

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

Scott L. Althaus
Associate Professor of Political Science and Communication,
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Cline Center for Democracy
2001 South First Street, Suite 207
Champaign, IL 61820
phone: (217) 265-7879
fax: (217) 265-7880
email: salthaus@illinois.edu

ESTIMATED WORD COUNT
MAIN TEXT AND NOTES: 9,139 words
APPENDIX: 953 words

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 eight decades before CNN would begin distributing news footage once again to all corners of the world. This manuscript 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, pre-television news broadcasts, soft news, global news broadcasting

RUNNING HEAD

The Forgotten Role of the Global Newsreel Industry

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Linda Kaye of the British Universities Film & Video Council and Jenny Hammerton of Film Images Limited (London) for their invaluable help, Erin Janulis and Omair Akhtar for their research assistance, and the Cline Center for Democracy at the University of Illinois for release time to support this project.

Article forthcoming 2010 in *International Journal of Press/Politics*

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

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 eight decades before CNN would begin distributing news footage once again to all corners of the world. This manuscript 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, pre-television news broadcasts, soft news, global news broadcasting

RUNNING HEAD

The Forgotten Role of the Global Newsreel Industry

We like to think of the visual news industry of the late 20th and early 21st 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 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 26 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 1,000 hours of raw news footage per week that was condensed into polished news programs for worldwide distribution.¹ 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 51 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 47 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% of the world's population *every week*. By way of comparison, BBC's World News is currently the world's most-watched satellite news service, with a weekly global audience amounting to just 1.2% of the world's population in 2008. This number rises to 3.5% 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 news media often marks the increasing popularity of electronically-broadcast television news 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 (e.g., Barkin 2003; Baum 2003; Blumler and Kavanagh 1999; Cohen 2008; Hallin 1986; Meyrowitz 1997, 1986; Postman 1985; Schudson 1998; Zelizer 2004). 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 that was in place long before the radio or television industries would come into being. A global system for distributing twice-weekly news films was already in place before the First World War, nearly half a century before television news would begin to attract sizeable domestic audiences and eight decades before CNN would begin distributing news footage once again to all corners of the world.

This article aims to correct three important and widespread misunderstandings about the history of visual news broadcasting that have flourished due to scholarly neglect of the global newsreel system. First, news film of public figures and noteworthy events was regularly shown to larger and more diverse audiences during the pre-television era than during the television era that began in the 1950s and 1960s. These film stories were typically presented as simple “here is what happened” narratives rather than anything we would recognize today as journalistic reporting, but the topics of newsreel stories were quite similar to those covered today by network and cable news channels.

Second, the newsreel system that distributed these filmed stories served as a rudimentary global broadcasting system that predated the arrival of satellite news broadcasting by more than sixty years. On this reading, CNN and BBC World were not the first global news networks, as is often claimed (e.g., Gilboa 2002, 2005; Robinson 2002). International newsreel companies like *Pathé* and *Movietone News* had been serving news film to global audiences for most of the first half of the 20th century. Moreover, this internationally-distributed news film was custom-edited for each client country to suit cultural tastes and to be scripted and narrated in local languages. Yet because this early global news system was also in the entertainment business, and because its international reach disintegrated when its functions were

transferred to domestic television industries beginning in the 1950s, the size and scope of the early 20th century newsreel industry has been largely forgotten.

Third, although much scholarship has documented the recent growth of “soft news” programming (e.g., Baum 2002, 2003; Prior 2007) along with the turn toward “soft news” coverage within traditionally “hard news” program formats (e.g., Patterson 2000; Hamilton 2004), these trends do not represent new developments for broadcast news. The newsreel began life in the years before World War One as an enormously successful “soft news” medium, and continued in that form until at least the time of World War Two, when the industry began pioneering somewhat less sensationalistic modes of visual news coverage. On this reading, “soft news” broadcasting has remained a popular visual news format from the early years of the twentieth century to the present, except for a brief hiatus between the end of the newsreel era and the maturation of national television news industries. In the United States this “break” from soft news broadcasting occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, while in Great Britain it occurred somewhat later.

Given the important place of newsreels in the history of visual news reporting, it is remarkable that little scholarly attention has been given to their study. The standard texts on the history of mass communication tend to omit any reference to the newsreel industry (e.g., Delia 1987; Tebbel 1974; Pember 1977; Fang 1997; McQuail 1994; Schramm 1960; Baran and Davis 2006), and 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 McKernan 2002; Jeavons, Mercer, and Kirchner 1998; Ballantyne 1983) 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 world-wide system” of visual news reporting (Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 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 manuscript 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 manuscript 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 besides 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 80 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 libraries⁴ 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 will be 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 20th 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 re-edited 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 same period that photographs began appearing in newspapers (Barnhurst and Nerone 2001; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 10). 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 (McKernan 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 topical content for nearly 60 years in the United States and almost 70 years in Great Britain, with the last American newsreel closing in 1967 and the final British newsreel ending production in 1979 (Fielding 2006; McKernan 2002).

The format of the cinema newsreel quickly matured before the start of the First World War and remained essentially unchanged thereafter for the next 60 years. Newsreels were silent until the late 1920s and were usually filmed in black and white. The major newsreels were issued to cinemas twice a week, some of them also producing weekend editions and occasional special editions (Fielding 2006; Pronay 1971). Newsreels were so popular that by the early 1930s special theaters devoted solely to the airing of newsreels were in place throughout America and Great Britain (Lejeune [1931] 2002; Brown [1939] 2002). These newsreel theaters showed 20 minutes of news film as part of hour-long programs of documentary shorts more than 30 years before television news would mature beyond the 15-minute broadcast in the early 1960s. However, audiences were typically exposed to newsreels as an essential part

of the standard block-booked feature film program used in cinemas worldwide for the first two-thirds of the 20th century. During that period, every person who went to a movie theater—whether young or old, at matinees or evening screenings, in Manila or Madrid—was presented with a newsreel in their own language that was included as part of the short-subjects reel that came with every feature program (Fielding 2006; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952; Cumming 1967; McKernan 2002).

The typical newsreel might consist of anywhere from five to 10 stand-alone stories, each about a minute long, often presented in no apparent order. Although studies conducted in the 1950s suggested that a majority of American newsreel stories in the post-World War II era were about “serious” news subjects like government, national defense, and foreign affairs, the bulk of newsreel stories from the 1930s and earlier were focused on less momentous topics (Sterling and Haight 1978: 296; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952). For example, one British critic in 1914 lamented the trivial items that populated early newsreels, which at that time were called “news gazettes”:

One ‘world’s news’ film is remembered which was occupied by four items: (1) fashions, (2) ship-launching at X, (3) ship-launching at Y, about twenty miles from X, (4) ship-launching at Z, about 7 miles from X.... There is a tendency in some gazettes to include, instead of news matter, items of general interest, such as views of a cat playing with a canary, of a house where King Charles slept, of a sign-post with a word spelt wrongly, how cauliflowers are grown on Mr. A.’s estate, a picture of Mr. B’s (the famous novelist) pigsties, or an intensely uninteresting view of an exceptionally large egg laid seven years ago by a three-legged chicken—and so on. These are often fairly interesting as they go, and would probably make excellent ‘interest’ films, but they are not news, and are certainly out of place in a news gazette (Ruah [1914] 2002: 22).

Following World War I, advances in film technology allowed newsreel companies to capture a broader range of content than had been possible in the early days. During the inter-war 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 (Benn [1929] 2002: 67) 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 jingoes.” 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. Controversial domestic issues were avoided by the newsreels 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 like 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 inter-war 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% of American newsreel stories in 1941 to nine percent during each of the next four years of the war. Overseas news about World War II had occupied 21% of American newsreel stories in 1941, but rose to 46% of all newsreel stories in 1943, 54% of stories in 1944, and 48% in 1945 (Sterling and Haight 1978: 296; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952: 36; Handel 1950: 170).

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: 169-170). 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. Peacetime 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 movie-goers. 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 48 hours of its being shot at the front in Belgium or France (Kearton [1935] 2002: 41). Largely due the introduction of air transportation in the inter-war 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 DC to be developed en route to New York so that Broadway theater-goers could watch the event on the same day that it occurred

(Cumming 1967: 82-3). 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 shows that in 1923 there were enough movie theaters in the United States to seat 6.8% of the American population at one time. Theater seating capacity peaked in 1931 at 9.8% of the population, before declining to 3.1% by 1967 (Sterling and Haight 1978: 325). This seating capacity was well-used, as weekly attendance numbers (Sterling and Haight 1978: 352) confirm that movie-going 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

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

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 audiences 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% and 73% of the American population every week in 1930, an exposure rate temporarily lowered by the Great Depression but otherwise stable until the late 1940s.⁶ A rapid but sustained decline in American movie-going 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 a 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% of households per week, representing 26 million weekly viewers or just 8.6% 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% of the American population (Althaus 2007). These data clarify that the newsreel audience during the first half of the 20th 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 21st century. To be sure, the newsreel audience wasn’t 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 48 countries containing a total of 1.7 billion persons, or about two-thirds of the estimated global population

in 1950. As with the estimates of U.S. newsreel attendance from Figure 1, these are based on ticket sales and are therefore presented with an upper bound representing the size of an unduplicated weekly national audience and a lower bound indicating the national attendance rate if each cinema-goer bought two movie tickets per week. Aggregating the estimated weekly newsreel exposure figures for all 48 countries shows that between 5% and 11% of their combined population was exposed to a domestic-language newsreel every week in 1950. Given the dominant position of Fox's *Movietone* operation within the international newsreel industry, this range is consistent with *Movietone*'s claim that its newsreels were seen by approximately 8% of the world's population every week in 1946 (Lawrenson 1946).

Figure 2 shows the country-level breakdown of estimated weekly newsreel exposure in 1950. Israel led the world in cinema attendance, with newsreels seen by as many as 70% of its citizens every week. That the newsreel was especially popular in English-language areas is shown by the next-leading countries: the United Kingdom (upper bound of 55% per week exposed to newsreels), Australia (46%), the United States (43%), New Zealand (35%), and Canada (32%). After predominantly English-speaking countries, the next largest newsreel audiences were found in 16 mostly European nations, which had weekly newsreel audiences of between 30% and 14% of their national populations. Except for Cuba (upper bound 20% per week) and Japan (14%), the 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.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Because the newsreel audience was drawn to theaters for entertainment rather than information, it not only tended to be larger than today's television news audience, but also more diverse. British data show that cinema audiences in the first half of the 20th 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; Prior 2007; Price and Zaller 1993). Television news audiences today are also older. The average viewer of primetime cable news in 2006 was 48 years old, while the average viewer of nightly network news was 60 (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% liked the newsreels in general (Pronay 1972: 72, n26). 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 20th century with a large number of short-lived domestic newsreel companies and a small number of longer-lived multinational companies.⁷ Foremost among the early multinational companies was the *Pathe* newsreel, anchored in the United States but with major operations in England and France.⁸ 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* (1911-1956), *Universal News* (1912-1967), *Hearst Metrotone News*, later renamed *News of the Day* to distance the newsreel from its controversial founder (1914-1967), *Fox News*, later renamed in the sound era as *Fox Movietone News* (1919-1963), and *Paramount News* (1927-1957). The British market was also controlled by five major newsreels: *Pathe News* (1910-1970),⁹ *Gaumont-British* (1910-1959), *Movietone News* (1929-1979), *Universal News* (1930-1959), and *Paramount News* (1931-1957). Of these, British *Movietone* and British *Paramount* were wholly-owned subsidiaries of their American namesakes; British *Pathe* 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 (Fielding 2006: chp. 11; Pronay 1971; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952). Among the multinational operations, *Movietone* and *Pathe* were the longest-running and most widely-viewed newsreels of the era.¹⁰

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. Besides 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: chp. 11). Under these agreements, film shot by one national subsidiary of an international newsreel chain like *Pathe* or *Movietone* was shared with other subsidiaries, who re-edited 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; Sanger [1946] 2002; England [1940] 2002; Martin [1940] 2002; Fielding 2006).

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 cameras 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 like war that had international appeal but high production costs (Fielding 2006: chp. 16; Hulbert 2002; Bluem 1965: 40). 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 was 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 re-edited 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., Priestley [1948] 2002; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952), much as CNN’s dominant position in the global satellite news industry would become a matter of controversy half a century later. Of 51 countries surveyed in a 1952 UNESCO analysis of the newsreel industry, 37 were direct subscribers to American-distributed newsreels, 25 were direct subscribers of

French newsreels, and 24 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 one 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 didn’t 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.

Besides 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 35mm stock rather than the 16mm stock being used for early television newscasts. As a result, the image quality for newsreel film was much better than 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 inter-war 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: 24-9; Sterling and

Kittross 2002). During this transitional period, television news footage was supplied in large part by newsreel companies (Nielsen 1975; Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952), and much of the technical expertise of the early television news industry was brought over by camera operators and editors transferring out of 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 newsfilm 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 re-edited much of the same footage into country-specific news products was gradually supplanted by newsfilm 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 half a century 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 pre-television 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, 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 40 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.

¹ By the early 1920s, *Fox Movietone* was processing a combined 60,000 feet of film per week (Fielding 2006: 61). At the then-contemporary standard of 18 frames per second, this amounted to approximately 1,000 hours of new footage every seven days.

² Fox was only 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 37 full-time cameramen spread around North America alone, and a total of 60 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 over 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 doesn't 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% of the British population attended the cinema every week in 1934, increasing to a weekly audience of over half of the population by 1939 (Pronay 1971).

⁷ In most cases, each country's branded newsreel operation (e.g., Warner's *Pathé* in the U.S. or *British Pathe* in the U.K.) 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 Pathe 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 Pathe 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.

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 Metrotone* 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.itnsource.com/partners/foxmovietone/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 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 were 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 U.S. 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).

References

- Althaus, Scott L. 2007. Free falls, high dives, and the future of democratic accountability. In *The politics of news: The news of politics*, edited by D. A. Graber, D. McQuail and P. Norris. Washington D. C.: CQ Press.
- Baechlin, Peter, and Maurice Muller-Strauss. 1952. *Newsreels across the world*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Ballantyne, James, ed. 1983. *Researcher's guide to British newsreels*. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Baran, Stanley J., and Dennis K. Davis. 2006. *Mass communication theory*. 4th ed. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth.
- Barkin, Steve M. 2003. *American television news: The media marketplace and the public interest*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Barnhurst, Kevin G., and John Nerone. 2001. *The form of news: A history*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Baum, M. A. 2002. Sex, lies, and war: How soft news brings foreign policy to the inattentive public. *American Political Science Review* 96 (1):91-109.
- Baum, Matthew A. 2003. *Soft news goes to war: Public opinion and American foreign policy in the new media age*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Benn. [1929] 2002. Why not a Socialist newsreel? In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Bluem, A. William. 1965. *Documentary in American television*. New York: Hastings House.
- Blumler, J. G., and D. Kavanagh. 1999. The third age of political communication: Influences and features. *Political Communication* 16 (3):209-230.
- Brown, J. Neill. [1939] 2002. The industry's front page. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Butsch, Richard. 2001. American movie audiences of the 1930s. *International Labor and Working-Class History* 59:106-120.

- Butterfield, Charles E. 1940. The new newsreel. In *We present television*, edited by J. Porterfield and K. Reynolds. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Cave, G. Clement. [1948] 2002. Newsreels must find a new policy. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Caven, Hannah. 2001. Horror in our time: Images of the concentration camps in the British media, 1945. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 21 (3):205-253.
- Cohen, Jeffrey E. 2008. *The presidency in the era of 24-hour news*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Cumming, Adelaide F. Hawley. 1967. A history of American newsreels, 1927 to 1950. Ph.D. diss., New York University.
- Cummins, G. Thomas. [1957] 2002. The cinema newsreel and the impact of television. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Dale, Edgar. 1937. Need for study of the newsreels. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1 (3):122-125.
- Delia, Jesse G. 1987. Communication research: A history. In *Handbook of communication science*, edited by C. R. Berger and S. H. Chaffee. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Dorté, P. H. [1949] 2002. The B.B.C. television newsreel. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- England, Leonard. [1940] 2002. Memo on newsreels. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Fang, Irving E. 1997. *A history of mass communication: Six information revolutions*. Boston: Focal Press.
- Fielding, Raymond. 1972. *The American newsreel, 1911-1967*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- . 1978. *The March of Time, 1935-1951*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- . 2006. *The American newsreel: A complete history, 1911-1967*. 2nd ed. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- Gilboa, Eytan. 2002. Global communication and foreign policy. *The Journal of Communication* 52 (4):731-748.
- . 2005. The CNN effect: The search for a communication theory of international relations. *Political Communication* 22 (1):27-44.
- Hallin, Daniel C. 1986. *The "uncensored war": The media and Vietnam*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hamilton, James T. 2004. *All the news that's fit to sell: How the market transforms information into news*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Handel, Leo A. 1950. *Hollywood looks at its audience: A report of film audience research*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Higashi, Sumiko. 1998. Melodrama, realism, and race: World War II newsreels and propaganda film. *Cinema Journal* 37 (3):38-61.
- Hiley, Nicholas, and Luke McKernan. 2001. Reconstructing the news: British newsreel documentation and the British Universities Newsreel Project. *Film History* 13:185-199.
- Hulbert, Jeff. 2002. The Newsreel Association of Great Britain and Ireland. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Huret, Marcel. 1984. *Ciné actualités: Histoire de la presse filmée, 1895-1980*. Paris: H. Veyrier.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. 1988. *Eloquence in an electronic age: The transformation of political speechmaking*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jeanne, René. 1961. *La cinéma et la presse, 1895-1960*. Paris: A. Colin.
- Jeavons, Clyde, Jane Mercer, and Daniela Kirchner, eds. 1998. *The story of the century! An international newsfilm conference*. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.

- Kearton, Cherry. [1935] 2002. Adventures of a war correspondent. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Knightley, Phillip. 2004. *The first casualty: The war correspondent as hero and myth-maker from the Crimea to Iraq*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Lawrenson, Harry. 1946. Foreign editions. *Journal of the Society of Motion Picture Engineers* 47 (5):361-364.
- Lee, Megan. 2005. H-wood in B-town: Belltown's historic film row. *Belltown Messenger*, July 2005.
- Lejeune, C. A. [1931] 2002. The news-theatre. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- MacMillan, Pater, and Ian Smith. 2001. Explaining post-war cinema attendance in Great Britain. *Journal of Cultural Economics* 25:91-108.
- Martin, Charles. [1940] 2002. Newsreeler at Dunkirk. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- McKernan, Luke, ed. 2002. *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- McQuail, Denis. 1994. *Mass communication theory: An introduction*. 3rd ed. London: Sage Publications.
- Meltzer, Newton E. 1947. Are newsreels news? *Hollywood Quarterly* 2 (3):270-272.
- Meyrowitz, Joshua. 1986. *No sense of place: The impact of electronic media on social behavior*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- . 1997. Shifting worlds of strangers: Medium theory and changes in 'them' versus 'us'. *Sociological Inquiry* 67 (1):59-71.
- Montague, William P. 1938. Public opinion and the newsreels. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 2 (1):49-53.
- Murphy, William T. 1996. The preservation of newsreels in the United States. In *Newsreels in film archives: A survey based on the FIAF newsreel symposium*, edited by R. Smither and W. Klaue. Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books.

- Nielsen, Ted. 1975. A history of network television news. In *American broadcasting: A source book on the history of radio and television*, edited by L. W. Lichty and M. C. Topping. New York: Hastings House.
- Noble, Ronnie. [1955] 2002. Television and the land of morning calm. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Patterson, Thomas E. 2000. *Doing well and doing good: How soft news and critical journalism are shrinking the news audience and weakening democracy-and what news outlets can do about it*. Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University.
- Pember, Don R. 1977. *Mass media in America*. Chicago: Science Research Associates, Inc.
- Postman, Neil. 1985. *Amusing ourselves to death: Public discourse in the age of show business*. New York: Viking Press.
- Price, Vincent, and John Zaller. 1993. Who gets the news? Alternative measures of news reception and their implications for research. *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57:133-164.
- Priestley, J. B. [1948] 2002. If I owned newsreels...What a row there would be! In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Prior, Markus. 2007. *Post-broadcast democracy: How media choice increases inequality in political involvement and polarizes elections*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Project for Excellence in Journalism, The. 2007. *The State of the News Media 2007: An Annual Report on American Journalism*.
- . 2008. *The State of the News Media 2008: An Annual Report on American Journalism*.
- Pronay, Nicholas. 1971. British newsreels in the 1930s: Audience and producers. *History* 56 (188):411-418.
- . 1972. British newsreels in the 1930s: Their policies and impact. *History* 57 (189):63-72.

- Robinson, Piers. 2002. *The CNN effect: The myth of news, foreign policy and intervention*. New York: Routledge.
- Ruah, Lester. [1914] 2002. A criticism of the news-film. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Sanger, Gerald. [1946] 2002. We lived in the presence of history: The story of British Movietone News in the war years. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Schramm, Wilbur. 1960. *Mass communications*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
- Schudson, Michael. 1998. *The good citizen: A history of American civic life*. New York: Free Press.
- Smither, Roger, and Wolfgang Klaue, eds. 1996. *Newsreels in film archives: A survey based on the FIAF newsreel symposium*. Trowbridge, UK: Flicks Books.
- Sterling, Christopher H., and Timothy R. Haight, eds. 1978. *The mass media: Aspen Institute guide to communication industry trends*. New York: Praeger.
- Sterling, Christopher H., and John M. Kittross. 2002. *Stay tuned: A history of American broadcasting*. 3rd ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Talbot, Frederick A. [1912] 2002. The 'animated' newspaper. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Taylor, James. 2002. Beating the press? Reporting the R101 disaster. In *Yesterday's news: The British cinema newsreel reader*, edited by L. McKernan. London: British Universities Film & Video Council.
- Tebbel, John. 1974. *The media in America*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company.
- Whissel, Kristen. 1999. Uncle Tom, Goldilocks and the Rough Riders: early cinema's encounter with empire. *Screen* 40 (4):384-404.
- . 2002. Placing the spectator on the scene of history: The battle re-enactment at the turn of the century, from Buffalo Bill's Wild West to the early cinema. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 22 (3):225-243.

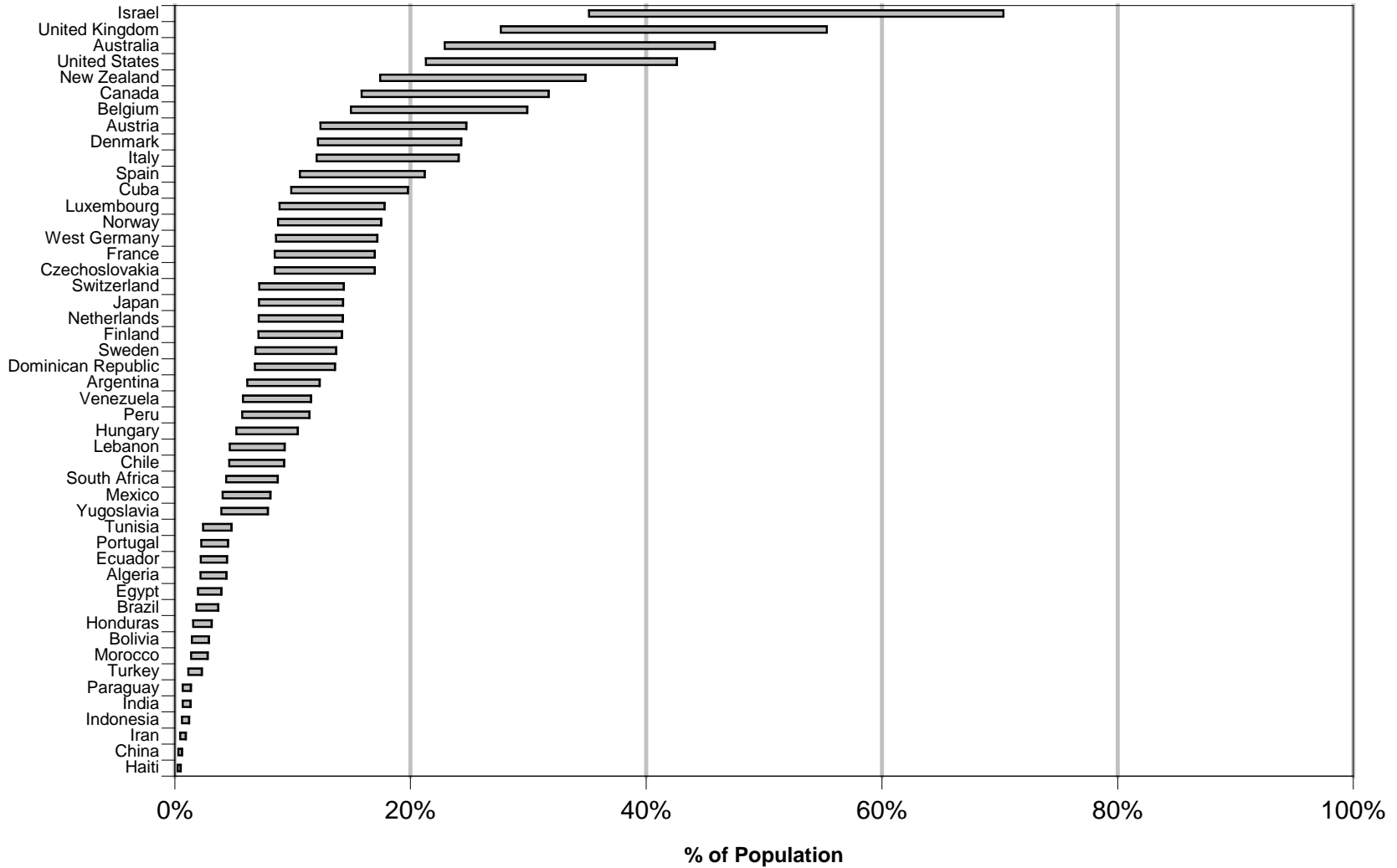
Zelizer, Barbie. 2004. When war is reduced to a photograph. In *Reporting war: Journalism in wartime*, edited by S. Allen and B. Zelizer. New York: Routledge.

Figure 1: Weekly Newsreel Exposure in the United States, 1922-1965



Source: Sterling and Haight 1978, p. 352.

Figure 2: Weekly Newsreel Exposure Around the World, 1950



Source: Baechlin and Muller-Strauss 1952, pp. 73-91.