

Exam focus

Top tips for answering questions

- ✓ This unit is examined by a written paper lasting 1 hour 30 minutes and you will need to divide up your time carefully.
- ✓ The paper is marked out of 60 and you have to answer two questions in total. The first is worth a combined total of 27 marks; the second is worth 33 marks
- ✓ If you allow between 5 and 10 minutes for reading and planning your answers this means you should spend about 30 minutes on Question 1 and 45 minutes on Question 2. This should leave you 5 minutes to read over and make late additions to your answers.
- ✓ Question 1 will be divided into two parts, the first worth a total of 9 marks, the second worth 18 marks.
- ✓ The first part of Question 1 (part a) will ask you to 'Identify and briefly explain'. It is important to do both of these (see later).
- ✓ Do not confuse discussion of gender with that of sexuality. Gender concerns males and females; sexuality is about orientation and includes gay, straight and bi-sexual.
- ✓ Any question on the media and the audience will expect you to include a range of views, not just a single theory.

Mass media questions

- ✓ When discussing the media do not just limit yourself to one form such as television. Media is a plural so try to cover a range of them.
- ✓ A question on gender representations would expect you to discuss both males and females. Do not just deal with one.
- ✓ In writing about the media try to avoid long descriptions of popular television programmes or films. If you want to give illustrations make them brief and make them relevant.

Exam focus

Specimen question: Mass media

1 Read Item A below and then answer both parts (a) and (b)

Item A

Many sociologists have been interested to see how the media represent a range of different groups in society. Considerable research has been carried out into how different age and ethnic groups are portrayed. A common way to conduct such investigations is by using a method called content analysis where media output is placed under close scrutiny.

Feminists have been keen to explore how the media represents gender and how such representations might change over time. Indeed some argue old-fashioned stereotypes are now much less common and that media representations are now much more favourable to certain groups. Others are less positive and suggest negative images remain.

1 a) Identify and briefly explain:

i) one advantage of using content analysis to study the media.

(3 marks)

ii) two disadvantages of using content analysis to study the media.

(6 marks)

b) Use material from Item A and elsewhere to assess the view that old-fashioned stereotypes are less common in the media than in the past.

(18 marks)

2 Assess the claim that mass media exert control over the way people think and behave, even if they are unaware of it.

(33 marks)

Two groups are mentioned here. These can be used in answer to Question 1b.

Another group to be discussed.

'Change over time' is a key phrase and needs to be remembered in answering questions.

Note the layout of 1a. You should follow it when answering.

Make sure you have two clear and distinct disadvantages. It will help to number them.

What is there in the item that you could use?

No specific groups are mentioned so you can use ones in the Item and any not in there.

This is about how things may have changed so you need to deal with the past but also to consider possible changes.

Try to re-write this question in 'plain English' to work out what it is asking.

The all important 'command' word. You need to subject the claim to critical analysis.

Exam focus

Exemplar response: Candidate A

1a) Content analysis is a very popular way to study the media. It has been used in many studies to look at how different groups are represented. An advantage of the method is that it is a cheap way of doing a study. All you need are lots of newspapers and a video of television programmes and then you can do the analysis. Because of this it is also a quick way to study media. But there are problems with the method. There is the problem of bias. When you are doing the analysis you may see things in a particular way, e.g. you might think something is negative towards something but someone else might not. So the method can reflect some of your own values and not be accurate. Another problem is that content analysis is hard to do because there is so much media content about. It would be difficult to cover everything so you might just pick some programmes or articles which would make the study biased.

This candidate has not made the best of starts to their answer. The first point to note is the layout. The question was divided into parts (i) and (ii) so it would be better if the answer repeated this. Also instead of writing in a complete paragraph it would be better to divide up the answer so that advantages and disadvantages could be clearly seen.

If we now look at the marks we see the first two sentences are unnecessary as they do not answer the question. The advantage of being cheap can score a mark for identification but it is not explained. The candidate would need to explain that the method is cheaper than, say, conducting interviews because there is no need to train and pay other researchers and that all the material is at hand at no cost. A possible second advantage is that it is quick but the question only asked for one.

(i) 1 out of 3 marks)

The first disadvantage concerning bias scores for identification and this is then explained. The bias can be in categorising according to your values which can reduce accuracy of the study. This is explained enough to score the full 3 marks. However, the second disadvantage is actually about sampling rather than the method. Just because there is a lot of media content this does not mean it cannot be studied so this does not score.

(ii) 3 out of 6 marks)

1b) There is no doubt that women get a bad deal from the media. Nearly all the media owners are men and most of the key workers such as editors and sub-editors are also men. Most women employed are either working in fashion or cookery or are on T.V. as 'eye candy' for male viewers.

This is not a very strong opening. It seems that the focus is going to be quite narrow as it is all about gender. Also the points about employment within the media are not linked to the question, apart from the short reference to 'eye candy' which is neither explained nor developed. A better way to start is to interpret the question by indicating which stereotypes and/or groups are going to be discussed. This would set the scene and give a clear indication of where the answer was going to go.

Meehan did a study which showed that women were often portrayed in a very limited number of ways in the media. These included the Goodwife, where she was seen as being the perfect housekeeper and mother, the Bitch, where she was seen as dangerous and deceitful, and the Victim, where she was seen as helpless and needing to be rescued by men. She concluded that women were usually portrayed at the extreme, as either very good or very bad with nothing in between. The problem with this study is that it is now out of date. There are lots of strong women portrayed in the media. There are lots of women doctors in Casualty and the women in *Sex and the City* are seen as independent and do not need to depend on a man to have a good time.

This is a better paragraph as it contains some reasonable knowledge of a potentially relevant study. There is some analysis as the candidate attempts to explain and develop the study. There is also an attempt at evaluation which is somewhat limited. It would improve the answer if the criticisms of the study were based on another study rather than just some illustrations from current media output. Also it is not enough to state the study is out of date; when was it conducted and what has changed to make it so?

Another study was done by which looked at women's magazines. Most of these tended to show women as only interested in a narrow range of things such as cooking, fashion, gossip and how to attract men. But what was interesting was that a later study also looked at women's magazines and found that they were much less focused on these things. There was more time given over to careers and personal happiness than in the past. This suggests that things are changing and that old stereotypes are less strong.

Again good use of a study to explore the question although the description lacks a little detail. It would be helpful to know who had conducted this study (Ferguson) and what this other study was and when it, and the original, was conducted. By indicating the timeline of studies it helps to explore the idea of change and to see if it is recent or not. The focus remains narrow at this point, concentrating not only on gender but also only on women. To improve the essay the candidate will need to widen their consideration of stereotypes in the media.

Naomi Wolf is a feminist who talked about the beauty myth. She says the media presents a certain type of body image as normal and desirable and this encourages women to want to be like this. Recently there has been a lot of debate about size zero models and if they encourage young girls to develop eating disorders in order to lose weight. However we have also seen changes here such as Sophie Dahl who is a successful model but is also quite large. This shows a different image to girls that you don't have to be thin to be successful.

There is just a brief reference to the item here as the candidate mentions feminist theory. A little explanation of this theory could improve the answer. There is a good use of contemporary material in an attempt to give alternative views and some indication that old stereotypes might be being challenged. However, it is noticeable that the narrow focus remains. The answer could be improved by talking about male stereotypes and by looking at other groups in society. For example, the item mentions age and ethnic groups so these could be explored to give a more comprehensive response to the question.

So overall I think that the question is right. There used to be a lot of old stereotypes in the media but things are changing and we are seeing more and more positive images of women. This is true of other groups such as the old and ethnic minorities.

Whilst it is good that the candidate attempts to draw a conclusion this is quite a weak one. In particular the reference to other groups means little as they have not discussed these in their essay. Conclusions should sum up what has been discussed and should attempt to answer the question by referring back to something in the essay rather than just saying you agree or disagree with the statement.

(AO1 mark: 3 out of 6, AO2 marks: 5 out of 12)

Total: 8 out of 18 marks

2 There is a lot of debate about what effect the media has on people. The hypodermic syringe model suggests the media is like a drug and is able to make people act in ways they want them to. Their view of the audience is that they are passive and are unable to reject the influence of the media.

There are some good things in this first paragraph. The candidate identifies and briefly explains a theory of media effects and introduces the concept of a passive audience. However, introductions should interpret the question and give some idea of what the essay is going to cover. This candidate tends to jump straight in and it would be better if they could indicate what they plan to discuss their answer.

Evidence to support this theory comes from a study done by Bandura. He showed children video clips and then observed their behaviour. The ones who saw scenes of violence were more likely to hit a large Bobo doll than the ones who didn't. Bandura thought that this proved that the media could have a direct effect on behaviour. This has come to be known as copycat violence because it suggests that especially young people are likely to copy what they see in the media and think and behave in the way they do because of all the media they watch.

It is a good idea to seek out supporting evidence and the candidate clearly knows the basics of this study. However, there could be more detail about how the study was constructed. Also it would be useful to place the study in some sort of historical context and to point out that it was carried out broadly within a psychological perspective.

Not everyone agrees with this study. It was conducted in a laboratory and that is not a natural setting. So the study lacks ecological validity and therefore we cannot say that it proved the influence of the media. But supporters of the hypodermic syringe model point to the James Bulger case. Two boys who murdered this toddler had been watching a lot of violent videos and this may have made them think that the violence was either not real or was acceptable.

Again there is an attempt at some evaluation here. The criticism regarding ecological validity is sound but could be expanded. The candidate might also want to consider alternative explanations for the behaviour of the children in the experiment. Also the case study of Jamie Bulger could itself be subjected to critical scrutiny. For example, what evidence was there that videos had actually been viewed and can we say these caused the actions of the boys?

The opposite view to the hypodermic syringe model is something called the uses and gratifications model. It is the opposite because it sees the audience as active rather than passive. This model was suggested by McQuail who said that people use the media in different ways. Some people look to the media for information whilst others just want entertainment. Others actually use the media as a source of friendship; it gives them the feeling of having people around them. This could be why people like soap operas because they view the characters in them as if they know them.

It is a good idea to introduce an alternative theory and the distinction between active and passive audiences is an excellent one. This point could be explored in a lot more detail and perhaps even be expanded to consider how far audiences are similar (homogeneous) or diverse (heterogeneous). This would allow the candidate to explore some sociological theory about how far people control their lives or are controlled by external forces. There is some detail of the uses and gratification model but this is rather superficial (see Candidate B's response).

Because people get different things from the media we cannot say that the media brainwashes people. Also pluralists argue that those who produce the media have to bear their audience in mind. If newspapers or T.V. programmes are not popular they will not make any money and so go out of business. This makes the programme makers give the public what they want.

Some theory is introduced here with a mention of pluralism. The brief points about this view are accurate enough but it would be better if the candidate could link them back directly to the question. Pluralists argue it is the public which controls the media not vice versa so they would argue the media cannot make people think or act in ways that they did not already. This could be contrasted with a Marxist position which sees the media as able to manipulate people's thoughts and actions.

Between these two models is another one called the cultural effects model. This suggests that people's culture or background influences how they read the media. So, for example, working class people might interpret a news programme differently from a middle class person because they have a different upbringing and they interact with different groups of people.

Whilst it is a good idea to introduce a third model, the candidate shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the cultural effects model. Far from being a pluralist type approach it sees the media as able to control people but in a more subtle and indirect way from the hypodermic syringe model. For this reason it has been described as the 'drip drip approach'. So this paragraph adds little to the overall answer.

So, in conclusion, it is not easy to say if the media does have a drug like effect on people. Some theorists believe it does but others clearly believe that it is the public that controls the media not the other way around. It is still a question that sociologists have not been able to answer.

The candidate does attempt to draw a conclusion but it is a rather weak one. A stronger strategy for ending the essay would be to return to the points made about active and passive audiences. The candidate could use this to show that the answer to the question probably depends on where one stands on the issue of how far the audience has the ability to interpret and then accept or reject media influences.

Overall the answer reads like a brief summary of two (possibly three) theories of the media backed up by a couple of studies. At no point does the candidate directly focus on the question asked and indeed if you read the response it may not be clear what exactly the question was that they were constructing an answer to.

(AO1 mark: 8 out of 15 as the answer has adequate but rather limited knowledge and understanding of relevant material.)

AO2 (a) mark: 4 out of 9 as the interpretation of the question is very narrow.

AO2 (b) mark: 5 out of 9 as there is an attempt to both analyse and evaluate sociological theories and studies.)

Total: 17 out of 33 marks

Overall, Candidate A has scored 29 out of 60. This is likely to translate to approximately a grade D.

Exemplar response: Candidate B

1a) i) An advantage is that it allows for comparisons to be made. By analysing the content of media output the sociologist can count the references to different groups and classify how they are represented. This then allows them to compare groups to see if one gets better or worse treatment.

ii) One disadvantage is that classifying can be highly subjective. For example one sociologist might see a reference to a group as negative whilst another might not. This means the results of the study depend on the researchers own personal decisions and so may not accurate.

A second disadvantage is that the facts and statistics content analysis often produces may lack depth or explanation. For example if one group gets less favourable coverage than another we can't say why. So content analysis can give us some facts but not explanations for why the facts exist.

This response is clearly set out and makes it easy for the examiner to mark. Each identification is stated and then explained. Note especially that with the disadvantages the candidate starts their explanation with 'for example'. This is a good way of developing the identification. In each case there is enough explanation to secure the 2 marks but the candidate does not waste time or effort by expanding too much on the points made.

(9 out of 9 marks)

b) It seems that a number of groups have experienced negative stereotyping at the hands of the media. As Item A suggests this includes not only women but also ethnic minorities and often young people. In this essay I am going to look at these three groups to see if such stereotyping still exists or if it is a thing of the past.

This is quite a simple but a very effective introduction. It makes use of the item to identify a number of groups and so it immediately interprets the questions in a much broader fashion than Candidate A. It also gives a clear statement of intent so that the examiner has a clear idea of where the answer is going to go.

A famous study by Cohen called 'Folk Devils and Moral Panics' looked at how the media often portray young people in a negative way. Cohen claimed society needs scapegoats or someone to blame for all the problems in society. Young people are often picked on as such and are made to seem like a problem. His study showed how groups of youths were presented in a distorted way and were made to be seen as a threat to wider society. A good point about this study done about events in the 1960's is that it can be applied to other groups since then. At different stages different youth cultures such as Punks, Goths and Crusties have been demonised by the media.

A good use of a study here. The candidate uses it to explore a possible reason for stereotyping. Also suggesting a strength of the study is a good point as is placing it within a historical context. Perhaps the candidate might point out that it was not all young people who were subject to media attention but specific groups who were seen to be 'unusual' or more of a challenge to existing norms.

However not everyone agrees that the media stereotypes all young people as a threat. McRobbie has argued that moral panics may have been common in the past but that nowadays the audience is too diverse and media literate to be taken in by them. It is also pointed out that a lot of media content, especially the new media, is aimed at young people so they are hardly likely to promote negative stereotypes of groups they are trying to sell products to.

This is a short but effective paragraph. The candidate is able to offer some valid criticisms of the position outlined previously. The paragraph could be even more effective if the candidate took a little time to explain a couple of the points they make.

For example, what does the term 'media literate' mean and why might this change people's attitudes? Also, what are the 'new media' mentioned? By exploring these questions the candidate could gain extra marks for analysis.

Another group who often find themselves portrayed as a threat to society are some ethnic minorities. In a study which was similar to Cohen's, Stuart Hall showed how the media helped to build up a moral panic over the street crime of mugging. The media linked this crime specifically to young black males and this created a negative stereotype in the minds of the public who saw all young blacks as potential criminals. Angela Barry, in a study in 1989, showed how black people in media reports are usually represented as a 'problem'. Reports were often negative based on things like crime, unemployment and drug dealing with little positive news being fed to the public.

It is a good idea to link one study to another as it shows the candidate can see the similarities. Whilst the exact date of the study is not needed it would help if Hall's study was located in a specific decade. Otherwise the candidate has used two studies to good effect. It would be even better if there could be some discussion if these stereotypes still remain common, as this is the focus of the question.

Finally, gender is another area where stereotypes in the media can be found. McRobbie did a study of teenage magazines using content analysis and found that they presented an image of what was desirable to their readers. Girls were told that romantic love should be their main goal and that boys were only interested in girls who took fashion and appearance seriously. However it should be pointed out that McRobbie's study is over 20 years old and there is no doubt media output has changed since then. Girls' magazines are not as popular as they were and the content has changed. Girls see many positive role models on T.V. and in soaps carry storylines about strong women.

Introducing a third group to the discussion clearly broadens the answer. The details of the study are a little general and it would help if there was a little more detail. The study is subject to a little evaluation, however, it would be useful if an alternative study could be quoted rather than just asserting that things have changed. One area which could be explored would be new media such as the internet and social networking sites which might mean girls are exposed to different influences than when McRobbie conducted her study.

It should be noted that this answer ends somewhat abruptly. Some sort of conclusion also adds to an answer, especially as it allows the writer to both summarise their main points and to suggest an answer to the question set. On the positive side there are three areas discussed although the studies quoted tend to more about past stereotyping than any changes which may have taken place. So, in this answer there is quite sound knowledge most of which is well applied to the question. A greater emphasis on contemporary issues would improve the response.

(AO1 mark: 5 out of 6, AO2 mark: 7 out of 12)

Total: 12 out of 18 marks

2 The question about how far the media is able to exert control over its audience has been debated strongly within sociology. One position basically sees the audience as passive and unable to resist media influences. An alternative view is that the audience is active and in control of how they use the media. This essay will attempt to consider both of these views.

This is a clear and concise introduction which shows a good grasp of the question. The candidate has introduced a key debate and has given a clear indication of what they intend to do in their answer. This makes a favourable initial impression because it suggests they have a plan of what to cover in their answer.

The hypodermic syringe model was one of the first models of media effects. It claims the media has a direct and immediate impact on the audience. It is as if they are injected with a drug and they are powerless to resist. Early research into advertising such as Packard's study *The Hidden Persuaders* suggested the media was able to shape the thoughts and tastes of the target audience even if they were unaware of it. This can explain why companies spend huge amounts of money on advertising campaigns; they want to get people to act in a certain way and to buy their products.

Unlike Candidate A this answer actually explains the model they quote. The discussion of advertising is interesting because often the only media effect candidates discuss is violence. This helps to give the answers a wider focus. A small point which could improve the paragraph is to indicate roughly when Packard's study was done. The precise year is not needed but the decade would help to place it within a context. (The book was published in 1957.)

Also Bandura's study of media violence seemed to lend support to the idea that the media could directly influence people's behaviour. However the evidence for such a claim has been strongly criticised, for example his study was done in a laboratory which is clearly an unnatural setting. However a stronger criticism is that human behaviour is the result of many complex factors and so it is impossible to isolate one single cause or variable such as exposure to the media. It is also not possible to say all people will respond to the media in the same way.

There are a lot of good points here. Whilst there are few details of Bandura's study there are very useful criticisms. The point about the unnatural setting could be expanded to discuss the possibility that this makes behaviour untypical. Perhaps concepts such as ecological validity and demand characteristics could also be introduced. However, there are two good critical points made about problems in studying media effects which will boost the candidate's mark.

However Marxist theorists do agree that the media has a powerful influence over audiences. The cultural effects theory argues that the media does not actually force people to act in certain ways but that it is able to gradually shape the way we see the world and is therefore important in the way we form our attitudes. By being fed a constant view of how the world is we experience a 'drip by drip' effect and so we come to accept a certain world view as natural or common sense. Of course the same problem of proof applies to this theory. It is almost impossible to measure the effects of the media, especially over a long period. So this theory might just be one view of how the media works which is no better or worse than any other.

This response has a reasonable grasp of cultural effects theory and is able to suggest a basic criticism of the approach. This is a useful addition to the debate and could be developed a little bit more. For example, the contrast with the hypodermic syringe model could be drawn out more. Another possible avenue would be to illustrate the theory with some examples of studies that adopt this view; the work of Philo and the Glasgow University Media Group could be quoted to good effect here.

Certainly pluralists reject the idea that the media is able to control its audience. They offer a much more active view of audiences and also make the point that audiences are very diverse and therefore are unlikely to be influenced in a uniform way. They favour something called the Uses and Gratifications model which states that people select and react to the media in personal terms. McQuail argues that people make use of the media for different reasons. One is entertainment and another is identification. Some people even use the media as a source of personal identity whilst some use it for surveillance so they know what is going on.

It is good to introduce an alternative theory although it is not clear exactly who or what pluralists are. A sentence or two on this would help to develop the answer. Also the point about the audience being diverse could be explained a little, for example it could be said that social factors like age, gender, ethnicity and social class can influence media consumption. The use of a study to illustrate the theory is a good idea but the categories McQuail identifies could be explained a little more.

Similar to this is the work of Klapper who points out that the media is only one of many things which influence people. His work is often called the Selective Filter Model because he claims media messages pass through a series of filters and most people tend to accept ideas they already agree with. In a similar way if they meet ideas they do not agree with they are likely to simply reject them. If this is true then the media not only has a very limited effect it is also a long way from the 'direct hit' proposed by the hypodermic syringe model.

This is a brief but effective use of another study to advance the discussion. Once again there is no suggestion of when this work was done. The final point sets up a good contrast with an earlier theory but it might also be a good idea to suggest possible criticisms of the pluralist position. Without this it appears that the candidate thinks this approach is correct and other theories incorrect.

So we can see opinions are divided on the effects the media can have on our attitudes and actions. Those theorists who see the audience as passive believe they are easy targets for media manipulation and control. Others, including many post-modernists, do not accept this and argue people can choose what media they consume and what messages they take from it.

The candidate has attempted to pull together their answer but this is not the best of conclusions. For one thing they introduce post-modernist theory but this does not appear in the main body of the answer. Conclusions are not the place to introduce new ideas or discussions because they cannot really be explained or explored. It would be better to conclude with a contrast between pluralist and other theorists as this was the focus of the answer.

(A01 mark: 12 out of 15. The knowledge is accurate and relevant to the question. A slight lack of detail in some studies keeps the mark from being at the top of the range.

A02 (a) mark: 7 out of 9. The interpretation of the question is sound and material is appropriate but could be applied a bit more explicitly.

AO2 (b) mark: 7 out of 9. Analysis is good in parts but studies/concepts are not always explored fully. Evaluation is present but is somewhat one-sided with no critique of the pluralist position.)

Total: 26 out of 33 marks

Overall, Candidate B has scored 47 out of 60 marks which is a very comfortable grade A.