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# A-LEVEL MEDIA STUDIES

7572/2 Written  
Report on the Examination

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## Overview

Once again students responded very positively to Paper 2, taking advantage of the opportunity to develop analysis and argument across the extended response questions. It is really positive to see so much engagement with media theories and concepts, with students able to apply them to the set products and to consider their validity. It was noticeable that across the paper, students were question focused, addressing the particular assessment objectives, demonstrating the ability to evaluate theory and to draw judgments and conclusions. At the top levels there was a lot of evidence of students testing ideas in a sophisticated way and there was very little evidence of rote responses at any level. Many students produced responses which really demonstrated the importance of media studies as a subject which can critically engage with contemporary, urgent issues.

As noted in previous reports, the theoretical frameworks (media language, representation, industry, audience) are the central focus of the specification with the study of the CSPs there to help explore and 'test' the approaches. It is important that students can develop arguments, evaluate and make judgements about theoretical approaches and concepts, in order to achieve the higher levels.

The improvement in the balanced and meaningful use of the set products (CSPs) noted in last year's report continued in this session. There is now an excellent weighting between the need to provide detailed analysis of products in some questions ('apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to analyse media products') and to use them in reference to the theoretical frameworks ('apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to make judgements and draw conclusions').

Students should be reassured that the space provided in the answer booklet should be sufficient to produce a very successful response. Students should make sure their work is focused on the question and that it is analytical rather than descriptive.

The following provides information on the responses to each question. Please note that there is also detailed indicative content for each question included in the mark scheme available on the secure area of the AQA website.

## Q1

Analyse **Figure 1** using the following semiotic ideas:

- *signifier*
- *signified*
- *ideology*.

This question assessed AO2 1, which meant students had to:  
Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media studies to analyse media products through the use of academic theories.  
(9 marks).

Question 1 is the only short answer on the paper and will always test knowledge and understanding of the framework of media language. The contextual information is deliberately kept to a minimum and no prior knowledge of the product is required (though it will always relate to one of the forms assessed on this paper).

Students performed well on this question, clearly familiar with the selected terms from semiotic approaches (some responses made references to Saussure and Barthes though this wasn't required, and students could achieve full marks without referencing theorists) and were able to

confidently analyse the meaning of the poster. Not all students were able to link this analysis explicitly to issues of ideology which meant it was difficult for them to get into the highest band of the mark scheme. However, there were many answers which linked the symbols of the corporate world and capitalism to gangster culture, rather than a more conventional idea of gangs. There was a lot of detail about the way the skyscrapers were also guns, the mode of address of the characters and the threatening mise en scene. The nature of the diversity in terms of ethnicity and gender was also a way in for students to discuss ideological messages. The most successful answers spent time considering the media language of the image before linking to wider ideological messages, finding a good balance between the two.

It's important for students to remember the relatively low tariff for this question and to make sure they remain question focused and concise.

## Q2

*Clay Shirky argues that the development of online media means that the audience has become the producer.*

*How valid are 'end of audience' theories in explaining the relationship between audiences and producers of online media?*

You should refer to the online Close Study Products *Teen Vogue* **and** *The Voice* in your answer.

This question assessed AO1 1b, AO2 2 and AO2 3 which meant students had to:

Demonstrate understanding of the theoretical framework of media (**10 marks**).

Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to:

- evaluate academic theories (**10 marks**)
- make judgements and draw conclusions (**5 marks**).

The focus of the question was to assess students' knowledge and understanding of end of audience theory and, through reference to their CSPs, draw judgements and conclusions as to how valid the claims made by the theory are. This meant that students needed to refer to the theory (identified with a prompt in the question) and evaluate its validity within the wider theoretical framework of audience. It was important for students to address the question of the validity of the theory. There was no 'right' answer and students were not expected to argue either way in terms of validity, but to make a convincing case for whichever argument they chose.

As Clay Shirky was referred to in the question, responses did need to show their understanding of his ideas about the changing nature of the media audience in relation to producers. Students seemed confident in doing this, able to use relevant concepts such as prosumer, mass amateurisation and cognitive surplus in their answers. It was notable that students were relatively sceptical about the positive analysis of this relationship provided by Shirkey, which allowed for a thoughtful evaluation of the theory. Many responses questioned how much change there had actually been in the relationship, arguing that ultimately corporations were still very much the dominant force. There were though also very thoughtful points on the way in which the relationship had changed – even if not in quite the way Shirky envisaged – arguing that *Teen Vogue's* success came from a very close relationship with the audience, one which *The Voice* didn't have. This was backed up with examples of how audience activity was central to the *Teen Vogue* website and inherent in its mode of address ('Rise, Resist, raise your Voice'). Some students were able to develop a sophisticated argument about how this was an iteration of a contemporary public sphere, providing space for public debate. Relevant and useful examples also included the way that *Teen*

*Vogue* actually had to limit audience contribution due to the nature of social media platforms and the danger of abuse and trolling, particularly for their target audience, again an unforeseen consequence of greater audience visibility. In contrast, the majority of students felt that *The Voice* had a much more traditional relationship to the audience, with very limited opportunity for the audience to take part in the communication beyond BTL comment and letters. At the higher levels students were able to place this in the context of the very different nature of the producers. More problematic was the argument that the audience for *The Voice* was 'too old' to be engaged in interaction or prosumer behaviour.

Although Shirky was the main focus of the question it was also relevant to draw on related theorists such as Jenkins whose work on participatory culture was used effectively. It's useful to remember that students are being assessed on their knowledge and understanding of the ideas in the theoretical framework of audience (the bullet points in the specification) so there isn't a requirement to refer to a particular number of theorists. It also worked well for students to address the question of validity by drawing on their knowledge of other approaches to audience such as considering the audience as more passive, with a one way relationship to the producer.

The only real issue with responses was when students argued that the need to target an audience meant that the audience became a producer, dictating the content of the media. While there may have been some implicitly relevant points in this approach it didn't really engage with the specifics of the question and identified theory.

It was clear that students were very familiar with the websites and just needed to select relevant examples; the history of *The Voice* as a newspaper and website was rightly interesting to students but wasn't necessarily relevant to the question. Students tended to follow the instruction to 'refer' to (rather than to analyse) the CSPs but it was very important to give precise, specific examples from the websites such as story titles, menu bars, interviews, offers, spaces for contributions etc, rather than generalised points about the type of content they might include.

### **Q3**

*Changes in economic and cultural contexts have led to changes in the way media products are distributed and consumed.*

*To what extent does an analysis of your television Close Study Products support this view?*

*You should refer to both of your television Close Study Products to support your answer:*

*Capital and Deutschland 83*

**OR**

*Witnesses and The Missing*

**OR**

*No Offence and The Killing*

This question assessed AO2 1 and AO2 3, which meant students had to:

Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to analyse media products, including in relation to their contexts (**15 marks**).

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Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to make judgements and draw conclusions (**10 marks**).

This is always the 'contexts' question and this time students needed to draw on their knowledge of the distribution and consumption of media products as well as the nature of the economic and cultural contexts in which they exist. They then needed to use these examples to argue the extent to which the statement in the question was true. This was an industry question and students were able to refer to the way in which distribution strategies were affected by globalization, conglomeration and the role of public service broadcasters in an age of increased commercial, transnational competition. The analysis of the interrelationship of developing media technologies, media distribution and patterns of consumption provided a productive way into accessing the question. All the set television programmes provided the opportunity to discuss the importance of 'content' in the contemporary media landscape, with all the series (due in part to their age) having been exploited across different institutions, platforms and countries. The advent of transnational co-productions, the willingness of audiences to consume products in different languages and about different cultures to their own, as well as the emergence of streaming services, were all discussed in order to explore the statement.

Students were able to make analytical points about their chosen products in relation to contexts by arguing for the extent to which they demonstrated the need to address a global audience which led to some astute points about the nature of the programmes. These included the greater popularity of *Deutschland '83* outside of Germany, the 'glamorisation' of Scandi culture in Europe and the USA, and the focus on the transnational in *The Missing*. In considering the changing nature of consumption through streaming, students discussed the popularity of the thriller genre, a form suited to binge viewing.

The concept of 'peak TV', characterised by the competition for content between conglomerates in order to remain profitable, was applied through the way in which the set programmes (most of which are around ten years old or more) were continually recycled from their original terrestrial or cable channel to a variety of international platforms and sites (some with a public service remit such as the BBC i-player and Walter Presents). Some responses referred to the way in which the COVID pandemic had accelerated the shifts in audience consumption to streaming and detailed the way in which institutions were able to take advantage of an extensive back catalogue which could then be released on different platforms.

Although there were many strong, focused responses, this was the question where students did less well overall; this seemed to be due to interpreting this as a question about representation and audience response. Students could be reminded that distribution is something that media industries are in control of and is a way of trying to control patterns of consumption – use of these terms would therefore indicate an industry question. Responses which focused on issues of representation didn't really engage with the question and so were difficult to reward above lower levels of the mark scheme as they weren't discussing the economics of media industries and how that shapes consumption. There was though some possibility of question focus where students discussed changing representation as an aspect of changing cultural contexts and therefore as a way of targeting audiences. However, a discussion of representation of groups and places tended to move too far away from the question to produce answers worthy of many marks – which was obviously disappointing when students were clearly knowledgeable – a clear reminder of the importance of addressing the question as set.

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**Q4**

*To what extent do media products construct a discourse of gender inequality?*

*You should refer to the magazine Close Study Products *Oh Comely* and *Men's Health* in your answer.*

This question assessed AO1 1a, AO1 1b and AO2 3, students needed to:

- Demonstrate knowledge of the theoretical framework of media (**5 marks**).
- Demonstrate understanding of the theoretical framework of media (**10 marks**).
- Apply knowledge and understanding of the theoretical framework of media to make judgements and draw conclusions (**10 marks**).

Q4 is the synoptic question (and is identified as such on the cover of the exam booklet) where students are expected to draw on their knowledge across the media frameworks. They aren't expected to address these equally (or even all four) but it is a chance to explore the CSPs across a range of concepts and issues. It was very positive that there was clear evidence of this approach being used far more successfully than in previous sessions – a further indication of the successful teaching of the specification. It was particularly notable that students were confident to draw on their knowledge of industry to develop their answers in a very productive way. For example, responses often situated the construction of gender representations within the industry context with the argument that a conglomerate such as Hearst would be expected to reinforce the dominant ideology while an independent publisher like Iceberg Press would have more freedom to challenge such views. Some students rather dryly pointed to the fact that the combination of progressive representation and independence had led to the demise of *Oh Comely*.

This was the most successfully answered question on the paper. This suggests how engaged students are with issues of gender and representation (which isn't surprising) but also that they were confident in applying the concept of discourse to the debate, leading to some very thoughtful responses which explored a range of relevant arguments about the role of the media in shaping – or responding to – questions of identity. There was scope for a variety of approaches (enhanced by the synopticity in the question) with responses which argued that the magazines were either reinforcing gender inequality through their segregated audiences and – in the case of *Men's Health* – the reliance on stereotypical images of masculine dominance. It tended to be the case that responses argued that *Oh Comely* was attempting to subvert the gender hierarchies of the society in which it existed by including progressive representations of women. Some sophisticated responses challenged the terms of the question, arguing that *Oh Comely* rejected the very concept of gender as binary and therefore couldn't be judged through this approach, while *Men's Health* used the binary to exert male dominance.

There was clear evidence in responses to this question of a high level of knowledge and understanding of theoretical approaches. The concept of discourse was well understood as a form of dialogue with the media which repeated and reinforced particular ideas, but could also be shaped and interpreted by audiences. A range of theories from gender and feminist approaches were utilised very effectively to develop arguments. These included the application of gender as a performance to both publications in order to explore representations as constructed and therefore open to question, and ideas of intersectionality that were used to argue that gender must also be considered in relation to other hierarchical structures. In considering the industry context, arguments were very effectively developed by applying ideas from culture industries approaches.

The weaker responses – within the context of a successfully answered question – tended to focus on straightforward representations of gender, providing a series of (perhaps pre-prepared) examples from the magazines of the ways in which representations of masculinity and femininity were constructed, rather than engaging with the nuances of the question, but these were still likely to include relevant points.



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

Grade boundaries and cumulative percentage grades are available on the [Results Statistics](#) page of the AQA Website.