General

This was the final full examination of MEST3, but the exam bows out on a high, with an array of engaging and interesting responses provided to the questions that were asked. Many students explored complex issues of media ownership and control, with a pleasing focus on the impact of media technology upon identity and society as a whole.

The majority of students had been well prepared for this exam, with a wide range of appropriate case studies seen. Students who had not been successful generally lacked an effective case study. Indeed, some students answered their selected Section B question but failed to make reference to a single media product, thereby making it difficult to accept that they had completed a two year-long A-level course of study. Such responses relied on generic points that failed to explore the relationship between the media and contemporary society. Equally, many responses failed to apply media theory, and as a result did not achieve high marks. This point is particularly salient given the nature of the new A-level Media Studies specification, with its focus on the theoretical framework to underpin a study of the Close Study Products. More than ever, all students will need to have an understanding of those media theories, and be able to apply them in exam conditions.

As in the past few years, there was an issue with the quality of hand-writing. Scripts are increasingly marked online rather than on paper, and as such it can be tricky to decipher some hand-writing. If a student has hand-writing that is difficult to decipher, then schools are advised to make sure that appropriate steps have been taken to enable those students to fulfil their potential. Examiners can only assess what they can actually read.

Section A

The two unseen products this year were moving image advertisements for AT&T and IBM, with each product providing a number of opportunities for analysis. Students of all abilities were able to engage with both the construction features of each product and the issues and debates that emerged from them.

QUESTION 1

Many students wrote engaging responses to this question, discussing a range of media language techniques in good detail. There were some nice comments about the use of soundtrack, camerawork, editing and mise-en-scene, while many responses highlighted the differences between the two products. Weaker responses described what happened in each advert, without fully engaging with how the products were specifically constructed or how audiences might respond to them.
The majority of responses focused more on product one than on product two, perhaps because the pace of the first advert encouraged greater audience engagement. It was pleasing to note that a number of responses engaged with institutional values, with some good arguments that AT&T were suggesting that internet users would benefit from using their product. Students have not really engaged with such values over the past few years, so this was a refreshing development.

The focus when analysing product two was largely upon the presence of Carrie Fisher, with some good points made about how her role in the advert would engage fans of Sci-Fi as a genre. Beyond that, while there were some relevant comments about audiences being able to relate to the self-help narrative of the product, few responses fully engaged with the construction of the product itself.

**QUESTION 2**

This question proved to be an instant differentiator between students of contrasting abilities. Better students explored the nature of modern living, with detailed points about our use of smart phones and smart home technologies such as Alexa, while also discussing the inter-connectivity created by our use of social media. Weaker students primarily focused on the role of one institution, which tended to be either Snapchat or Instagram. This difference tended to suggest that weaker students were not seeing a “bigger picture”, and therefore were not debating the issues fully.

Relevant points were made about how different generations use media technology in different ways. However, there continued to be a rather alarming idea that people over thirty were “middle aged”, “unable to cope with media technologies” or had “given up on new-fangled online living”. Maybe some students might benefit from being reminded that it’s the over 30s who have invented a number of the new media technologies that contemporary life relies upon.

**QUESTION 3**

This question enabled students to draw on their prepared case-study material a little further. As a result, there were a number of responses that made some relevant references to the Kardashians, Logan Paul, RuPaul and Gary Lineker. In each case there were some engaged and engaging points about how the public persona of an individual did not always reflect their private self. Better responses tended to take this argument further, developing the idea that contemporary social pressures lead to many of us having a wide range of different faces for different audiences. A range of media theories were therefore applied by more able students in answering this question, amongst them Henry Jenkins, David Gauntlett, David Buckingham and Tajfel and Turner.

The main flaw in responses was that students failed to debate the idea of “To what extent”, as explicitly expressed in the question wording. Most answers were presented in a binary manner, so either our online identity entirely reflected our real life identity or they were two different things.
completely. There were few grey areas. The lack of nuance and subtlety in many responses limited the development of argument and prevented access to the higher bands of the mark scheme.

SECTION B

QUESTION 4

This question was the least popular of the two provided in the Identities and the Media section, and was also the question in which students were awarded the lowest average marks across Section B as a whole.

In some ways this question served as an extension of Question 2, with the themes and issues raised being similar. As such, a number of responses focused upon Kylie Jenner and contemporary social media celebrities. There were some engaging answers that explored the ways in which younger generations, in particular, felt culturally obliged to maintain a presence on a variety of social media platforms, with the concept of FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out) driving the behaviour of many. The strongest responses took a more autonomous approach, with case studies that were more nuanced and less obvious. Products referred to in such responses included Childish Gambino’s video for “This is America”, the emergence of the #metoo debate and the voices of the survivors of the Parkland shooting in Florida.

Again, the overall quality of responses relied upon student engaging with the “Discuss the positives and negatives…” aspect of the question. The wording used here was designed to encourage a debate, with the implication being that there are both positives and negatives to the increased role of the internet in contemporary life. Better students engaged with both advantages and disadvantages while weaker responses argued from just one perspective.

QUESTION 5

This was the most popular question of the four posed in Section B, with approximately 35% of all students selecting this response.

The same products and case studies emerged again, with a number of answers mentioning the Kardashians and Jenners, Love Island, and more weighty examples such as the 2016 Ariana Grande Manchester bombing and the London Bridge attack. In some ways it was this question that offered the most reassurance to the examiners. The vast majority of students revealed themselves to be engaged members of society, shattering the stereotype of teenagers as feckless and self-centred. There was some superb engagement with current affairs, including discussion about topics such as ISIS, Brexit and President Trump

Weaker responses failed to explore more than the occasional example product or individual, and made little reference to media theory. Stronger responses, on the other hand, were fully engaged
with wider contexts and the world at large, whilst simultaneously applying a range of relevant theoretical perspectives.

**QUESTION 6**

This question was the least popular of the four that were asked in Section B, with those students who did attempt it primarily focusing on the concept of “fake news”. This was perhaps understandable, given the prominent role of Donald Trump and the impact he has had on global events since announcing his presidential candidacy. However, few responses made detailed reference to the other terms used in the wording of the question, which was disappointing.

Better answers explored how audiences needed to be increasingly “media savvy”, making informed choices about which perspectives and institutions they elected to believe. Accordingly, there was some really good application of theory in some responses to this question, with the ideas of Eli Pariser and George Gerbner being used particularly effectively. Weaker responses relied on more simplistic approaches, and failed to identify the idea that audiences are active and able to differentiate between the voices that are presented to them by the media.

**QUESTION 7**

The more popular of the two questions asked in the New / Digital Media part of Section B, this question was seized upon by a number of students who had been reading the news over the past twelve months. Many responses to this question explored the Cambridge Analytica story, while there were also a number of answers that also made reference to the Visa card outage that had occurred over the weekend prior to the exam being sat.

There were some insightful and interesting debates about how much personal data we willingly give up to institutions such as Google, Amazon and FaceBook. More pertinently, there was a general sense that, while this surrender of details might not be in the best interests of each individual, it was now unavoidable. Many answers explored the concept that life in 2018 is increasingly difficult without engaging with such companies. The air of resignation from young people was crystal clear, and gave the impression that, despite best efforts, “big business” has already won.

**SUMMARY**

This final full cohort suggested that A-level Media Studies students are increasingly well informed and increasingly engaged with the world around them. There were some genuinely excellent responses seen, with more students earning full marks in both Section B and across the entire paper than in 2017. However, schools have, perhaps, now worked out how to teach students more effectively in specific preparation for this paper, and we have seen a number of standard responses that contain an element of what is very obviously teacher-led content. Regrettably, there certainly appeared to be a reduction in the number of truly autonomous responses this year.
Similarly, a number of schools and students have been identified who have taken the very cynical approach of reproducing the content and analytical argument of the MEST4 Critical Investigation in Section B of MEST3, which has limited the quality of some responses.

Finally, this paper threw up some intriguing individual errors, which are worthy of mention if only because this is the final full year of the paper. An exam paper which leads to student responses that explore “slow-paste editing”, “mice-en-scene” and “non-diabetic sound” either suggests that our young people are having a laugh at our expense, or perhaps is something to be looked back at fondly now that it has gone.
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