

AQA A LEVEL
SOCIOLOGY

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TOPIC ESSAYS

The Media



ITEM N: MASS MEDIA INFLUENCE ON AUDIENCE

Some sociologists feel that members of society are directly influenced by what they see in the media. This makes the media a powerful socialising institution. Others point out that individuals are affected in different ways by the media, and can make choices about which outlets influence them.

Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media has a direct influence on its audiences. (20 marks)

Sociologists have opposing views about the extent to which the mass media influences its audience members. Some view the audience as very passive and therefore highly susceptible to the media messages that are transmitted, whereas others see the audience as an intelligent decoder of media messages and point out that the “audience” is not a homogeneous group (ITEM N); therefore the way in which we are individually influenced by the mass media will vary hugely.

Sociologists who believe that the mass media has a direct influence on its audience often subscribe to the hypodermic syringe model of society. This regards the audience as a passive group of individuals who are highly susceptible to the influences seen in the mass media. These sociologists would point to the huge investments in the advertising industry and the fact that some companies, like Google, are able to offer outstanding services to their users for free instead they generate their capital from advertising revenue. The profitability of advertising as an industry is clear evidence of the influence of the mass media upon its audience; if it did not influence their behaviour advertising would not be the huge industry that it now is. This suggests that the mass media does have a direct influence on its audience.

However, Pluralists might criticise this view. They argue that the mass media has to serve the interests of its audiences and not the media owners as they rely on their audiences to make a profit. Therefore, the content of the mass media cannot simply be used as an ideological tool by the ruling elite as Marxist sociologists might argue (according to ITEM N); instead, it must appeal to the uses and gratifications of audiences (McQuail). Advertising, therefore, does not have a direct influence on an audience as such; it does not manipulate them into purchasing products. Rather, the consumer industry must make products which appeal to the wants and needs of its audience. This suggests that the mass media does not have such a direct influence on its audience. However, there are other sociologists such as Hegemonic Marxists who would argue that the mass media does have a

The introduction outlines the debate and makes reference to the item.

Reference is made to theoretical explanations and examples are given to support points, though these could be more developed.

There are links back to the original question – though supporting sociological evidence could be added.

Evaluative paragraph which uses sociological theory and applies it appropriately.

There is reference to the item and this has been built upon and evaluated using sociological evidence. Links are made to the question.

Further evaluation using theory and key concepts

direct influence on its audience; that it is a tool used by the ruling elite to transmit capitalist norms and values. The success of consumer society and the way in which class structures continue to exist clearly show the influence of the mass media on its audience: in capitalism has been normalised and the proletarian revolution prevented by the perpetuation of a myth of meritocracy despite inequalities in power. Marxists also argue that the mass media has a direct influence on audience members through the negative stereotypes of ethnic minorities it perpetuates: using a “divide and rule” strategy to control the working classes by scapegoating ethnic minorities for social problems; thereby deflecting attention from the exploitation experienced by the working classes at the hands of the ruling elite. This shows that the mass media does have a direct influence on the audience as it performs the function of ideological control.

However, there are alternative arguments which suggest that the mass media does not have a direct influence on behaviour, but rather this influence undergoes a process known as “two-step flow”. Sociologists would argue that the mass media’s messages are internalised by powerful social figures, known as opinion leaders, who are highly media literate. It is their interpretation of the mass media that plays the biggest part in transmitting media messages to the audience. For example, celebrities such as Beyoncé have internalised the media messages surrounding political issues such as “Black Lives Matter” and these have been disseminated to her fanbase using social media and her own musical performances. This means the messages may be somewhat biased towards her own interpretation, but they are still generally reflective of the views expressed in the mass media. This suggests that the influence of the mass media is not necessarily direct, but it is still significant.

It is difficult to deny the influence of the mass media in inciting violent behaviour amongst vulnerable individuals in society however. Bandura’s study of aggression for example offered clear evidence of the influence of media violence on the propensity of violence in children. There have been numerous instances of vulnerable individuals witnessing acts of violence in the media and then re-enacting them: for example, the tragic murder of the toddler Jamie Bulger or more recently where Islamic terrorists have been radicalised by the violent content they have accessed online. This suggests that the mass media does have a direct influence on its audience. However, critics would argue that these claims can be applied only to a small number of individuals and that the vast majority of the population are not directly influenced

effectively which demonstrates A02 and A03.

Analysis here is well developed and is linked back to the original question.

Another evaluative paragraph which introduces new sociological theories and offers contemporary examples to support points.

Links are made back to the question.

Appropriate application of examples and studies which shows A01 and A02 skills, with some evaluation later in the paragraph as evidence of A03 – though at times the issues are dealt with only briefly.

More explicit links back to the question could be added here.

by the media as they do not commit copycat crimes or the violence that they see. In fact, many would argue that viewing abuse or deviance in the media can actually have a cathartic effect which is beneficial for the social order, or alternatively can sensitise us towards violence and aggression which can make us more compassionate as a society.

Based on the evidence, sociologists would agree that audiences are influenced by the mass media; but there is still some debate about how direct that influence is and whether it is felt in the same way by all audience members.

A clear conclusion which references the debate in the question. A further sentence or two linking a wider range of as-yet unmentioned debates can provide a fruitful and thought-provoking conclusion.

[~900 words]

Examiner Style Comments: *Mark Band 4: 17-20*

This essay would fall comfortably within the top mark band, although this level could be achieved in slightly fewer words. Breadth of knowledge was impressive here, and the candidate routinely applied this back to the item or question at the end of each paragraph. There was good use of contemporary examples and sociological theories.

A wise tactic is to scrutinise both the question and the item for 'hooks'. These include descriptions of concepts, contentious issues and phrases around which to frame your debates. This question includes the hooks 'direct' (which implies the possibility of indirect influence) and 'audiences' (as opposed to one homogeneous 'audience'). The answer successfully addresses these, as well as another easy-to-overlook item-based hook about 'socialising institution(s)'. By selecting and applying Hegemonic Marxism to this hook, the candidate increases their chances of entering the top mark band.

It was also pleasing to see the candidate apply material learned from across the topic, by using the portrayal of ethnic minorities as a timely example of Hegemonic Marxism. Impressively, they returned to this theme in the subsequent paragraph with the contemporary example of the 'Black Lives Matter' movement. This is a great example of how candidates have the freedom to direct part of their essay towards any related source of lively sociological debate, as long as this is fully and clearly applied to the question.

This answer demonstrates A03 (Analysis and Evaluation) by comparing two opposing approaches to media influence. There were occasions when it would have been useful to have moved on from simply juxtaposing these two alternatives, i.e. parking them next to each other, so to speak. Some ways of doing this include evaluating strengths and weaknesses of each approach at the end of a paragraph, analysing some similarities and differences between them, and concluding by judging one to be more relevant for understanding contemporary society.

CHECKLIST

Specification	Content	
New media	The new media and their significance for an understanding of the role of the media in contemporary society.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Ownership and control	The relationship between ownership and control of the media.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Globalisation and popular culture	The media, globalisation and popular culture.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Selection and presentation	The processes of selection and presentation of the content of the news.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Representation	Media representations of age, social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and disability.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audiences	The relationship between the media, their content and presentation, and audiences.	<input type="checkbox"/>

THE MEDIA ESSAYS

- 1) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media has a direct influence on its audiences. (20 marks)
- 2) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media encourages negative gender stereotypes. (20 marks)
- 3) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the power of the mass media is concentrated in the hands of a few. (20 marks)
- 4) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media is ruled by the audience. (20 marks)
- 5) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media is a beneficial institution for society. (20 marks)
- 6) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media is responsible for creating moral panics around particular ethnic groups in society. (20 marks)
- 7) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that new media technologies have had a beneficial impact on society. (20 marks)
- 8) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that what appears in the news is an accurate reflection of social reality. (20 marks)
- 9) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the mass media offers a negative portrayal of the lower social classes. (20 marks)
- 10) Applying material from ITEM N and your knowledge, evaluate the view that globalisation of the mass media has had a positive impact on society. (20 marks)

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