

Media platforms



The term **platform** comes from computer technology and is used to describe the hardware (the computer) and/or the software (operating system and application programs). In media studies, platforms are the technological means whereby the media communicate with an audience. The following media platforms are central to the AQA specification and your study of media texts should always be based on their dissemination across these platforms:

- **broadcasting** — television and radio (factual and fictional), films, advertisements, trailers and other audio/visual promotional material
- **print** — newspapers, magazines, advertising and marketing texts
- **e-media** — websites, blogs, podcasts; advertising and promotional material; radio, television, music and film downloads; games and emerging forms

Cross-media topic areas

Examples of media texts across the three platforms

In all cases, you need to consider the production and reception of the text:

- **broadcast or film fiction** — primarily found in broadcast or cinema platforms, but also on the internet and portable electronic devices (e.g. opening sequences available for download), in magazines and newspapers, and advertisements.
- **documentary and hybrid forms** — primarily found in broadcast or cinema platforms, but also in newspapers and magazines, the internet and portable electronic devices.
- **lifestyle** — broadcasting, the internet, newspapers and magazines.

- **music** — broadcasting, the internet and portable electronic devices, newspapers and specialist magazines.
- **news** — broadcasting, newspapers (including online newspapers), the internet and portable electronic devices.
- **sport** — broadcasting, the internet and portable electronic devices, newspapers and magazines.

Documentary and film fiction are discussed as examples of cross-media texts at the end of this chapter.

Although some texts are designed predominantly for one media platform, you must examine them across all three. The phrase 'production and reception' means considering the process of putting a text together and shaping it with an audience and platform in mind, and the response of the audience to that text.

Intertextuality

Intertextuality is the practice of making references to other media texts within a media text, with the intention that audiences recognise these references. By attaching their own product to already-established and successful media texts, media producers aim to achieve success by association and trigger a positive response in the audience. In marketing terms, this helps to ensure the success of the new text. Intertextuality can involve homage (respectful reference) to famous texts, parody (where the text referred to is mildly satirised), or pastiche (a simple imitation).

An example is Robert Zemeckis's film *What Lies Beneath* (2000), which pays homage to film-maker Alfred Hitchcock by using similar filming techniques to those in *Psycho* (1960) and *Rear Window* (1954). Audience enjoyment is enhanced by recognition of these references.

Another example is Robbie Williams' use of a sample from the James Bond film *You Only Live Twice* (Lewis Gilbert, 1967) as a backdrop to the track 'Millennium' on the album *I've Been Expecting You* (released 1998).

The CD cover shows Williams dressed in white shirt with black tie and jacket, posing in a similar way to Sean Connery or Roger Moore as Bond. The title of the album is taken from dialogue spoken in the film *The Spy Who Loved Me* (Lewis Gilbert, 1977). The photographic images used on the CD cover, which include night-time cityscapes and a swimming pool with an attractive woman, also have echoes of the Bond films.

Ideas for discussion and development

- **How many examples of intertextuality can you find in texts known to you?**

Broadcasting

Audience access to television is changing dramatically. **Digital television** has developed rapidly and the British government plans to cut off the **analogue** signal entirely by 2012. This, together with satellite broadcasting from companies like BSkyB, means that audiences have access to far more television channels than ever before.

The quality of these new channels is variable, but some, like the Discovery Channel, the History Channel and various sports channels available with satellite subscription packages, have put pressure on the five terrestrial television channels. The BBC's digital television and terrestrial service require a considerable budget and some — notably veteran broadcaster John Humphrys of the BBC Radio 4 programme *Today* (a popular morning news programme that has seen severe budget cuts) — have argued that BBC funds are spread too thinly and the quality of traditional broadcasting is suffering as a result. It may well be true that the demands of finding sufficient material to broadcast across the greatly expanded digital services has led to a decline in the standard of programming.

Key terms

analogue: a method of recording visual and sound images. Analogue technology represents the shape or appearance of an object in an unbroken form. Traditional film is analogue, as it runs through a camera in an unbroken sequence.

digital: a communication system that is based on the storage and retrieval of numerical information.

digital television: sound and images that are converted to computerised digits for reception by aerials, satellites or cables and then decoded in a television set-top box. The system is faster, allows for multiple channels, and produces better-quality images than the analogue signal. Digital signals also allow for greater interaction with pay-per-view television, television shopping and choices of viewing angles already available to viewers.



Watching television in the 1940s

Television

Brief history of television

Television's early development took place before the Second World War, but the new service was closed down for the duration of the conflict. The BBC television service was reopened in 1946 and the audience was encouraged to 'look in' on a range of programmes in the evening. Since then, the following developments have occurred:

Case study

Future of television?

Vinton Cerf, Vice President of Google, has said that television is dying. A founding father of the internet, Cerf said that television is facing 'an iPod moment', when viewers will soon be downloading most of their favourite programmes onto their computers. 85% of all video we watch is pre-recorded so you can set your system to download it all the time. 'Live television would only be for news sporting events and emergencies. Television will be like the iPod; you will download to watch later.'

Source: *Daily Telegraph*, 28 July 2007

- ITV, the first commercial channel, arrived in 1954, with advertisements — famously described by show-business entrepreneur Lew Grade as 'a licence to print money'.
- BBC 2 arrived in 1962 after a report by the Pilkington Committee castigated ITV for US imports and 'sponsored' programming.
- In 1984, Channel 4 was launched, with a brief to cover film and sport, minority interests and the other gaps left by ITV coverage.
- The 1990s saw deregulation and the development of satellite broadcasting, as well as plans being made for digitalisation and the switch-off of the analogue signal in 2012.

Today, new technologies mean that traditional television reception will soon be part of a multi-faceted service, providing interactive links, the internet, multi-channel television and computer facilities all on the same screen.

Ideas for discussion and development

- **Do you agree with the ideas of Vinton Cerf? Do you spend more time in a week watching television or at your computer?**

Media institutions in British television

The following institutions dominate the British television industry:

- **BBC:** see pages 108–11 for an overview of the BBC.
- **Independent Television (ITV):** the commercial television network of companies franchised to provide regional independent television coverage. In spite of its commercial nature, ITV was constrained by a

public service requirement, monitored by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), to ensure that its programmes contained agreed percentages of news, current affairs and quality drama-based productions, together with programmes produced in the UK. In 1968, major changes in the franchises created five big ITV companies: Thames, London Weekend, Yorkshire, Granada and ATV. After the 1980 franchise review, new companies such as Meridian emerged. The progress of deregulation, begun in the 1990s, created further upheavals and changes of franchise and by 2000 Carlton, Granada, United MAI and the Scottish Media Group (together with few independent franchises) dominated the network, with ITV 1 in England and Wales being controlled entirely by Carlton and Granada. The overall tendency was towards merger, with a few large companies taking control and a consequent reduction in distinctive regional identity. The merger of Carlton and Granada in 2003 created one giant new company, ITV plc, which owns 40% of Independent Television News (ITN).

- **Channel 4:** an independent commercial television channel established in 1982 under the IBA, with a brief to cover minority interests, the arts, documentary and film, and to act as a complementary channel to both ITV and the two BBC channels. Channel 4 developed a reputation for cutting-edge and challenging programming, often drawing criticism from television watchdog groups such as Mediawatch. Its support of the British film industry through its Film 4 channel has been an important source of finance for independent producers. The high-status social profile of its audience has made the channel a favourite with advertisers and has helped secure its financial viability.
- **Five** (known as Channel 5 until September 2002): independent commercial terrestrial television station, launched in 1997 as a result of a requirement in the Broadcasting Act 1990 for the Independent Television Commission (ITC) to establish a fifth terrestrial channel in the UK. With difficulties involving uninspired programming and poor signal quality in many parts of the UK, the channel had a slow start with low viewing figures. An improvement in programmes has increased its share of the terrestrial market. The licence was awarded on the basis of competitive tender, with the aim of appealing to a 'modern mainstream' audience. Its owners were Pearson, United News and Media, CLT Ufa (a European TV company) and Warburg Pincus and Co. (a US company). Five agreed a partnership with Zip television, a specialist in interactive advertising, in 2004.

- **British Sky Broadcasting (BSkyB or Sky):** the company name of Rupert Murdoch's television satellite channel in the UK and Europe, and part of the News Corporation. BSkyB has become the largest and most successful of the satellite broadcasters.

Television genres

Traditional television schedules are made up of selections of programmes from a range of genres. Some of the main ones are discussed here.

Soap operas

A **soap opera** is a continuing, episodic serial on radio or television. The 'soap' portion of the term originates from US radio where, in the 1930s, soap powder companies sponsored continuous serials. The 'opera' element suggests the melodramatic and often fanciful nature of soap plots.

Soap operas choose known locations, with a focus — often a pub or a bar — around which the life of the local community revolves. They contain a range of characters who are easily recognisable to the audience from their own everyday experiences. Soap characterisation and plots — insofar as production schedules allow — attempt to cover topical matters, although of necessity in a very general way.

Ideas for discussion and development

Location	Soap	Pub/club
Manchester	<i>Coronation Street</i>	The Rovers Return
West Yorkshire	<i>Emmerdale</i>	The Woolpack
Chester	<i>Hollyoaks</i>	Max's club and Tony's restaurant
East London	<i>EastEnders</i>	The Queen Vic
Ambridge (rural England)	<i>The Archers</i> (Radio 4)	The Bull

- **Why do all these British soaps revolve around the pub/club?**

The time sequence of soap operas is parallel to that of real life, so Christmas episodes coincide with Christmas, summer holidays with summer holidays etc. Soaps have **cliffhanger** endings for every episode. A cliffhanger is a dramatic moment in the story where the audience is left guessing what will happen next and so is encouraged to watch the next episode.

Why do people watch soaps? The following reasons might apply:

- Something to talk about with friends.

- Assessing your own behaviour and opinions — following the life decisions of others may help you make decisions yourself.
- Substitute relationships — soap characters have more close relationships than many people have.
- Addiction — some viewers may become obsessed with characters' lives and behaviour. Soap audiences often have difficulty in separating the fictional lives of characters from the actors who portray them.
- Prediction — audience members enjoy guessing where the plot is going.
- Moral judgement — people enjoy moralising about the behaviour of others: 'he should be in prison; she shouldn't have the abortion; he's out of order' etc.
- Spin-off activities — e.g. reading about soap celebrities in magazines.

Crime fiction

Crime fiction is an important television genre dating from the 1950s. It encompasses a whole range of programmes, with narratives and representations being adapted to reflect changing social and cultural values and expectations.

Crime fiction drama exists in many varied forms, ranging from the traditional 'whodunnit' detective story (e.g. Agatha Christie's *Poirot* and Colin Dexter's *Inspector Morse*) to hard-hitting contemporary dramas (e.g. Jimmy McGovern's *Cracker*). Consequently, it appeals to many different audiences.

Representations of the police and criminals have varied considerably since the 1950s, with British mainstream series like *Dixon of Dock Green*, *Z Cars*, *The Sweeney* and *The Bill* attempting 'realistic' domestic representations of crime and law-and-order issues, and thus often reflecting the changing British social scene. Such series can act as vehicles for the airing of public concerns about crime and related issues, e.g. drug abuse, domestic violence, juvenile crime, alcohol-related crime, racism, and even police corruption. We can say that the genre has a **social action** agenda.

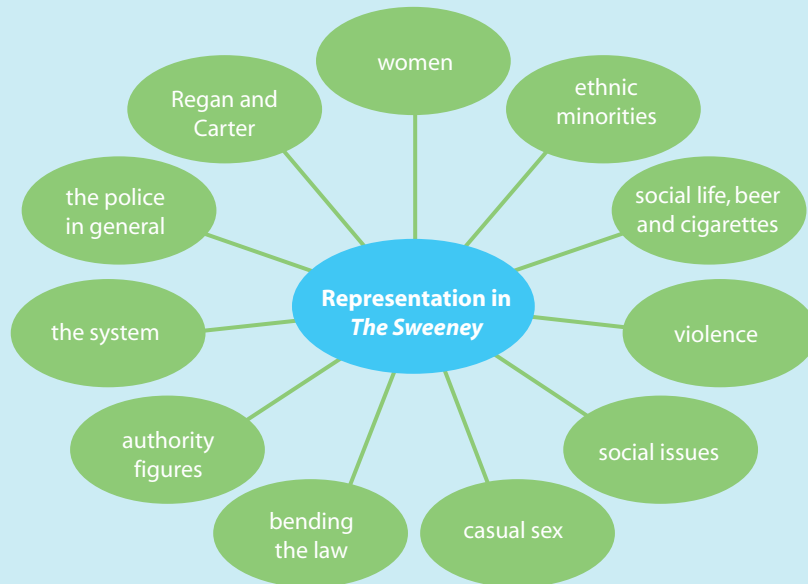
Imported US series, from *Dragnet* (1950s and contemporary remake) to *NYPD Blue* (1993–2005), have provided more escapist entertainment value, representing a different crime culture and distant locations.

Key term

social action broadcasting: television and radio programming that is designed both to analyse current social problems and issues and to encourage people to respond to what they have seen and heard. Social action programmes are a form of interactive television or radio. An example is the BBC's *Crimewatch UK*.

Ideas for discussion and development

If possible, watch an episode of *The Sweeney*. Try analysing the way the episode represents:



- **What are the differences between social attitudes in the episode to those of the present day?**

Situation comedy

Situation comedy (sitcom) refers to a television or radio comedy in which characters are located in a particular contained environment. This can be a house, a shop, a workplace, a prison or any other restricted location. Classic BBC examples from the 1970s include *Rising Damp* and *Porridge*.

Alternative comedy

Alternative comedy is a form of often experimental comedy that challenges mainstream values and expectations. First developed in radio programmes such as the *Goon Show* (1950s) and then on television, alternative comedy shocks the audience by extreme, unexpected or unorthodox representations, e.g. in *The League of Gentlemen* (1999–2002) one of the comic themes has suggestions of cannibalism. Other successful alternative comedy series include *Monty Python's Flying Circus* (1970s), *The Young Ones* (1980s), *The Fast Show* (1990s) and *Little Britain* (2003–06).

Hospital drama

This is a television genre centred around hospitals and the lives of hospital staff and patients. Hospitals have always been a popular setting for television drama and romance, the first British series being ITV's *Emergency Ward Ten* (1957–67). Currently popular are *Casualty* and its spin-off *Holby City*, and the US series *ER*.

Since the National Health Service is a sensitive subject politically, hospital dramas often contain a strong social action element. Issues are highlighted, such as funding, management styles, staff shortages, malpractices and a range of other political, social and economic concerns relating to hospitals and the medical profession, both for their entertainment value and also as a means of encouraging public debate.

Ideas for discussion and development

- **Watch an episode of *Holby City*. List all the issues relating to healthcare provision that you can identify.**

Reality television

This is a style of television that claims to represent real-life situations rather than scripted pre-recorded constructs. It has become extraordinarily popular in recent years. For television companies, reality shows are relatively cheap to make and they can bring in large audiences if successful. Reality shows have developed a variety of different sub-genres:

- Chosen participants (either celebrity or non-celebrity) are placed together in a setting and observed as they interact and manage their surroundings (which are manipulated by the programme makers) and each other.
- Ordinary people are assessed by 'experts' for such things as body shape, diet, house-decorating abilities, and marital and domestic lifestyle.

The first type has replaced the 'fly-on-the-wall' documentaries popular in the 1960s and 1970s, where hidden cameras observed people's everyday lives and behaviour. These programmes were based on the principles of subjectivist sociology, which argued that social studies should concentrate on analysing what people do rather than relying on any preconceived theories of behaviour. However, the more recent programmes are designed purely for entertainment and have little academic value.

Reality television was developed in the late 1990s, with programmes like *Castaway* and *Survivor* first airing in 2000 and 2001 respectively. In these examples, analysts comment on and discuss the participants' behaviour. The audience develops likes and dislikes for individuals and can vote participants off the show. Plain ordinariness and banality, forced



Eviction of Charley Uchea, *Big Brother 8*, 2007

sexual encounters and conflict all blend together to feed audience obsessions with these programmes.

The second type of reality shows are appealing because of the ordinariness of their participants and the everyday situations in which they are placed. The audience gains pleasure from criticising or sympathising with the participants and in judging the value of the expert's advice.

Very little is 'real' about reality shows. Recent evidence about the faking of scenes in the BBC's *Castaway* is a reminder of the artificial nature of these programmes.

Big Brother (Channel 4) is now a national institution. Named after the all-seeing leader in George Orwell's novel *1984*, *Big Brother* originated in Holland in 1999. The first UK series aired in 2000 and is famous for the character of 'Nasty' Nick Bateman. The show is now so well-known that any would-be celebrity invited to take part acts up to the cameras from the first moment.

Ideas for discussion and development

- Is reality television 'dumbed down' television at its worst?

It still seems amazing that an audience will watch ordinary people sleeping — as they do in the unedited versions of the show. The prime-time version is edited, with a voice-over giving details of time, place and character to bring out any drama involved. The power given to the audience is of spying on people — part of an increasingly voyeuristic culture encouraged by the internet — and being able to choose who to evict. Of course, the

characters in *Big Brother* want to be spied on and hopefully get 'discovered', as new 'celebrities' are guaranteed lucrative contracts with tabloids and advertisers.

Radio

Brief history of radio

Radio is the original broadcasting medium. It was developed between 1904 and 1922, and was officially established in the UK in 1927 with the founding of the BBC as a broadcasting monopoly offering, originally, three radio channels.

Radio was the predominant medium of news, entertainment and propaganda between 1927 and 1950. In the UK, radio was a public service, whereas the USA had a commercial radio system carrying advertising. In the UK, radio became the focus of national identity and resistance during the Second World War.

Radio faced strong competition from television in the 1950s and saw declining audiences. With only three (later four) radio stations offered by the BBC and with the challenge of 'pirate radio' in the early 1960s, the structure of radio broadcasting was adapted through legislation. The BBC's monopoly was broken after commercial stations were allowed to broadcast legally in 1974. In the 1990s, after deregulation, new commercial franchises encouraged the further expansion of national, local and community stations. The BBC launched Radio 5 (later renamed Radio Five Live) in 1990 with a mix of sport and lightweight news.

In the 1930s, radio was the first medium used to bring all the countries in the British Empire together to hear the King's Christmas message. Current expansion of radio services is on a narrowcast basis, with local and ethnic services developing to serve the needs of particular communities and interest groups.

Digital radio (Digital Audio Broadcasting, or DAB), with an enhanced digital signal, has been available in the UK since 1995 and the BBC launched five digital-only services in 2002.

Radio is regulated by Ofcom, which monitors and regulates programming and advertising on all independent (non-BBC) radio stations.

Music and radio

Music has been a major part of radio output from the early days of the BBC, with classical music being offered on the BBC's Third Programme