

WORLD WAR II NEWSREELS: THE LEGACY OF YELLOW JOURNALISM

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In January 1930, the regular movie-goer could experience flight in the award-winning Guggenheim plane, watch the Capitol Dome in Washington, D.C. go up in flames, let the 41st Annual Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade pass by, be amazed by the marksmanship of a 13-year-old-girl splitting a playing card edgewise from 45 feet away, and ride on a Miami auto-coaster with other thrill seekers.¹ What a miraculous way to see the world, and all in the comfort of one's local movie theater. This is just one example of the American newsreel, which provided the public with a visual representation of the news. From its introduction to the American people in the 1900s to its demise in the 1950s, the newsreel was a staple of American life. These ten-minute presentations with around eight subjects of newsworthy or interesting footage played in theaters twice a week before a feature film.² Five major newsreel companies – Paramount News, 20th Century Fox's Movietone News, RKO-Pathé News, MGM's News of the Day, and Universal Newsreel – capitalized on the success of showing a lineup of headlines, human-interest stories, and sports. The subjects varied from week to week until the 1940s, when the newsreel began to focus on one subject – World War II.

The Universal Newsreel of March 1944, for example, opens with a flight that highlights the newsreel companies' focus on World War II. "BLAST BERLIN BY DAYLIGHT" flashed across the screen as music played in the background.³ The booming

¹ Universal Newsreel, 8 January 1930, source: 200 Universal 2-3 National Archives, College Park, MD (Compiled by Steven Schoenherr, University of San Diego Department of History), DVD 19.

² Raymond Fielding, *The March of Time, 1935-1951* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 3.

³ Universal Newsreel, 20 March 1944, source: 200 Universal 17-278, DVD 53.

voice of the narrator announced, “The United States Army Air Force is off for Berlin. Bucking a 70 mile an hour headwind, our flying forts hit temperatures ranging as low as 58 below zero – as it’s bombs away over the German capital!” The first subject of the reel concluded with the return of the successful raiders, which before that lost fourteen bombers. The images of the flight, planes, bombs, and return flight are constantly accompanied by music or narrations. This same newsreel shows a battle with the Japanese near the Saipan and Tinian Islands. The newsreel also reported, with the narrator reciting his lines in an Irish accent, on the New York St. Patrick’s Day parade strutting down Fifth Avenue. Caught between two goals – entertaining movie audiences and presenting factual information from the war front – the newsreel was at a crossroads, judged by cinema critics as a far cry from entertainment and labeled by journalists as pure entertainment. Even so, the American public clamored for the seemingly real-life events portrayed on the movie screen.⁴ In order to satisfy all of these audiences – cinema critics, journalists, and the public – the newsreel mirrored another earlier form of wartime journalism that presented sensationalized news – yellow journalism, which flourished during the Spanish-American War.

World War II-era American newsreels and turn-of-the century yellow journalism newspapers display similarities, both in their sensationalized war content and in the techniques utilized to present that content. In the following pages I elucidate how yellow journalism lived on in World War II-era American newsreels through an analysis of the newsreels of one of the major producers of the films, Universal Newsreels.⁵ Print journalism eventually eschewed the sensationalized tactics of yellow journalism when a more

⁴ Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel, 1911-1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 289.

⁵ Although five newsreel companies, Paramount News, 20th Century Fox’s Movietone News, RKO-Pathé News, MGM’s News of the Day, and Universal Newsreel, were active at the time, here I concentrate only on the newsreels from Universal Newsreel. The 44-disc DVD collection of Universal Newsreels I have come from the University of San Diego, which were recorded by Dr. Steven Schoenherr for his history classes. The newsreels have been copied on mini-DV tape at videotape resolution from the public domain reference videocassettes at the National Archives in College Park, MD of the Universal Newsreel gift collection made to the federal government in 1970 that included 30 million feet of film made from 1929 to 1967.

formal code of conduct was introduced.⁶ As I discuss, however, the content and format of yellow journalism, never left the field of journalism; rather it was adopted by a different and developing medium. The legacy of yellow journalism lived on in World War II newsreels as the American people willingly accepted the news from the war front in a new and exciting film format.

Yellow Journalism and the Spanish-American War

At the turn of the twentieth century, yellow journalism gained national attention for its coverage of the Spanish-American War as industry giants William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer fought for newspaper readership. The American people accepted both this competition and the information that the competition produced. Yellow journalism – eye-catching headlines, sensationalized news, and the penchant for self-promotion – made its mark on the American public. During the nineteenth century, an increased demand for information by the public, an increased role of reporters with their new writing style, and the increasing stature of the newspaper publisher and editor led to newfound competition during the 1880s.

The competition began with the New York *World* and its publisher, Joseph Pulitzer. In 1883, Pulitzer bought the struggling newspaper and in three years made it the most profitable newspaper in the nation. Circulation rose from 15,000 to 100,000 as Pulitzer and the *World* created a “new journalism” that other newspapers emulated.⁷ Pulitzer’s new journalism, according to George Douglas, was based on six factors: “good news-coverage peppered with sensationalism, stunts and crusades, editorials of high character, size,

⁶ Hazel Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 8 and 257. See also, Richard L. Kaplan, *Politics and the American Press: The Rise of Objectivity, 1865-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 2; Stephen J.A. Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics: The Path to Objectivity and Beyond* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006), 191.

⁷ George H. Douglas, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999), 95; Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism, A History: 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1962).

illustration, and promotion.”⁸ The hallmark of Pulitzer’s success with the American public was his Sunday edition, which debuted in 1893 filled with illustrations and cartoons, all in color.⁹ A newcomer to the New York newspaper scene sought to take on Pulitzer and the *World’s* recipe for success. In 1895, William Randolph Hearst bought the New York *Morning Journal* and infused it with, in Douglas’s words, “even more blatant techniques than those employed at the *World* – bigger headlines, more sensationalistic treatments, more sin and sex, more outrageous crusading, larger pictures, and something Pulitzer had not stooped to: overt manipulation and distortion of the news.”¹⁰ While the use of such techniques attracted attention and readers to the *Journal*, Hearst’s main competition from Pulitzer remained the *World’s* Sunday edition. In response, Hearst offered large salary increases to the staff of the *World’s* Sunday edition, all of whom accepted and joined the *Journal*.¹¹ Particularly damaging was the departure of Richard F. Outcault, illustrator of the popular comic strip, “The Yellow Kid.” In response, Pulitzer hired George B. Luks to continue drawing the comic strip.¹² Both the *World* and the *Journal* had yellow kids, which stood as the symbol of the rivalry between the two papers – the yellow press.

The yellow press reached its climax with the Spanish-American War. From April to August 1898, Spain and the United States fought over the islands of Cuba, Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. Both the *World* and the *Journal* had been covering the revolt in Cuba following an 1895 Baire outbreak. At least four New York newspapers had correspondents and illustrators in Cuba supplying stories.¹³ Coverage increased in 1896 thanks to the new Captain-General of the Spanish armies, Valeriano Weyler, nicknamed “the Butcher” due to

⁸ Mott, *American Journalism*, 439.

⁹ Douglas, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper*, 97-98.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

¹¹ Mott, *American Journalism*, 524.

¹² Douglas, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper*, 109-110.

¹³ Sidney Kobre, *The Yellow Press and Gilded Age Journalism* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1964), 283; Mott, *American Journalism*, 528. The *World*, *Journal*, *Sun*, and *Herald* had reporters and illustrators in Cuba following the 1895 revolt.

his reputation for brutality. The *World's* correspondent Sylvester Scovel gruesomely reported on the brutality of Weyler and his soldiers in 1896:

“I’ll make you,” said the Spaniard, and he proceeded to tear off her clothing. He then questioned her anew and receiving no answer from the woman, who was crying hysterically, he unsheathed his sword and fell to cutting and slashing his victim, until her blood covered the floor and she fainted in a corner. Her shrieks and entreaties only served to provoke the brutal laughter of the soldier ... With a convulsive movement the woman tried to shield her child with her own body, but the merciless bullets did their work.¹⁴

Similarly, Hearst’s *Journal* exploited ensuing events such as the Ruiz affair, the Cisneros rescue, and the Dupuy de Lôme letter. Hearst’s coverage of these events support an alleged correspondence between Hearst and his illustrator Frederic Remington, who was in Cuba. Remington reported to Hearst in early 1897 that all was quiet in Cuba and there would be no war. Hearst allegedly replied, “You furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.”

Hearst swayed public opinion in favor of American intervention by casting the Spanish in an unfavorable light. For example, he used the plight of Evangelina Cisneros, the niece of the Cuban president, who was imprisoned by Weyler for allegedly enticing a military governor to enter her room where Cubans attacked him.¹⁵ With Hearst’s sensationalist coverage, “The Cuban Girl Martyr” was born, prompting thousands of supporters to sign petitions to free Cisneros. Tales of her deteriorating health and the morbid conditions of the prison in which she was kept filled the *Journal* and other papers that picked up the story. In October 1897, reports surfaced that Cisneros had escaped thanks to the assistance of outsiders. Days later, with the headline “An American Newspaper Accomplishes at a Single Stroke What the Red Tape of Diplomacy Failed Utterly to Bring about in Many Months,” the *Journal* claimed responsibility through their reporter Karl Decker for freeing Cisneros¹⁶

¹⁴ Kobre, *The Yellow Press and Gilded Age Journalism*, 283.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 286; Charles H. Brown, *The Correspondents’ War: Journalists and the Spanish American War* (New York: Scribner’s, 1967), 96; Mott, *American Journalism*, 529.

¹⁶ Brown, *The Correspondents’ War*, 99.

Cisneros was welcomed with a rally at Madison Square Garden and a reception with President William McKinley in Washington, D.C. Hearst and his reporters covered the rescue in a way that made the nation feel an emotional connection to the Cuban struggle. The incidents covered in both newspapers created a sensation across the country, further intensifying public opinion leading up to the sinking of the *Maine*.¹⁷

The U.S. warship *Maine* had been in the Havana harbor since 24 January 1898 protecting United States citizens and their property. On the night of 15 February, an explosion destroyed the warship. The next day, diagrams, displays, and black headings covered the front pages of the *World* and the *Journal* beginning, according to Sidney Kobre, “the practice by most American newspapers of utilizing heavy type across several columns in displaying significant news.”¹⁸ While a Court of Inquiry was dispatched from Washington, D.C. to ascertain the reason for the explosion, the *Journal* had already blamed Spain and offered a \$50,000 reward for information on the persons responsible. The destruction of the *Maine* had a large influence in increasing public opinion in favor of intervening in Cuba. In April, President McKinley, prompted by increased popular pressure for intervention, asked Congress for the authority to take measures to end hostilities between Cuba and Spain. Among other reasons for declaring war, in his April 1898 letter to Congress, McKinley also cited the American public’s protectionist sentiment.¹⁹

The Spanish-American War was ideal for this new journalism. Limited in support and duration, lasting four months only in Cuba, the war was close enough to the US to allow for around 500 reporters, photographers, and illustrators the chance to be war correspondents. Thus the war to which the publishers contributed was now passed on to the correspondents, who had unusual access to military commanders and freedom with the

¹⁷ Kobre, *The Yellow Press and Gilded Age Journalism*, 288.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 289; Mott, *American Journalism*, 531.

¹⁹ Robert H. Holden and Eric Zolov, eds., *Latin America and the United States: A Documentary History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 70. McKinley writes that in addition to subjecting the United States to “great effort and expense” in regards to neutrality and trade, the situation in Cuba also “shocked the sensibilities and offended the human sympathies of our people.”

information gathered. According to Charles H. Brown, the reporters felt “that they must be held accountable for the state of hostilities” and “assumed airs of authority as to its management” giving “as much prominence to views as to news.”²⁰ Both the *World* and the *Journal* maintained a circulation of around 1.5 million during the war months thanks to its use of banner headlines and detailed dramatic coverage of the battles.²¹ By the end of the Spanish-American War, journalism had changed not only in its look and form, but also had new tactics it could use to influence its readers.

Yellow journalism was established through scare-head tactics, the lavish use of pictures, faked interviews and stories, the Sunday supplement, and sympathy for the underdog.²² Yet, if the war was the catalyst for the emergence of this new style, it simply highlighted structural changes taking place within the newspaper industry. Throughout the 1880s and 1890s, a new, more visual journalism was forming.²³ The characteristics of yellow journalism, according to W. Joseph Campbell, are:

The frequent use of multicolumn headlines that sometimes stretched across the front page; a variety of topics reported on the front page, including news of politics, war, international diplomacy, sports, and society; the generous and imaginative use of illustrations, including photographs and other graphic representations such as locator maps; bold and experimental layouts, including those in which one report and illustration would dominate the front page ... Such layouts sometimes were enhanced by the use of color; a tendency to rely on anonymous sources, particularly in dispatches of leading reporters ... ; [and] a penchant for self-promotion, to call attention eagerly to the paper’s accomplishments.²⁴

These defining factors also were able to cross journalism medium boundaries.

²⁰ Brown, *The Correspondents’ War*, vi.

²¹ Mott, *American Journalism*, 537.

²² *Ibid.*, 539.

²³ Kobre, *The Yellow Press and Gilded Age Journalism*, 294.

²⁴ W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 8 and 13.

The more blatant characteristics of yellow journalism, however, did not last past the turn of the twentieth century. Print journalism had a more formal code of conduct placed upon it in 1911 in order to present more ethical coverage.²⁵ Independence, factuality, and impartiality characterized this more ethical coverage – soon known as objectivity.²⁶ Objectivity became a formal term in journalism, following World War I, was widespread in the 1930s, and reached its zenith in the 1940s and 1950s.²⁷ However, the characteristics of yellow journalism were not totally eschewed by the world of journalism. According to Frank Luther Mott, yellow journalism evolved out of its “blatant and dishonest phases” and was able to contribute “banner heads, free use of pictures, and the Sunday supplement” to modern print journalism.²⁸ Campbell agrees with Mott’s conclusions regarding the legacy of yellow journalism, and was the first to test such claims. Campbell performed a systematic content analysis of the front pages of seven American newspapers from 1899 to 1999 to test whether and to what extent these newspapers adopted the practices of yellow journalism.²⁹ Campbell concluded that features of yellow journalism were adopted and adapted in twentieth-century print journalism. Additionally, I hope to build upon his view, but with the stance that yellow journalism lived on in a new and developing form of journalism – World War II American newsreels. Campbell sees a legacy, but only a partial one. Actually, World

²⁵ Dicken-Garcia, *Journalistic Standards in Nineteenth Century America*, 8 and 257. Will Irwin, a journalist who reported for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *New York Sun*, and *McClure’s Magazine*, listed four areas of rules under his Code of Ethics which appeared in a 1911 article in *Collier’s Weekly* entitled “The American Newspaper: A Study of Journalism in Its Relation to the Public.”

²⁶ Ward, *The Invention of Journalism Ethics*, 191.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁸ Mott, *American Journalism*, 539.

²⁹ Campbell, *Yellow Journalism*, 151-167. Campbell analyzes the *Los Angeles Times*, the *New York Times*, the *Raleigh News and Observer*, the *Washington Post*, the *Denver Post*, the *San Francisco Examiner*, and the *St. Louis Dispatch*. His method consisted of analyzing and applying point values to certain types of typography, graphics and illustrations, and content. In terms of typography, Campbell looked at multicolumn headlines, two or more multicolumn headlines, and banner headlines. For graphics and illustrations, Campbell looked at multicolumn illustrations, and three of more illustrations. The content Campbell looked at was the use of the newspaper’s name in a headline, use of anonymous sources in a staff-produced article, prominence to reports about sports, prominence to reports about society events, and the topic of the main story. However, the characteristics of yellow journalism that were seen in his study were more in the field of typography, rather than in sensationalized content.

War II newsreels continued the full legacy, embracing similar sensationalized characteristics – large headlines, reporting on a variety of topics, and a visual representation of the news. The newsreel was able to pass itself off as a news source, while at the same time pleasing its audience with hyperbolic information from the war front. This sensationalized information hit a boom during World War II and had a direct impact on its viewers. The newsreel, much like yellow journalism war reports, impacted its audience through sensationalized reporting of World War II. Yellow journalism’s legacy is not only present in print journalism, but can also be seen in World War II-era American newsreels.

Setting the Stage: The Development of the Newsreel

We have to ask ourselves, what did the members of the audience say to each other when they left the theater? There was no tradition of pictorial journalism. This explains why early audiences could be taken in.

~ Raymond Fielding, quoted in *The Dawn of the Eye*³⁰

For ten minutes, twice a week, American audiences watched the news. The newsreel differed from other news forms of its time, such as print or radio. The cinematic and photographic counterpart to print journalism from 1911 to 1967, the newsreel was based primarily on its journalistic predecessor – the newspaper – in its personnel and structure.³¹ The staff of newsreel companies came from the print journalism world.³² And, while print journalists discovered a new medium with film, they still used the style of a newspaper. For example, newsreel title pages mimicked the headlines of a newspaper, and newsreels presented the most newsworthy story at the beginning, with stories declining in importance as the ten-minute reel played on.

³⁰ Mark Starowicz and Gene Allen, *History through a Lens: 1894-1919*, vol. 1 of *The Dawn of the Eye: The History of Film and TV News*, VHS, CBC Television with BBC and the History Channel (Princeton, NJ: Films for the Humanities and Sciences, 1997).

³¹ Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 135.

³² *Ibid.* Hearst, served as one of the backers of a major newsreel company.

Actualities, in the 1890s, were the start of both the newsreel industry and the motion picture industry.³³ These were short films of everyday life, people, and events. Audiences did not expect much from these films and were accepting of any recognizable or familiar scene, such as a sneeze.³⁴ Early newsreels, however, were not held to print journalism standards since they were an unfamiliar medium that crossed the boundary between journalism and entertainment. What set newsreels apart from entertainment was the fact that the events on the screen were portrayed as actual; what set it apart from journalism was the fact that, in many cases, the events presented on the screen were not the actual events, but recreations of those events. This fact can be seen even at the start of the newsreel industry when, in 1896, Francis Doublier, a cameraman for the Lumiere Brothers, fabricated a film of the Dreyfus affair, making Doublier, according to Raymond Fielding, “one of the first motion picture cameramen to fake a news film – a practice which in time became as much the rule as the exception in the newsreel business.”³⁵ Despite the inclusion of manufactured material, the general public still placed trust in the content and intent of the newsreels they viewed at the movies.³⁶ The public’s faith can be gleaned from a 1900 editorial in *Leslie’s Weekly*, which stated that “A written description is always the point of view of the correspondent. But the Biograph camera does not lie and we form our judgment of this and that as we watch the magic of the screen.”³⁷

³³ Ibid., 3-28. Actualities were short films of general interest that provided a look into contemporary life. One of the earliest actualities was William Friese-Greene’s 1889 scenes of London citizens on a Sunday at Hyde Park as they walked to church.

³⁴ “Edison kinoscope record of a sneeze, January 7, 1894, by W.K.L. Dickson” also titled “Sneeze” or “Fred Ott’s Sneeze” filmed 2-7 January 1894 by cameraman William Heise in Edison’s Black Maria studio published in the United States by the Edison Manufacturing Co., copyright to W.K.L. Dickson 9 January 1894, source: 0026A.mpg, Library of Congress Motion Picture Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division, Washington, DC (Compiled by Steven Schoenherr, University of San Diego Department of History), DVD 33.

³⁵ Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 8. Doublier is quoted as saying, “Piecing together a shot of some soldiers, one of a battleship, one of the Palais de Justice, and one of a tall gray-haired man, I called it ‘L’affaire Dreyfus.’ People actually believed that this was a filming of the famous case.”

³⁶ Ibid., 146-147. Fielding selected quotations from the popular press at the beginning of the 1900s, revealing how newsreels were thought to be completely objective.

³⁷ Ibid.

The newsreel industry matured in its technological capabilities and, because of that, experienced dramatic growth and expansion in the 1920s and 1930s as competition among producers and cameramen to scoop their rivals became more intense. Responsible for meeting this demand week after week, producers manufactured newsworthy information if none was readily available.³⁸ Therefore, according to Fielding, “the price which producers and audiences had to pay for permanent, regular newsreel release was a gradual erosion of authenticity and veracity in newsreel content.”³⁹

As the newsreel evolved from silent to sound, editors added narration, music and sound effects. In order to enhance and distinguish one company from another, all of the major newsreel companies employed the use of a narrator. For example, Universal Newsreel introduced Graham McNamee as the “Universal Talking Reporter” at the end of 1931.⁴⁰ In addition, the editors sought a smoothness in presentation, which was facilitated by dramatic scores that made the newsreel more like a theatrical production. Instead of using raw recordings from the field, sound technicians usually mixed the original sound with other tracks or added artificial sound effects from their newsreel sound library.⁴¹ The addition of sound doubled the opportunities for newsreel editors to partake in sensationalism and journalistic fraud – visually and auditorily. According to Fielding, the use of sound effects undermined the credibility of the newsreel because every gain in “smoothness appeared to

³⁸ Ibid., 145, 246, 148-152. The lack of footage led to the frequent practice of manufacturing newsreel scenes, which newsreel editors and cameramen both admitted to and boasted. There were four types of manufactured material during the silent newsreel era. First was the staging of components of an event at the actual time of the event; second was the re-creation of an event with some of the same individuals who were involved in the original event; third was manufacturing events for the camera, especially those events which never would have otherwise occurred; and fourth was the faking of events with celebrities.

³⁹ Ibid., 145.

⁴⁰ Universal Newsreel, December 1931, source: 200 Universal 4-1, DVD 20; Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 191. Many of these narrators were radio announcers who were heralded as the voice of the newsreel, such as Harry Von Zell as the “Voice of Pathé News.”

⁴¹ Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 167. A November 1934 Universal newsreel showed the title card “SPECIAL EXTRA,” behind which a hand appeared firing a pistol and followed by the title card “NELSON KILLED,” Universal Newsreel, November 28, 1934, source: 200 Universal 06-306, DVD 44.

be attended by a proportionate decrease in authenticity, believability, immediacy, and journalistic integrity.”⁴²

Newsreels and World War II

The competition, sensationalism and structure of the newsreel in the 1930s spilled over into the 1940s when the theater-going public clamored for war coverage.⁴³ The sheer quantity of material newsreel companies gathered made it the medium for presenting actual visual news from the war front. In fact, four-fifths of all newsreel footage released from 1942 to 1946 was war-related, with Paramount News reporting that 77 percent of its news was war news.⁴⁴ According to Carlton Brown, newsreels entered their peak as Americans “were far more concerned with world events than they usually are and found the most compelling account of them, for the first time, in the newsreels.”⁴⁵ Thus, it was the events of the early 1940s that helped newsreels flourish.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941 dramatically shifted the focus of the war for the American public. Sentiment quickly moved in favor of military intervention after the Japanese attack, resulting in the death of 2,280 American soldiers.⁴⁶ A 24 December 1941 Universal Newsreel both chastised Japan and rallied public support: “America is drawn into the world-wide war by Jap infamy and treachery in the Pacific. Dastardly dawn attack on Honolulu unites all Americans in vengeful determination to crush the war-lords of Japan. Get behind your President! Work for Victory! Buy Defense Bonds and Stamps!”⁴⁷ Soon after, Roosevelt declared war on Japan and allied the US with Britain, the Soviet Union,

⁴² Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 168.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 205. The 1930s newsreel business benefited from what Fielding called the sensational events of the decade.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 289.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴⁶ Spencer C. Tucker, *The Second World War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 111-116.

⁴⁷ Universal Newsreel release sheet, 24 December 1941, source: 200 Universal 14-44, DVD 52. Newsreel companies sent release sheets to theaters on a weekly basis promoting the content of the newsreel.

China, and over twenty other countries. United State's involvement in the war gave the newsreel a potency among the American population it had never before known.

The newsreel's appeal, Thomas Doherty contends, was the reel itself and the verification it provided of the news that the American public read in newspapers and heard on the radio.⁴⁸ Newsreels could not compete with newspapers and the radio in terms of timeliness, and the American public knew that. What mattered more to the newsreel industry was *what* was shown, rather than *when* it was shown. Much of the information presented in the newsreel was not entirely new or exclusive. At the end of the 1930s and throughout the 1940s, the five major newsreel companies participated in a rotapool coverage system in which footage of events was shared between them. Each of the five companies were allowed two cameramen for each theater of war.⁴⁹ Either civilian cameramen under the supervision of the military or military cameramen photographed the scenes from the war front. The War Department's Bureau of Public Relations released the already shot, edited, and censored film to the newsreel companies. The companies then shared the footage amongst themselves.⁵⁰

As United States' involvement in the war increased, the newsreel companies had to respond to the public's increasing desire for information and war footage. The newsreel industry had to continue working with the government and its release of the rotapool footage in order to show any war content. But, at the same time, each company had to find a way to distinguish itself in spite of the similar footage they were given. They did so by mimicking what yellow journalists had done – expanding upon their sensational presentation

⁴⁸ Thomas Doherty, *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 231.

⁴⁹ Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 273. Colonel William Mason Wright, head of the Pictorial Branch of the Bureau of Public Relations of the Department of War said, "I propose the idea of pooling our resources for the duration of the war. If each newsreel company will provide use with two cameramen for each theater of operations, I think we can adequately cover all theaters."

⁵⁰ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 233. What newsreel cameramen could shoot was not restricted or censored. Rather, any footage that was not acceptable to be released was edited out by the War Department before distributed to the newsreel companies.

of the news. The only way for the five newsreel companies to differentiate themselves was through inventive presentations of the approved and predetermined war news from the rotapool. According to Sumiko Higashi, during World War II “the moral fervor of newsreel rhetoric bordered on paranoia and hysteria” and was characterized by “hyperbole, excess, extravagant claims, externalizing of emotions, theatricality or heightened dramatization, sententiousness, moral Manichaeism, castigation of monstrous evil and spiritual uplift.”⁵¹ Thus, the newsreel industry relied on the same characteristics that the yellow journalism newspapers had in order to present this hyperbolic version of the news.⁵² The contributions of each newsreel company were no longer based on which company got the scoop, but rather on their logo, editing, commentary, and announcer’s voice because, according to Doherty, “during the war the action was more editorial than reportorial.”⁵³

The typical newsreel during World War II primarily contained footage of the war, a main reason why audiences were so intrigued, though producers still included domestic news, following pageantry, celebrity, and sports. Yellow journalism newspapers followed this same trend in presenting information on a variety of topics all on the front page, such as news of politics, war, international diplomacy, sports, and society. A Universal Newsreel from July 1943 reported on the demise of Italian Prime Minister Benito Mussolini’s reign with the headline title card, “MUSSOLINI FINISHED.”⁵⁴ In the same newsreel, aircraft carriers are christened, wheat crops are harvested, “shapely gals” parade in a “prettiest legs” competition, soldiers are put through motion sickness machines, dogs are trained for war, and Jeeps are tested on the hills of Australia.⁵⁵ In this one newsreel example, a variety of topics are covered, such as war, domestic issues, and pageantry. Subjects centered on World

⁵¹ Sumiko Higashi, “Melodrama, Realism, and Race: World War II Newsreels and Propaganda Film,” *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (Spring 1998): 39 and 43.

⁵² These characteristics were those that Campbell defined as “yellow journalism.” Using this definition of yellow journalism, I will analyze World War II-era newsreels and their tendency to exhibit these same characteristics.

⁵³ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 233.

⁵⁴ Universal Newsreel, 26 July 1943, source: 200 Universal 16-210, DVD 42.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

War II, just as yellow journalism had focused on the Spanish-American War. However, both forms of journalism also displayed a penchant for a variety of topics.

The reliance on visual information was a major reason why the *Journal* and the *World* were considered so sensational at the turn of the century. The visuals – illustrations, photographs, and maps – of these pictorial newspapers dominated the front page. Visuals were also the hallmark of the newsreel. For example, a September 1941 Universal Newsreel introduced a series of scenes under the title card “ARMED NAZI RAIDER SUNK,” which showed a Nazi raider surface ship sink after being hit by torpedoes.⁵⁶ Another from November 1943 showed audiences a variety of exciting war scenes, such as Russian armies converging on Korschew and defeating German forces through the use of rocket guns.⁵⁷ Another subject in the same newsreel showed one explosion after the other in Bryansk, Russia, where Russian forces took over the railroad station used by the Germans. In addition, the release of more timely and realistic rotapool footage starting in 1943 was allowed because the course of the war had shifted in favor of the Allies.⁵⁸ Therefore, newsreels could highlight dramatic and exciting visual content of victories. For example, “VICTORIES AT SEA” was the headline for an April 1944 Universal Newsreel, which showed American air craft carriers shooting down Japanese planes, and a Nazi submarine defeated by an American Navy seaplane tender.⁵⁹ Two months later, a Universal Newsreel release sheet heralded the coming newsreel with the first invasion picture of France: “The Greatest coordination of arms ever portrayed on any motion picture screen in the world. Every scene made during the greatest victory of Allied power, to date.”⁶⁰ However, use of more realistic war footage could still be deceiving, according to Newton E. Meltzer, because

⁵⁶ Universal Newsreel, 15 September 1941, source: 200 Universal 14-15, DVD 41.

⁵⁷ Universal Newsreel, 22 November 1943, source: 200 Universal 16-244, DVD 42.

⁵⁸ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 239.

⁵⁹ Universal Newsreel, 24 April 1944, source: 200 Universal 17-288, DVD 53.

⁶⁰ Universal Newsreel release sheet, 6 June 1944, source: 200 Universal 17-302, DVD 53.

the film camera “lies more artfully with the aid of a willing cameraman or editor.”⁶¹ One form of “cinematic falsehood” newsreels used was the juxtaposition of scenes to convey a desired feeling or meaning.⁶² American audiences flocked to the theaters for visual confirmation of the news, believing what they saw was an untainted reporting of World War II.

The newsreel relied on real life and manufactured footage, but also highlighted additional visual information by showing copious maps, arrows, diagrams, and illustrative graphics. Similarly, the public relied on visuals newspapers provided during the Spanish American War, such as maps showing battles and troop movements. According to Doherty, newsreels used such visuals to their advantage to make sense of the war because they “explained bewildering events on remote atolls and taught geography, military strategy, and international politics to a public conscious of the importance but confused by the complexity.”⁶³ For example, a June 1941 Universal Newsreel reported on the sinking of the *SS Robin Moor*.⁶⁴ A standard school map appears on the screen with a pencil tracing the route of the *Robin Moor* before a U-boat sank it. Over time, the newsreels matured in their presentation of maps, as can be seen with a February 1945 Universal Newsreel where United States forces attacked the Japanese from the South China Sea.⁶⁵ An animated map shows the South China Sea in relation to the continents bordering it. When the narrator talks about a heavy storm, an animated storm cloud appears on the map. Flashing animated arrows later point out where the Allied forces attacked. Maps and diagrams explained the war to audiences, and also helped newsreel editors fill in holes where they might not have had exciting footage to show.

⁶¹ Newton E. Meltzer, “Are Newsreels News?” *Hollywood Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (April 1947): 270.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 231.

⁶⁴ Universal Newsreel, 16 June 1941, source: 200 Universal 13-989, DVD 41.

⁶⁵ Universal Newsreel, 19 February 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-374, DVD 55.

Eye-catching, multi-column, heavy type, and banner headlines that stretched across the page characterized yellow journalism.⁶⁶ The newsreel, based on the presentation characteristics of the newspaper, displayed its own headlines in the introductory title card of each subject. The newsreels of the World War II era presented these headlines in capital letters and written in an active and dramatic fashion. For example, a May 1941 title card told audiences “H.M.S. HOOD AVENGED.”⁶⁷ A 1943 title card introduced information on a new tank artillery gun with the headline “UNCLE SAM’S NEW KILLER.”⁶⁸ The title cards told the story of the war. In March 1945, a Universal Newsreel title card reported “MANILLA FREE OF JAPANESE DOMINATION.”⁶⁹ April 1945 broke the news that the “ALLIED NET TIGHTENS ON GERMANY.”⁷⁰ One month later, the “BEATEN NAZIS SIGN HISTORIC SURRENDER.”⁷¹ And July 1945 reported on the “FINAL DAYS OF THE STRUGGLE IN OKINAWA.”⁷² Headlines are used to grab the attention of the audience. While similar to newsreels of the past decades, title card headlines of the World War II era were different because of their ability to keep audiences coming to the theaters and, while there, in their seats.⁷³ Though title card headlines presented truthful information about the coming scenes, they did so in a theatrical fashion, a practice print journalism had introduced, but eschewed at the turn of the century. The newsreels were not a true representation of a type of journalism that followed a code of conduct. These title

⁶⁶ Headlines during Hearst’s coverage of the Cisneros rescue included: “The Cuban Girl Martyr” and “An American Newspaper Accomplishes at a Single Stroke What the Red Tape of Diplomacy Failed Utterly to Bring about in Many Months.” Brown, *The Correspondents’ War*, 99.

⁶⁷ Universal Newsreel, 29 May 1941, source: 200 Universal 13-984, DVD 40.

⁶⁸ Universal Newsreel, 10 May 1943, source: 200 Universal 16-188, DVD 41.

⁶⁹ Universal Newsreel, 22 March 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-383, DVD 55.

⁷⁰ Universal Newsreel, 9 April 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-388, DVD 56.

⁷¹ Universal Newsreel, 14 May 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-398), DVD 56.

⁷² Universal Newsreel, 5 July 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-413, DVD 57.

⁷³ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 239-240. The Motion Picture Research Bureau reported that 85 percent of the public wanted to see the topics of war covered in the newsreels and advertised prominently on the theater marquees. This more attentive audience would rather watch the newsreel than visit the “lavatory” or talk to each other.

card headlines are just another example of how newsreels followed the codes and characteristics of yellow journalism.

The main newsreel characteristics were not new or even revolutionary during World War II. They began during the era of yellow journalism and were adopted for the medium of film, honing sensationalist presentation characteristics through coverage of the war. In addition, newsreels went a step further than yellow journalism in its editorialized version of the news because of the ability to use sound. Yellow journalism was known for its emotionalized and editorialized reporting of events, which influenced public opinion.⁷⁴ Newsreels followed its lead by transforming the reporter into the narrator, the voice of the reel, a practice which continued and was improved upon during World War II.

The newsreel companies set themselves apart through their narrative voice. The “Voice-of-God” narrations briefed the American public about other cultures, cultures that represented opposition to the forces of the United States.⁷⁵ The invisible and omniscient narrator also taught the audience about the war, while at the same time influencing the views of the theater-going public. For example, the narrator of a February 1945 attack on Japan relayed this dramatic information to audiences: “Carrier forces attached to the greatest fleet on earth roll on the waters off Japan and the Philippines. A deadly brood gets ready for a crushing blow at enemy sea units and shore installations. Official Navy pictures show a deck-load of death ready for delivery.”⁷⁶ Another narration excessively described a March 1945 night bombing of Pforzheim: “A city is literally being wiped out before your eyes. Explosions and fires are sucking the oxygen from the air. Nothing can live in this inferno.”⁷⁷ The narrator giving this dramatic version of the news on film was the

⁷⁴ Brown, *The Correspondents' War*, vi. According to Brown, the reporters felt “that they must be held accountable for the state of hostilities” and “assumed airs of authority as to its management” giving “as much prominence to views as to news.”

⁷⁵ Higashi, “Melodrama, Realism, and Race,” 39 and 43.

⁷⁶ Universal Newsreel, 19 February 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-374, DVD 55.

⁷⁷ Universal Newsreel, 15 March 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-381, DVD 55.

counterpart to the reporter in print. Just as the reporter during the Spanish-American War was taught to write in a concise and dramatic telegraphic style, according to narrator Harry Von Zell, “my delivery had to be similar to that of a teletype machine – crisp, flat.”⁷⁸ The narrator was the most effective medium in communicating the newsreel’s message to its audience. In order to present the approved and predetermined war news from the rotapool, the narrations written and the narrator’s delivery instilled a dramatic and encouraging feel to the newsreels.⁷⁹

The narrative voice was also backed by a variety of additional sounds, which included dramatic music to heighten the emotion of the newsreel. Universal Newsreels in 1944 and 1945 were introduced with the Universal Newsreel logo “COVERS WORLD-WIDE EVENTS” while upbeat music played in the background.⁸⁰ This music, usually trumpets blaring, continued on throughout the newsreel and reached dramatic heights during combat scenes. The more excessive the narrator got in his narrations, the more heightened the music got. Instrumental renditions of, for example, “Yankee Doodle Dandy” were also used, adding to the patriotic and theatrical nature of the newsreel.⁸¹ To further augment the visuals, according to Doherty, companies relied on prerecorded sounds of the war, such as “the accelerating roar of a divebombing plane, the distinctive explosions from different caliber ordnance, and the trademark ‘squish’ of the flamethrower.”⁸² Examples of dive bombing planes and explosions can be heard in a March 1945 Universal Newsreel as “CARRIERS HIT JAPAN!”⁸³ While easier for the newsreel editor, the use of these canned

⁷⁸ Fielding, *The March of Time*, 11. The newspaper reporter’s writing style evolved just prior to the Spanish American War due, in part, to the Civil War. Because of the use of the telegraph by newspapers, the reporter, according to Douglas, developed “a clipped, telegraphic style” and “learned the art of writing in a concise, dramatic style.” Douglas, *The Golden Age of the Newspaper*, 66.

⁷⁹ George H. Roeder, Jr., *The Censored War: American Visual Experience during World War II* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 17-18.

⁸⁰ Universal Newsreel, 1944-1945, source: DVD 53-57.

⁸¹ Universal Newsreel, 15 March 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-381), DVD 55.

⁸² Doherty, *Projections of War*, 245-246.

⁸³ Universal Newsreel, 19 March 1945, source: 200 Universal 18-382, DVD 55.

war sounds in a newsreel that was supposed to be authentic was, instead, illusory. The techniques utilized in sound editing were perfected during this time, allowing for, according to Fielding, “considerable alteration of the original meaning and emphasis in any particular sequence.”⁸⁴ Narration, music, and sound effects both heightened emotions of American audience members, and increased interest in the newsreels. At the end of World War II, the United States had become a world power and the newsreel had become a trusted source for information. Its presentation of that information was questionable throughout the war, but it was the “war [that] amplified the power of motion picture news.”⁸⁵

Audience and Impact

You suddenly have this tremendous repository of visually compelling material and, for the first time, motion picture news becomes as narratively and visually compelling as motion picture entertainment, and that really makes the newsreels something different than before the Second World War.

~ Thomas Doherty, quoted in *The Dawn of the Eye*⁸⁶

World War II allowed the newsreel to flourish, and to do so in front of American audiences filling theaters across the country. Americans were part of an “imagined community” when they stepped foot into a movie theater.⁸⁷ Twice a week, newsreels played in front of millions of viewers who crossed class-lines, regions, and ethnicities.⁸⁸ Film brought American audiences the news and, at the same time, softened the impact of a changing world due to the effects of war. The war years brought to light the capabilities of

⁸⁴ Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 241.

⁸⁵ Starowicz and Allen, *Eyes of the World*.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 6-7. Anderson defines his view of a nation as an imagined community in which, no matter how large or small the community is, all the members will never know each other, however they see themselves as a coherent community. Americans viewing newsreels, no matter how far apart they were geographically, were part of this common imagined community, confirming Anderson’s argument that “regardless of the actual inequality or exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”

⁸⁸ Roeder, *The Censored War*, 4.

film, and therefore facilitated, according to Doherty, the “transition from a rational print-based culture to an impressionistic motion picture world.”⁸⁹ These images became the collective memory of war for the American public as film visually archived the events of their lifetime. By the 1940s, on average, Americans visited their local movie theater at least three times a month.⁹⁰ Throughout the war, and as newsreels grew in popularity, audiences went to the theater not just for the Hollywood feature film. The marquees even displayed the newsreel alongside the feature film. The Motion Picture Research Bureau reported that 85 percent of the public wanted to see the topics of war covered in the newsreels and advertised prominently on the theater marquees.⁹¹ Pathé advertised, “today news-on-the-screen rivals the feature as a marquee attraction,” a statement that Doherty confirms as most likely true.⁹² Because of such promotion and due to its war coverage, the newsreel developed an attentive audience.

What made the visuals presented in the newsreels also influential was the widespread acceptance of newsreels as a source for information. While popular public opinion showed trust in the newsreels before the 1940s, it was not until World War II that both the motion picture industry and the journalism world took notice and recognized the importance of the footage being presented to mass audiences. Critics began writing about the newsreel, according to Fielding, “half hoping that it might, in war, realize its always recognized potential for intelligent journalistic contribution.”⁹³ William Whitebait of the *New Statesman and Nation* wrote that “Queues twenty-five yards long outside the news theatres testified to the main drama of this week and of many weeks to come. ... Here, for once, was something worth standing in the rain for.”⁹⁴ Additionally, the film industry praised the manner in

⁸⁹ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 6.

⁹⁰ Roeder, *The Censored War*, 4; Meltzer, “Are Newsreels News?” 271. Newsreels reached a larger audience because a majority of the members of a family in two out of three American homes visited the theater for the newsreel.

⁹¹ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 239-240.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 239.

⁹³ Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 291.

⁹⁴ William Whitebait, “The Movies,” *New Statesman and Nation*, June 17, 1944, 404.

which the newsreel presented the news, pointing out the mass appeal of the medium. The *Motion Picture Herald*, which in the 1930s degraded the newsreel's importance, warned that "the patrons will immediately start beefing" if the newsreel was cut out of the program during the 1940s.⁹⁵ This type of fervor for the newsreel was because, according to the *Motion Picture Herald*, "A man reads his paper or hears a broadcast about the great victory at Sicily, then he wants to see how it was done – so he goes to see it in the newsreel."⁹⁶ Due to the opportunities afforded to the newsreel industry during World War II, and the way in which the newsreels covered those events, the newsreel grew in status, both theatrically and journalistically, as the whole of its viewers saw the importance and impact of the medium.

While it was a new medium of public information to be reckoned with, Meltzer argued in 1947 that the newsreel was not a true representation of the social and political world Americans lived in, and would not truly be "*news* until they [newsreels] are freed from the superficial formula that has cursed them for nearly four decades."⁹⁷ What made newsreels so potent in imparting certain views was the fact that these films purported to be real or truthful, and therefore, according to Higashi, brought "the spectator into more direct contact with the historical world."⁹⁸ The content of the newsreel helped to create a perception of the world, which was accepted by the public largely because newsreels were now an accepted and trusted form of news. The newsreel's concentration of facts in a short period of time, coupled with its journalistic foundations and documentary framework, gave the newsreel the "weight of conviction" and a legitimacy among the public.⁹⁹ The newsreel,

⁹⁵ Doherty, *Projections of War*, 239. See also, Fielding, *The American Newsreel*, 222. In 1937, the *Motion Picture Herald* published, "... newsreels have no social obligation beyond those of the amusement industry and theatres they are supposed to serve. Newsreels have an obligation, if they are to be purveyed as entertainment in theatres, to be entertaining. They have no obligation to be important, informative. They can successfully present neither one side, both sides, nor the middle of any social condition or issue."

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Meltzer, "Are Newsreels News?" 272.

⁹⁸ Higashi, "Melodrama, Realism, and Race," 39.

⁹⁹ Meltzer, "Are Newsreels News?" 271.

therefore, influenced how those viewers perceived and understood the world around them.¹⁰⁰

The role of the newsreel was to present information to the American public, no matter how objective or sensationalized that content was. World War II allowed the newsreel to flourish, and to do so in front of the tens of millions of Americans filling theaters across the country. This success occurred during its coverage of World War II as the newsreel employed the same tactics as newspapers of the yellow journalism era in order to present its version of the news. Large headlines, reporting on a variety of topics, and visual information became the identifying and similar characteristics of both World War II-era newsreels and yellow journalism. Therefore, the legacy of yellow journalism's sensationalistic content and presentation is seen in World War II-era newsreels.

¹⁰⁰ Miles Hudson and John Stanier, *War and the Media* (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 73. The newsreels conditioned the viewers' "perception of their fortunes in the conflict."