The Forgotten Role of the Global Newsreel Industry in the Long Transition from Text to Television

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Abstract

Political communication scholars often mark the increasing popularity of electronically broadcast news film as a dividing line between a text-based information culture that survived through World War II and a visually oriented electronic information culture that was in place by the late 1960s. Yet this standard view is incomplete, for it neglects a forgotten but extremely popular worldwide system of visual news reporting based on documentary film shorts. A global system for distributing twice-weekly newsreels was already in place before the First World War; nearly half a century before television news would begin to attract large national audiences and seven decades before CNN would begin distributing news footage once again to all corners of the world. This article aims to reorient political communication scholarship to the historical importance of the newsreel medium and to direct political communication scholars to the rich trove of newsreel film stock that recently became available for analysis.

Keywords

newsreels, documentary short films, pretelevision news broadcasts, soft news, global news broadcasting

We like to think of the visual news industry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as a one-of-a-kind system: the first to transmit the same moving images of newsmakers and events to every corner of the world, the first to expose large portions of the world’s population to moving images about news of the day, and the first

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to dish up "soft news" infotainment. But the global television news systems in place today were neither the first worldwide news broadcasts, nor the most popular, nor even the softest.

In 2007, Fox News had three news bureaus in countries other than the United States; while global giant CNN had twenty-six news bureaus outside North America (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2008). But there was a time when Fox News boasted of having more than a thousand news cameras stationed around the world in such far-flung places as Shanghai, Sydney, Borneo, Tibet, Dublin, and Irkutsk (Fielding 2006: 61). These cameras produced approximately one thousand hours of raw news footage per week that was condensed into polished news programs for worldwide distribution. The year was 1922, the era of the silent film, and Fox was in the newsreel business.2

In the 1930s and 1940s, Fox’s Movietone News grew to become the largest American newsreel operation and the most influential distributor of international newsreels, boasting cameramen in fifty-one countries as well as film processing centers in nine international locations (Fielding 2006: 113). Its twice-weekly newsreels covered a wide range of current events stories and were so popular that by 1946 Movietone newsreels were seen in forty-seven countries by a combined weekly international audience of 200 million persons (Lawrenson 1946). With an estimated 1950 world population of approximately 2.5 billion persons, the audience claimed by Movietone newsreels amounted to 8 percent of the world’s population every week. By way of comparison, BBC’s World News is currently the world’s most-viewed satellite news service, with a weekly global audience amounting to just 1.2 percent of the world’s population in 2008. This number rises to 3.5 percent of the world’s population when factoring in the combined audience for BBC World News, BBC Radio’s World Service, and the online audience for BBC.com.3 Yet today’s combined weekly audience for all BBC programming is still less than half the size of the 1946 weekly global audience for Fox’s Movietone newsreel.

Research on the historical development of mass media (e.g., 1977; Schramm 1960; Tebbel 1974), even in film criticism the newsreel has been conspicuously neglected as an object of study since as far back as the 1920s “Benn” (1929/2002; Pronay 1972). While the history of the French newsreel system has attracted a small amount of scholarship (e.g., Huret 1984; Jeanne 1961), to this day there have been no efforts to document the full history of the British newsreel system (although see brief treatments in Ballantyne 1983; Jeavons, Mercer, and Kirchner 1998; McKernan 2002) and only two attempts to document the complete history of American
newsreels: a volume by film historian Raymond Fielding (1972) that was originally published shortly after the last American newsreel operation closed shop and was recently updated in a second edition (2006); and an unpublished doctoral dissertation by Adelaide Hawley Cumming (1967), who had been a prominent newsreel personality for several decades before transitioning to graduate school after the demise of her industry. Because the small amount of newsreel scholarship that exists has been directed toward audiences in film history and cinema studies, it tends to ignore or minimize research questions of interest to political communication scholars. This gap in the scholarly record persists despite the fact that newsreels from America, France, and Britain—especially from the United States—comprised “the main pivots of a worldwide system” of visual news reporting (Baechlin and Muller-Staass 1952: 14) that was in place decades before television became commercially viable.

There are probably many reasons why newsreels have been ignored by political communication scholars. The melodramatic style and the odd structure of the newsreel program were unlike those of “serious” visual news forms that followed. As a result, comparing the forms of newsreel content to modern television news broadcasts is sometimes difficult, as the newsreels aimed to provide visual information about public figures, events, and social trends rather than the “hard news” reporting we would expect from television news today. The newsreel nonetheless carried more serious news content than its detractors often suggested (this point is made forcefully by Cumming 1967) and particularly excelled in covering wars. But since its role in the cinema industry was usually as filler rather than feature, and as its functions were transferred to and continued by the early television newscasts, the newsreel’s demise was neither widely regretted nor long remembered.

This article aims to reorient political communication scholarship to the historical importance of the newsreel medium. It does so primarily by integrating and synthesizing a wide range of newsreel literature—from primary sources about the international newsreel industry to newsreel scholarship produced mainly by film historians—in ways that address research questions of interest to political communication scholars. Cross-national audience data for weekly newsreel exposure are also presented, along with longitudinal data on weekly newsreel exposure for the United States from the 1920s through the early 1960s. The result is an accessible introduction to the content and structure of the newsreel industry that can be used to inform a broad range of political communication scholarship.

The article also aims to direct political communication scholars toward the rich trove of newsreel film stock that recently became available for analysis. The entire film libraries of two of the major newsreel companies—spanning the years 1896 through 1979—are now completely digitized and available for scholarly access at no cost (see the appendix for details). So beside serving as an introduction to the political communication aspects of the newsreel industry, the following analysis serves as a guide to assist political communication scholars whose research might benefit from access to the more than eighty years of news film that has been retained in these digital libraries.

The newsreel was the first global news medium, but because most newsreel footage available today comes from the shot libraries of the two largest British newsreels, it is important to outline the global structure of the newsreel industry to clarify why this British record represents a local repository of moving images that were shown on screens all around the world. As is explained in detail, the national subsidiaries of the major newsreel chains were part of an international film distribution system that shared film holdings with related subsidiaries from other countries. This means that researchers interested in studying newsreel images shown to audiences in the United States and other countries will find much of that visual record in the British shot libraries. In the case of international news topics like war, the British film libraries probably contain much of the same visual sequences used by newsreel companies in the United States and elsewhere, even if the narrator’s commentary that was custom scripted for British distribution was heard only by British audiences.

The pages that follow first describe the function and structure of the newsreel within the standard cinema program of the early twentieth century. The next section discusses the audience for newsreel content, which was much larger and more diverse than contemporary news audiences today. Following that is a discussion of the structure of the newsreel industry, emphasizing how economic incentives produced a system of content sharing that eventually eliminated competition among rival multinational newsreel companies. The demise of serious competition produced a rudimentary global news exchange system that delivered relatively homogenous news footage on a twice-weekly basis to a large global audience. Unlike the global satellite news systems of today, the global newsreel industry repackaged common content for domestic consumption by translating mass-communicated documentary footage into country-specific news products voiced in local languages and reedited to fit local tastes and customs. The article concludes by tracing the decline of the newsreel industry following the advent of television and detailing the main archival resources for studying English-language newsreel content.

The Forgotten News Medium

Documentary film shorts of “actualities” began appearing in the 1890s during the same period that photographs began appearing in newspapers (Baechlin and Muller-Staass 1952: 10; Barnhurst and Nerone 2001). The newsreel emerged as a new form of visual communication shortly thereafter, becoming established as a major information medium in Europe as early as 1910 (McKern 2002) and in the United States by 1911 (Fielding 2006). Newsreels became so popular that “by the 1930s two new media of mass-communications, [radio] broadcasts and newsreels, had joined the newspapers as suppliers of the sum of information and the range of interpretation upon which public opinion formed itself” (Pronay 1971: 411). The popularity and scope of the newsreel industry was so great that by the mid-1930s “the chances of an unexpected major news break occurring anywhere on the globe in the presence of fewer than two or three competing cameramen became slim indeed” (Fielding 2006: 171). Aside from the addition of sound in the late 1920s, the newsreels survived virtually unchanged in format and
the interwar period, the latest ladies’ fashions were of enduring interest, as were daredevil stunts, oddball technologies, and the latest doings of Hollywood celebrities. Film of military happenings and sporting events were two of the most popular subjects. A content analysis of American newsreel stories from the early 1930s found that military subjects were second only to sports as the most featured topical category (Dale 1937). This selection of topical matter led one contemporary British critic to lament that the real aim of the newsreel “is not to present news, but to breed a race of society gossipers, sport-maniacs, lick-spittles and jingoites” “Benn” 1929/2002: 67). In this sense, the newsreel was the original infotainer.

In the process of entertaining with moving pictures, the newsreels also forged important new forms of visual political communication that would later be taken up by the television news industry. The newsreels allowed citizens to observe their national leaders in action on a regular basis, sometimes making speeches and often as part of “media events” organized for the newsreel cameras. The newsreels framed public issues and highlighted government efforts to remedy social problems. Newsreels avoided controversial domestic issues for fear of alienating their socially diverse audiences, but international controversies were often featured, particularly when there were clear lines drawn between the domestic “us” and the foreign “them” or when the story was centered on a dramatic, high-profile event. Newsreels treated political leaders as celebrities long before television ever arrived on the scene. They interpreted the meaning of public events and allowed audiences for the first time to “see” extreme aspects of the human experience such as poverty, social unrest, and war that had been previously accessible mainly through textual description.

Perhaps because the 1920s and 1930s were the heyday of the newsreel industry, newsreel content tends to be remembered—in keeping with its interwar style—as both frivolous and spectacular. War changed this. American newsreels became so thoroughly saturated with World War II stories that contemporary film critics noted the eclipse of domestic news unrelated to the war effort (Meltzer 1947). Sports coverage dropped from 26 percent of American newsreel stories in 1941 to 9 percent during each of the next four years of the war. Overseas news about World War II had occupied 21 percent of American newsreel stories in 1941, but rose to 46 percent of all newsreel stories in 1943, 54 percent of stories in 1944, and 48 percent in 1945 (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 36; Handel 1950: 170; Sterling and Haight 1978: 296).

World War II was a turning point in the newsreel industry. Gerald Sanger, editor of British Movietone during World War II, later observed that “the contents and form of the news-reel changed with the war. The purely ‘entertainment’ content became less and less. . . . It became accepted by the public that the news-reels’ function was to report the war, and as the war became world-wide, the stream of other items dried up” (Sanger 1946/2002: 169–70). Wars ushered in periods of newsreel sobriety, in part because being in a war increased popular interest for serious war coverage, but also because war gave newsreels the dramatic material that they had to scramble for in peacetime. Peaceetime newsreels from before World War II already reveled in the extremes of human experience, featuring film of assassinations, executions of well-known criminals,
disasters, strange mishaps, traumatic accidents, and wars, as often as such footage could be obtained. In the early years, when authentic footage of such scenes was difficult to come by, newsreels simply faked or re-created them in ways that were difficult to distinguish from real footage (Fielding 2006; Whissel 2002). Going to war meant that newsreels could tap a constant stream of spectacular material. And tap it they did.

Newsreels relied so heavily on spectacular material because of the role they played in the typical cinema program and the way they were distributed. Three factors help explain the newsreels’ preoccupation with war, sports, fashion, and spectacle: their long circulation run, the speed with which they could report breaking news, and the entertainment preferences of newsreel audiences. First, newsreel stories needed to have a long shelf life because each newsreel print could be in circulation for as long as a month. Most newsreels were issued twice a week. But because prints were expensive, newsreels were released initially to a small number of first-run theaters, where they would be shown for three or four days. The prints then would be sent to second-run theaters for another few days, and so on until the prints circulated out to the cheapest cinemas (Fielding 2006; Pronay 1971). Routine stories about recent events might hold the attention of first-run audiences, but weeks-old news could hardly be attractive to the bulk of moviegoers. Newsreels therefore specialized in stories that would retain their appeal for weeks following their initial release. The long shelf life of entertaining footage did just this, whether of nationally prominent sporting events, collapsing bridges, flaming Zeppelins, public appearances of Hollywood notables, or executions of notorious prisoners. Coverage of high-profile government leaders and dramatic public events served similar ends.

A second reason for the newsreels’ reliance on spectacular material arose from limitations in the speed with which newsreels could get pictures out to first-run movie houses. Although newsreel cameras were often on hand to record breaking news stories, the time lag between the occurrence of an event and the initial distribution of newsreel film to first-run theaters meant that newsreels could not compete against newspapers or radio as a primary news medium. As a result, “The newspapers and the newsreels were not in direct competition . . . and the press seems to have felt no challenge from news film, being concerned far more with the threat of being beaten posed by [radio]” (Taylor 2002: 69) Newsreels served instead as “an illustrated supplement” (Talbot 1912/2002: 20) to stories that were already known to audiences through newspaper or, later, radio reporting. This helps to explain the presentation style of typical newsreel stories about current events, in which an unseen narrator merely describes images being shown without providing much context, and why newsreel stories were usually so short: “The cinema newsreels were not in the business of being first with the news, or of breaking stories—they were supplementary and dependent on their audience already being aware of the story to which their images referred” (Taylor 2002: 68).

In this sense, the newsreel was more of a repeating medium than a reporting medium. However, this tendency should not be overstated, and the time lag between the filming of an event and the release of that film to first-run theaters was rarely very long. In World War I, news film could be exhibited in London theaters within forty-eight hours of its being shot at the front in Belgium or France (Kearton 1935/2002: 41). Largely due to the introduction of air transportation in the interwar years, newsreels could—at great expense—sometimes beat newspapers at breaking news events. For instance, the takeoff sequence of Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight across the Atlantic was shown on screens in California at roughly the same time that Lindbergh’s plane touched down in Paris, a remarkable feat for the period. A specially equipped train allowed film of Lindbergh’s homecoming in Washington, D.C., to be developed en route to New York so that Broadway theatergoers could watch the event on the same day that it occurred (Cumming 1967: 82–83). Even international stories could be distributed quickly once air transportation came into the picture. Combat footage from the Korean War could be on British screens within a few days of being shot (Noble 1955/2002), about the same time it would take nearly two decades later for television film from Vietnam to reach American television networks in New York (Knightley 2004: 453). Exceptional cases aside, because newsreels were usually released once every three or four days, newsreel film of a breaking news event could only be shown in first-run theaters after newspapers and radio had initially reported the event.

A third reason for the newsreels’ reliance on spectacular material was that, then as now, people saw movies to be entertained rather than informed. This meant that the newsreel, as a component of every feature film program, had to do three things at once: avoid controversial subjects, hold the attention of audiences with little interest in current events, and be understood with minimal cognitive effort. The logic of story selection in the newsreel industry was explained in this way by an assignment editor for the Paramount News newsreel in 1938:

The theaters for the most part really did not want real news. They did not consider it their function to educate. They are an entertainment media. Then too, the majority of the people in an audience, I think, do not want news unless it is entertainingly presented in their newsreel. They come to the theater to escape reality... Here's the problem the newsreels are faced with. They have the prerogatives of a news agency and hence the social obligations of a news-disseminating organization. At the same time, their audience will accept their product only if it is entertaining—good theater. We are driven into the corner of having to combine the two factors, and our policy, as worked out roughly, became, "give us much real news as can really be interestingly told with motion pictures." (Montague 1938: 51)

As indicated in this quotation, audience expectations determined not only which stories were selected but also how they were presented. Newsreel stories were narrated by known personalities such as Lowell Thomas but were not “reported” in the modern sense of journalistic enterprise. Pictures were shown and described within a simple narrative structure defined by the musical accompaniment as much as by the spoken word. The author has seen several examples from World War II of Russian combat stories inserted “as is” with Russian-language narration into the Universal newsreels.
shown around the United States. The storyline in such stories is so obvious and so clearly marked by the musical score that the American newsreel editors apparently felt no need to translate into English what the viewers were actually seeing. With war stories, melodrama seemed the dominant motif in newsreel coverage (Higashi 1998; Whissel 1999, 2002). The distinctively overwrought presentation of newsreel war stories is more difficult to describe than the impression it leaves: the powers of good against the forces of evil, set to a musical score of earnest strings and fulsome horns punctuated with machine-gun fire, narrated by a grandiloquent sports announcer on his second pot of coffee. The dispassionate voice of objective journalism was little heard in the typical newsreel.

The Audience for Newsreels

Documentary film shown in the newsreels was seen by a much larger and more diverse audience than assembles for television news broadcasts today. Studies show that between 1930 and the mid-1940s Americans spent more money on cinema attendance than on any other recreational pastime (Butsch 2001). UNESCO data show that in 1923 there were enough movie theaters in the United States to seat 6.8 percent of the American population at one time. Theater seating capacity peaked in 1931 at 9.8 percent of the population, before declining to 3.1 percent by 1967 (Sterling and Haight 1978: 325). This seating capacity was well used, as weekly attendance numbers (Sterling and Haight 1978: 352) confirm that moviegoing was among the most popular recreational activities in America from the 1910s until the late 1940s (Figure 1). These attendance figures provide an estimate of weekly newsreel exposure, as every person attending the cinema was exposed to a newsreel regardless of age or the feature film they came to see.5

The historical record of cinema attendance consists of tickets sold rather than number of unique persons attending, so estimates of newsreel exposure in Figure 1 are presented with upper bounds assuming unduplicated weekly newsreel audiencese and lower bounds assuming that each audience member has attended twice a week. Since some people attended more than once a week—the regular feature programs rotated twice weekly—and some people less than once a week, the actual percentage of Americans going to the movies lies somewhere between these two bounds. Figure 1 shows that cinema attendance rates doubled in the United States between 1922 and the high-water mark of 1930, when a population of nearly 125 million persons bought an average of 90 million movie tickets per week. This means that newsreels were seen by between 37 percent and 73 percent of the American population every week in 1930, an exposure rate temporarily lowered by the Great Depression but otherwise stable until the late 1940s.5 A rapid but sustained decline in American moviegoing followed the growing popularity of television in the late 1940s and early 1950s.

Comparing the size of newsreel audiences to the size of television news audiences can help to put these figures into historical perspective. The combined audience for all three nightly network news broadcasts during the “golden age” of television news in the 1960s averaged around one-third of American households per week (Prior 2007: 16). By 2006, the combined audience for the three nightly network news broadcasts had fallen to an average of 18 percent of households per week, representing 26 million weekly viewers, or just 8.6 percent of the American population (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007). Adding in the average primetime audience for the three cable news channels brings the 2006 television news audience up to just under 10 percent of the American population (Althaus 2007). These data clarify that the newsreel audience during the first half of the twentieth century was at least as large as the average television news audience of the 1960s and probably three times as large as the average television news audience of the early twenty-first century. To be sure, the newsreel audience was not going to cinemas primarily to see the newsreels, so the comparison to today’s more selective television news audiences is inexact. But the point remains that a much higher proportion of the American population was regularly exposed to visual news film during the newsreel era than during the television era.

Newsreels were widely seen outside the United States as well. A cross-national comparison of newsreel exposure in 1950 was reported in a UNESCO study on the worldwide newsreel industry (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 73–91). These data consisted of cinema attendance figures from forty-eight countries containing a total of 1.7 billion persons, or about two-thirds of the estimated global population in 1950.
UNESCO data suggest that weekly newsreel exposure was typically lower than one out of ten persons per week in the regions of Central America, South America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia.

Because the newsreel audience was drawn to theaters for entertainment rather than information, it tended to be not only larger than today's television news audience but also more diverse. British data show that cinema audiences in the first half of the twentieth century had a distinctively working-class tilt (Pronay 1971), and additional evidence suggests that the more affluent classes were disdainful of newsreels as an information medium (Pronay 1972). Data for American film audiences in the same period are more ambiguous but seem to suggest that movie audiences were drawn broadly from all walks of society (Butsch 2001). In contrast, television news audiences today are more partisan, better educated, and more affluent than those who avoid television news programming (e.g., Hamilton 2004; Price and Zaller 1993; Prior 2007). Television news audiences today are also older. The average viewer of primetime cable news in 2006 was forty-eight years old, while the average viewer of nightly network news was sixty (Project for Excellence in Journalism 2007). In contrast, the newsreel audience extended to the very young. One 1938 trade study of 150,000 British children who attended a "Mickey Mouse Club" feature on Saturday mornings found that 83 percent liked the newsreels in general (Pronay 1972: 72n26). With regard to the grown-up subject matter of newsreels, the study found that "88% dislike the Dictators and 53% boo when they appear."

The Global Structure of the Newsreel Industry

The newsreel industry began in the first two decades of the twentieth century with a large number of short-lived domestic newsreel companies and a small number of longer-lived multinational companies. Foremost among the early multinational companies was the Pathé newsreel, anchored in the United States but with major operations in England and France. By the advent of sound newsreels in the late 1920s, the industry had consolidated into a small number of dominant multinational companies (Fielding 2006; Murphy 1996). The five major American newsreel companies were Pathé News (1911–56), Universal News (1912–67), Hearst Metrotone News, later renamed News of the Day to distance the newsreel from its controversial founder (1914–67), Fox News, later renamed in the sound era as Fox Movietone News (1919–63), and Paramount News (1927–57). The British market was also controlled by five major newsreels: Pathé News (1910–70), Gaumont-British (1910–59), Movietone News (1929–79), Universal News (1930–59), and Paramount News (1931–57). Of these, British Movietone and British Paramount were wholly owned subsidiaries of their American namesakes; British Pathé was co-owned by the American Warner Brothers company, which also released Pathé News in the United States; and Britain's Universal News was British produced but American owned (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952; Fielding 2006: chap. 11; Pronay 1971). Among the multinational operations, Movietone and Pathé were the longest running and most widely viewed newsreels of the era.
The high costs of newsreel production and low revenues obtained from newsreel distribution were largely responsible for the high failure rate of small domestic newsreel operations. Beside narrowing the major players to a small number of multinational operations, beginning in the 1930s the tight cost structure of the newsreel industry also conspired to dramatically reduce both domestic and international competition among the major newsreel firms. Three developments intended to reduce newsreel production costs inadvertently created a global system of film sharing that led competing newsreels to air much of the same footage all around the world: reciprocity agreements, film exchanges, and the rota system.

International competition among newsreel companies was limited from the start of the newsreel era by the widespread use of reciprocity agreements, in which the branded subsidiaries of a newsreel chain agreed to share footage with one another without cost. In effect, the reciprocity agreements pooled an organization’s film holdings across all of its national subsidiaries around the world (Fielding 2006: chap. 11). Under these agreements, film shot by one national subsidiary of an international newsreel chain such as Pathé or Movietone was shared with other subsidiaries, who reedited the film with local narration for distribution to their domestic audiences (e.g., Sanger 1946/2002). In addition to reciprocity agreements, the use of film exchanges began to erode even domestic competition. Film exchanges were buildings in which each of the major film and newsreel companies screened their short subject material for distributors and competing organizations (e.g., Lee 2005). The exchanges allowed film sequences shot by one newsreel company to be traded with film from another or sold at a price much lower than the film’s production cost. Although competition for exclusive footage sometimes limited the exchange of high-profile stories, the added revenue and cheap footage that could be acquired through film exchanges encouraged competing newsreels to use many of the same film sequences (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952; Caven 2001; England 1940/2002; Fielding 2006; Martin 1940/2002; Sanger 1946/2002).

The rota system adopted at the start of World War II cemented this tendency toward newsreel homogeneity. The wartime scarcity of film stock led to a cessation of competition in the newsreel industry, initially only for war-related film but eventually for a wide range of subjects. During World War II newsreel companies pooled cameramen in a government-run “rota” system (we would call it a “press pool” today), in which film shot by one company’s cameramen was made available to all. Although the rota system was officially discontinued at war’s end, the substantial cost savings it accrued led to its continued use by the newsreel industry, particularly in covering subjects such as war that had international appeal but high production costs (Bluem 1965: 40; Fielding 2006: chap. 16; Hulbert 2002). As a result of the rota system, “rivalry between the newsreels, which had been one of their greatest assets, ceased. . . . Whereas there had been discernible newsreel differences, the reels all began to look alike, except for slight variations in cutting and editing” (Cumming 1967: 99). Postwar analysis confirmed that all across the world, “the same pictures and stories are frequently found in issues of different news films. This is particularly noticeable with items taken on a rota basis” (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 25).

Although scripting, narration, and editing of film sequences were done at the national level and could therefore be potentially distinctive across countries, domestic newsreels around the world normally relied on the same raw visual imagery of war and other subjects of international interest, usually supplied to them by one of the major international newsreels. International newsreels likewise often contained identical film sequences that were reedited to suit the needs of each country’s population by being voiced in local dialects and framed according to national customs. Because of rota pools, reciprocity agreements, and film exchanges, “only a very limited number of subjects [i.e., unique news stories] are now in circulation throughout the world” (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 25). This tendency gave rise to regular complaints about the homogeneity of newsreel content within and across countries (e.g., Hiley and McKernan 2001). And because the largest international newsreel companies provided so much of the raw imagery distributed around the world, the high degree of American leverage over the global newsreel industry was a subject of enduring controversy (e.g., Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952; Priestley 1948/2002), much as CNN’s dominant position in the global satellite news industry would become a matter of controversy half a century later. Of fifty-one countries surveyed in a 1952 UNESCO analysis of the newsreel industry, thirty-seven were direct subscribers to American-distributed newsreels, twenty-five were direct subscribers of French newsreels, and twenty-four used newsreels from the United Kingdom (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 73–91). Often, the same countries would import newsreels from all three.

The scale of the global newsreel industry is perhaps best conveyed by the authors of the UNESCO study from the early 1950s, written as the newsreel was already waning in importance relative to television:

The big newsreel producers in the Western countries are able to obtain the greatest access to events throughout the world, thanks to their chain of cameramen, to their “bases” in all parts of the globe, and to the private exchange agreements among themselves, which gives them both financial and technical advantages. The high development of their economic and technical machinery enables these companies moreover to enjoy a virtual world monopoly in the reporting of news. All of this gives them a position comparable to that of the great press agencies. (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 17)

The Transition to Television

Changes in the economic structure of the film industry and the growing popularity of television eventually contributed to the decline of the global newsreel industry, sooner in the United States than in Europe (Fielding 2006). The demise of the newsreels can be traced in large part to the growing popularity of television, which precipitated a concomitant decline in cinema attendance. Television ownership increased from less than 1 percent of American households in 1948 to nearly half of households in 1953 (Sterling and Haight 1978: 372). Figure 1 showed that by 1953 the weekly American
cinema audience was less than half the size it had been in 1948. A similar pattern occurred in Great Britain following the introduction of television, but due to the later introduction of television in Great Britain the decline in British cinema attendance did not begin until the late 1950s (MacMillan and Smith 2001). This lag in the diffusion of television may help explain the relative longevity of British newsreels—which lasted into the 1970s—compared to their American counterparts.

Beside shrinking the newsreels’ audience base, the introduction of television brought two additional pressures to bear on the newsreel industry. First, daily television news programs were able to get pictures out to audiences much faster than the distribution system of the twice-weekly newsreels. Until the advent of television, the newsreel had no direct competitor as a visual information medium. When television news appeared on the scene in the 1940s, at first it was thought that the newsreel’s superior production values could keep it competitive with the new rival. Newsreel footage was typically shot on 35 mm stock rather than the 16 mm stock being used for early television newscasts. As a result, the image quality for newsfilm was superior to that for television coverage. But the speed with which television could broadcast images of news events spelled doom for the newsreel (Dorté 1949/2002). Television journalism was quick to proclaim itself as the “new newsreel” (Butterfield 1940), in part to highlight live studio broadcasting capabilities and the ability of television to show film of events shortly after they transpired. Once television diffused through the population, newsreels could no longer compete for visual priority despite their superior production values relative to the early television news programs (Cummins 1957/2002).

Second, the entertainment-oriented cinema audience kept newsreels from evolving into a serious form of journalism that could compete with the news values of the emerging television industry (Meltzer 1947). Early attempts to transform the newsreel into journalism rather than entertainment came to naught, despite the interest of many in the business to do so. The March of Time was a monthly film magazine that attempted to do just this, but its use of dramatic documentary techniques to enlighten rather than entertain met with popular disinterest (Fielding 1978, 2006). As a result, March of Time was a commercial failure. In the end, this experiment and others like it seemed to confirm that the tastes of cinema audiences were incompatible with efforts by some within the newsreel industry to make the newsreel a truly journalistic medium (e.g., Cave 1948/2002). As a result, although the content of post–World War II newsreels was relatively more serious than during the interwar years, the newsreel as a medium remained firmly bound to the tastes of audiences who sought escape and diversion in the cinemas.

Historians of television news programming often note the formative influence that cinema newsreels had on television newscasts of the 1940s and 1950s (e.g., Barkin 2003: 24–29; Sterling and Kittross 2002). During this transitional period, television news footage was supplied in large part by newsreel companies (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952; Nielsen 1975), and much of the technical expertise of the early television news industry was brought over by camera operators and editors transferring out from the floundering newsreel companies. The format similarities were so striking that the first television news broadcasts were typically called “television newsreels,” as was the flagship television news show of the British Broadcasting Corporation (Dorté 1949/2002).

What seems to have been forgotten is that while the television audience was ready for more in-depth and timely news programming than the newsreels could provide, those preferences for serious journalism—along with the cumbersome and pricey electronic broadcasting system needed to transmit and receive television signals—meant that the audience for television news would be smaller and more demographically homogenous than the newsreel audience had been since at least the late 1920s.

Another forgotten aspect of the transition from cinema to television is that it restructured news film distribution in ways that carved up the newsreels’ large, global audience into smaller, nationalized audiences for television-based broadcasting. The international delivery system for newsreel content that had reedited much of the same footage into country-specific news products was gradually supplanted by news film content generated within self-contained, domestic broadcast systems. A cross-national successor to the newsreel industry would not emerge again until the advent of CNN’s satellite news broadcast in the 1980s.

Conclusion

Political communication scholarship tends to conclude that audiences received news of the world primarily through print media until the early 1930s, when radio rose in popularity. Radio and newspapers were then thought to be the dominant news media until the 1950s, when television news began to grow into what would become the dominant news medium from the 1960s to the present. This developmental process is often thought to have produced a sharp experiential divide between a text-based newspaper culture that lasted through the 1950s and a visually oriented television news culture that began in the 1960s, with radio serving as a sort of transitional aural medium. Furthermore, political communication scholarship has tended to assume that “soft news” formats are a relatively recent development and that CNN was the first news medium to transmit the same news footage to all corners of the globe.

These standard assumptions are mistaken. They neglect the international newsreel industry that began distributing moving images of news events within a few years after photographs began appearing in newspapers. “Soft news” formats have always been a part of the broadcast news industry, at least in its visual forms. Economic forces that would eliminate serious competition among the international newsreels gave rise to a visual communication medium that served, alongside the major wire services of the day, as a rudimentary global news system for mass visual communication. It took several weeks for a given news item to fully circulate through the far reaches of the global newsreel system, so the audience exposed to news film of an event within two or three days of its being shot would have been just a fraction of the eventual whole. But it was nonetheless a global system for the distribution of filmed reports about current events, and it was in full operation nearly two decades before the
emergence of commercial radio. The global newsreel system began to fall apart almost three decades before television would enter the satellite era, but even in its waning years the global audience for newsreels was substantially larger than the comparable audience for today’s leading satellite television broadcasts.

The foundations of contemporary political communication research will not be shaken by correcting the historical record to recognize the newsreel as a transitional medium between text and television. But, as detailed in the appendix, scholarly access to newsreel content may allow political communication scholars to pursue lines of research that had until now been difficult to study. Three examples illustrate the possibilities opened up by the new opportunities for systematic analysis of newsreel content. First, although much scholarship has argued that the rhetorical style of political leaders was reshaped by the emergence of television as a medium for hearing as well as seeing (e.g., Jamieson 1988; Postman 1985), analysis of pretelevision newsreel appearances by major political leaders could allow scholars for the first time to separate the stylistic impact of primarily visual communication media (which began with the newsreel) from the impact of television as a particular vehicle for conveying visual information.

A second example considers the role of media economics in shaping the provision of public affairs information. Scholars have long been interested in comparing news content produced by commercial and public broadcasting systems. The newsreel system provides an additional point of comparison: visual news content produced by a system in which the exchange of money occurred between theater owners and cinema companies, an exchange structured by film distribution agreements rather than advertising revenue, audience ratings, or government subsidies.

The ability to study the editing process provides a third example of how newsreel content could inform political communication scholarship. Studying editorial decisions in television news is difficult because scholars typically have access neither to the “raw material” of unused film sequences nor to the assignment decisions that determined which stories would be covered in the first place. Since the British newsreel record is so extensively documented, detailed production notes that list the assigned stories, the original film sequences shot by the cameraman, and the editorial decisions that shaped the final newsreel story allow for a detailed analysis of the decision process used by editors to produce newsreel stories. In many cases the newsreel archives still contain unused footage that had been gathered for a particular news item and later retained for generic use as “b-roll” imagery, and these can be compared to the sequences actually used in the issued story to piece together how editors constructed the visual sequencing of newsreel narratives.

The limited amount of scholarship on the newsreel industry, and its almost complete neglect among political communication scholars, leaves us with more questions than answers regarding the nature of information flows carried through this global film network. As noted by film historian Nicholas Pronay nearly forty years ago, the newsreels “are important historical evidence which deserves study. Not as records of events, but as records of what a very large, socially important and relatively little documented section of the public saw and heard, regularly from childhood to middle age” (Pronay 1972: 72). Given the new ease of access to primary source material that comes from recent efforts to digitize the entire film libraries of the world’s two largest newsreel companies, one hopes that neglect of the newsreel as an object of academic study will soon become a thing of the past.

Appendix

Resources for Studying Newsreel Content

Since the United States was the leading distributor of worldwide newsreel footage, systematic analysis of American newsreel film would yield unique insights into the visual structure and informational content of the global newsreel system. Unfortunately, American newsreel holdings have been inconsistently preserved and sparsely documented (Murphy 1996). Several collections of American newsreel film are available to researchers, but most require researchers to either purchase clips or analyze film on site in special archive facilities. The entire collection of Universal Newsreels is now in the public domain and available through the National Archives, but segments from only 601 issues are currently available online in high-quality digital image files (these segments can be viewed at http://www.archive.org/details/universal_newsreels). The remaining Universal collection is retained on videocassette at the National Archives. The Hearst Metrotope newsreels are stored at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a partial collection of Fox Movietone newsreels is maintained at the University of South Carolina, but these collections are available on film stock and videotape that must be retrieved and analyzed on site. Fox Movietone (the American parent company of British Movietone) has a fully searchable index of film records (available at http://www.itsource.com/partners/movietone/foxmovietone.htm), but no preview films for online viewing. Moreover, little American newsreel footage has survived from before the 1930s, and the finding aids for American newsreel footage are more limited than for their British counterparts. These limitations seriously impede any systematic scholarly analysis of American newsreel content at the present time (Murphy 1996).

Fortunately, several other countries have taken steps to preserve and document national archives of newsreel film (Smither and Klaue 1996). Among the most complete and fully documented collections are those from the United Kingdom. British Pathe and British Movietone were the longest running and most widely viewed newsreels of the era, and although they were out of the newsreel business by 1980, the extensive film libraries developed by these newsreels remain an important source of revenue for their holding companies. Because these film libraries are in constant demand by documentary filmmakers around the world, British Pathe and British Movietone have recently taken the unusual step of making low-resolution digital video copies of their entire film libraries available online in fully searchable databases. Not only does this make the film collections relatively easy to access, but more importantly it allows researchers to randomly sample from the population of film sequences. British Pathe footage can be searched at www.britishpathe.com. British Movietone footage can be searched at www.movietone.com.
Because the online collections for British Pathe and British Movietone mix outtakes and unreleased footage with the finished newsreel stories that were actually shown in theaters, a random sample of film library holdings will not yield a random sample of stories actually seen by newsreel audiences. Identifying the population of issued newsreel stories requires using the online British Universities Newsreel Database (BUND), recently renamed the News on Screen database and maintained by the British Universities Film & Video Council (Hiley and McKernan 2001). The BUND database is available online at http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/. The BUND makes the process of unitizing and locating British newsreel stories relatively easy, providing a similar roadmap as the Vanderbilt Television Abstracts provide for network news coverage in the United States. Containing the definitive list of British newsreel stories actually produced and issued, the BUND database allows scholars to identify every newsreel story about a given topic that appeared during specific periods or sampled time units. Anyone interested in using British newsreel data is also advised to consult the Researcher’s Guide to British Newsreels (Ballantyne 1983).

Many of the BUND records include production documents associated with particular newsreel stories. Among the available documents are “assignment sheets” detailing the film sequences that newsreel cameramen were assigned by their editors to film, “dope sheets” written by cameramen to record details about each of the sequences they filmed while on assignment, and “commentary scripts” detailing the development of narration sequences for the finished stories. For many newsreel stories, the surviving documentation is extensive enough to allow a fairly complete reconstruction of the production process from beginning to end. The extent of such documentation for the British newsreel industry allows scholars to study not only the production decisions that culminated in each finished newsreel story but also the visual characteristics of shots that were used versus shots that were left on the cutting room floor but retained as unissued footage in the newsreels’ film libraries. In this way, the British newsreel archive system allows for detailed analysis of editing decisions, a type of analysis that remains difficult to conduct for nearly any other type of news medium.

Although the British newsreel industry may be of limited interest to many scholars, its holdings remain the most extensive record of the worldwide newsreel distribution system in the world today. Since British Pathe and British Movietone were subsidiaries of American-coordinated newsreels, their shot libraries served as local repositories of newsreel footage that was shown in theaters all around the world by their respective newsreel chains. For example, combat footage from the World Wars found in the British shot libraries should be quite similar to the combat film available to American newsreel editors, differing mainly in the likelihood of containing film showing British home-front activities generated exclusively for British audiences. Although the author has not conducted a rigorous analysis of this possibility, a detailed viewing of a wide range of wartime holdings maintained by several newsreel companies serving the United States and United Kingdom confirms striking similarities in the topics, specific film sequences, and types of footage shown to American and British audiences during World War II and the Korean War (the only two wars for which multiple comparisons can be made across different newsreel companies serving these countries).

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Notes

1. By the early 1920s, Fox Movietone was processing a combined sixty thousand feet of film per week (Fielding 2006: 61). At the then-contemporary standard of eighteen frames per second, this amounted to approximately one thousand hours of new footage every seven days.

2. Fox was one of several global newsreel operations in service before the start of World War I. As early as 1914, the American Pathé newsreel claimed to have thirty-seven full-time cameramen spread around North America alone and a total of sixty news bureaus in major European and American cities (Fielding 2006: 50).

3. BBC World News estimates that its cumulative worldwide television audience averaged 78 million viewers per week during the 2007–8 period. Its combined cumulative global audience for BBC World News, BBC World News Service, and BBC.com is estimated to be 233 million per week during the same period (both estimates are reported in http://www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/06/june/10/global.shtml, accessed October 31, 2008). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the world’s population in 2008 was approximately 6.7 billion persons (see http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/popclockworld.html, accessed October 31, 2008).

4. The “shot libraries” of the newsreel companies are the long-term assets that were built up decades of weekly newsreel production. After around 1930, nearly every piece of film that was issued in a newsreel was archived and retained for future use (licensing this footage to documentary filmmakers is an important revenue stream), along with any unissued “B-roll” footage that had possible future value down the road either for licensing or for use in other newsreel stories. The film record from before the 1930s is more sparse, as the unstable nitrate film stock used in the early years was highly flammable, dangerous to store, and often of greater value recycled for its high silver content than retained for possible future use. To give a sense of the size of these library holdings, the British Pathe shot library contains roughly 3,500 hours of issued and unissued footage originally shot between 1896 and 1970.

5. However, exposure to newsreels does not mean they were attended to. Many commentators of the period note how newsreels were often used as filler material while theaters were cleared for the next showing. Something of a transformation occurred following the serious
and exemplary visual coverage of World War II. "During the late war, the newsreel won for itself a wider, more attentive audience; no longer is its appearance on the screen considered an opportune time to visit the lavatory or discuss the merits of the feature picture" (Meltzer 1947: 271).

6. Comparable data on the British newsreel audience for the same period show that approximately 43 percent of the British population attended the cinema every week in 1934, increasing to a weekly audience of over half of the population by 1939 (Provan 1971).

7. In most cases, each country’s branded newsreel operation (e.g., Warner’s Pathé in the United States or British Pathé in the United Kingdom) was independently owned but run in a way that resembles a modern multinational corporation. For brevity’s sake, these complex arrangements are described as domestic subsidiaries of multinational corporations, but the actual ownership and control structures were more complex than this language suggests—domestic operations of an international chain seem to have been centrally coordinated rather than directly controlled.

8. One observer in 1914 noted that “while each Pathé company is independent in a sense, they are all under the same general supervision and work in perfect harmony” (Fielding 2006: 50).

9. Like its American counterpart, British Pathé was named after its French founder, Charles Pathé. But in Britain the acute accent on the name was generally dropped, unlike the American case.

10. Domestic newsreels were still produced in many countries independently of the multinational giants, but the high costs of newsreel production and low revenue streams available to the newsreel business meant that these domestic newsreel companies were often unable to compete with the big multinational chains. Nonetheless, domestic newsreels were often produced to supplement multinational products by focusing on domestic subjects and niche audiences that were poorly served by the larger newsreel chains. For a census of newsreel operations around the world as of 1950, see Baechlin and Muller-Strauss (1952).

References


Althauser


Mediatization and Personalization of Politics in Italy and France: The Cases of Berlusconi and Sarkozy

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Abstract
In contemporary democracies, the construction of political leadership is driven by communication strategies with greater emphasis on image over substance and personality over ideology. This article analyzes two countries, Italy and France, that have been recently characterized by a remarkable increase in the personalization and mediatization of politics. First, the article intends to identify some key features of the leadership that emerge and prove to be successful in mediatized democracies. Second, the article makes a comparison of Italian and French electoral campaigns, paying special attention to the role of the media in the construction of leadership. Finally, the article examines the cases of two leaders who have left their mark on recent electoral campaigns and are credited with remarkable expertise in political marketing and news management: Silvio Berlusconi and Nicolas Sarkozy.

Keywords
mediatization of politics, electoral campaign, leadership, Italian politics, French politics

In contemporary democracies the ascent of political leaders cannot be explained without making reference to their communication style and media strategies. In their seminal article, Mazzoleni and Schulz (1999: 251) argued that one of the key aspects of the mediatization of politics is that political actors have become “able to adapt their behavior to media requirements,” that is, “they stage an event in order to get media attention, or if they fashion an event in order to fit the media’s needs as regards timing, location, and the framing of the message and the performers in the

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