to confusion around defining social class and there was evidence of students falling back into discussing a more familiar aspect of representation – gender. However, students overall were able to identify the class divisions evident in the trailer, both through the ‘upstairs downstairs’ nature of the setting and through the construction of the trailer. Successful answers pointed to the class conflict (often referring to binary oppositions) and the way the audience was positioned to sympathise with the working-class characters. Some very perceptive analyses demonstrated how the working-class characters were frequently marginalised by screen time, framing and compositions. Students also made reference to the way in which the war setting was used to show how both classes were affected by the tragedy around them and had
to work together. There was a notable level of political analysis with students pointing to the representation of the upper class in the media as a form of ideological practice.

**Question 3**

There were a lot of engaged answers here, with students appearing to enjoy discussing the ways that the past had been ‘updated’ for an audience in the present. Problems came where students were confused about the definition of the term ‘contemporary’ (quite often thinking it was synonymous with young) or where they wrote generally about targeting any audience. The best answers understood that the trailer wasn’t a realistic portrayal of the 1940s but was a construction designed to appeal to an audience used to watching dramas with complex narratives, soaps and reality television. They pointed to the representation of a drinking culture, the modification of fashions and the use of a recent soul track as examples of the updating. Many of the responses focused on the inclusion of issues around sexuality and diversity which would have been taboo in the time the trailer was set but are mainstream to a contemporary audience. Students also successfully referred to the form of the trailer; the fast cuts, explosions and music as typical of contemporary Hollywood cinema. Some perceptive answers referred to the way in which the trailer provided escapism for a contemporary audience through the glamorisation of the past, but also remained relevant through parallels (a divided society, terrorism) with today.

**Question 4**

Students seemed quite comfortable with this question, though there was some confusion about the status and funding of ITV. Answers drew on the style and subject matter of the trailer: the tradition and popularity of period dramas, the literal dialogue of the voice over welcoming everyone in to the hotel and the range of storylines and characters which allowed a wide range of audiences to be addressed. Other relevant areas were related to the clearly high production values and recognisable actors. Students were also able to comment on the use of digital technology platforms by ITV which was indicative of a major broadcaster. Effective reference was also made to the Sainsbury’s sponsorship, discussing how the two brands were both examples of mainstream institutions.

**Section B - General**

There was again evidence of a lot of effective work on the cross-media study with students covering a variety of contemporary products, audiences and institutions. There were strong cross media studies across the topics with good responses using cookery and lifestyle, music industry, sports and film. It is recognised that with the developments in technology, the three media platforms are not the discrete forms that they once were with TV broadcasts now on channels such as YouTube, newspapers having an online presence, hosting podcasts and films as well as existing in print forms. It is important that students cover a range of examples but they do not have to be evenly distributed across platforms.

As has been discussed in detail in several previous reports, it is vital that students have a viable cross-media study in order to access the higher levels in the mark scheme. The focus should be on a case-study which allows students to engage with contemporary media debates and also gives them a wide enough range of products in order to be able to select the most appropriate examples for the question focus. With the emphasis being on contemporary media debates it is necessary for students to have current and recent examples to use. Case studies on film and television in...
particular, still refer to examples which are really too old to be effective in analysing the contemporary media landscape.

**Question 5**

There was a fairly even split across the optional questions this year. Students tackled the concept of interactivity from a variety of approaches, including the unexpected. While most students focused on the idea of interactivity within the context of digital technology and the blurred boundaries between audience and producer, there was also the possibility of considering it in more general terms, such as to do with audience engagement in a product. The latter approach included discussion of active and passive audiences and reception theories. There was a consensus that the extent of interactivity depended on the type of media form, with the print form allowing for the least opportunity for interactivity. In order to reach the higher levels of marks in discussing e-media, students should have specific examples of contributions to forums, tweets etc. and not just rely on general references to Facebook, Instagram etc. The most successful responses tackled the evaluative part of the question and debated how much of the seeming interactivity was actually meaningful and this led to some very thoughtful discussions. Students did need to engage with this part of the question in order to reach the higher levels. It was notable that in many cases students gave examples of limited audience interactivity but then stated in the conclusion that they disagreed with the statement, suggesting the need for greater attention to essay structure.

**Question 6**

This question allowed for a variety of approaches to evaluating the cross-media study. Popular ways to approach the question were: to consider the role of public service broadcasting in comparison to commercial institutions; the role of documentary filmmaking as a form of social justice campaigning; and the marketing strategies of Hollywood studios. Students were clearly aware of the need for media institutions to make money in order to survive and therefore took – on the whole – a nuanced view of the question (although too many responses revealed confusion around PSB, suggesting that the BBC didn’t need to worry about profits). There was a lot of engagement through evaluation of, for example, the careers of musicians and their relationship to the music industry on the one hand and their fans on the other. Successful answers were also evident in cross-media studies on sport, which considered public access to televised tournaments versus the need to make money on the part of institutions. The best responses were able to keep a critical distance from the operations of media institutions without assuming that making a profit was inherently bad. As with question 5, greater discipline in answering the question, rather than describing the case study, would have led to higher marks.
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