

Links in the Chain: Early Newsreels and Newspapers

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This essay is about newsreels, about their earliest years, and why they are important.¹ They are certainly important, but that importance is not truly reflected in the critical literature. There are too few books written about newsreels, and few film histories that consider them as an integral part of the story of the production, distribution and exhibition of film overall. Moreover, they are seldom discussed in general books about news. In preparing the talk on which this essay is based I consulted a dozen or so standard texts on the history of news, and only one of them mentioned newsreels. Newspapers, the telegraph, radio, television, the Internet, mobile phones – yes; newsreels – no.

I am not going to analyse the reasons for such neglect. Let us assume that it is a mixture of ignorance and prejudice. Instead I am going to argue for the importance of newsreels, looking at the first years of their existence to make my point. My argument will be that newsreels were an integral part of news provision to a mass audience from the start, because they deliberately positioned themselves as one link in a chain that offered news to the public across multiple formats. As such, they cannot be considered in isolation, and equally they cannot be ignored if we are to have a proper understanding of how news has been delivered and understood from the earliest years of the twentieth century. The examples I shall take will mostly come from British newsreels, because it is the area where I have researched the most, and because of the significant innovations in newspaper form that occurred in that country around the time that newsreels were first developed. I shall talk mostly about newsreels from the early cinema period, but I will consider their later development and the importance of the newsreel overall in our understanding of how news was communicated to a mass audience throughout the twentieth century.

The late Philip Taylor, in his book *Munitions of the Mind*, describes the year 1896 as being a ‘truly momentous’ one in the history of modern mass media, with ‘three significant developments’.² In that year, as we know, the motion picture moved out of its experimental phase into rapid commercial acceptance across the globe. Its potential to communicate images about different cultures and places was to lead to a huge transformation in how people understood the world and their position in it. Also

¹ This essay is developed from Luke McKernan, ‘Newsreels: Form and Function’, in Richard Howells and Robert W. Matson, *Using Visual Evidence* (Maidenhead/New York: McGraw-Hill/Open University Press, 2009), pp. 95-106. It was given as a paper at ‘The Construction of News in Early Cinema’ seminar at the Museu del Cinema, Girona, in 2011 and was published in Angel Quintana and Jordi Pons (eds.), *La construcció de l'actualitat en el cinema des orígens / The construction of news in early cinema* (Girona: Museu del Cinema/Ajuntament de Girona, 2012). Reproduced here with permission.

² Philip M. Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present Day* (Manchester/New York: Manchester University Press, 2003, 3rd edition), p. 174.

in that year Guglielmo Marconi made the first public transmission of wireless signals, firstly in central London and in a series of tests sponsored by the British government on Salisbury Plain, promising instantaneous access to intelligence in a form unhindered by cables, borders or distance. Thirdly in that year, British newspaper owner Alfred Harmsworth, later ennobled as Lord Northcliffe, founded the world's first mass circulation daily newspaper, *The Daily Mail*. As Taylor notes, 'newspapers previously had catered for a comparatively and educated section of the community'. *The Daily Mail* broke the mould utterly. It cost half a penny at a time when other papers cost a penny, and within a few years it had a circulation of a million, making it the most widely-read newspaper in the world. The success of *The Daily Mail* was built upon a working class and lower middle class audience with a growing amount of money and leisure time on its hands; moreover an audience that was more literate following changes brought about by the Education Act of 1870. It also built on a public appetite for magazines such as *Titbits*, *Answers* and *Pearson's Magazine*, which were written in a light, anecdotal style, strong on human interest and characterised by vivid illustrations. Harmsworth's innovation was rapidly followed in Britain by *The Daily Express* and the *Daily Mirror*, in the United States by the yellow press of William Randolph Hearst, and by similar imitations throughout the world. News was no longer for the elect, but for everyone – but in becoming something for everyone the nature of news had to change.

The nature of that change was not just in content and form, but in the means by which news could be gathered, transmitted and delivered to an audience. The wireless telegraph, which would evolve into radio, was to shrink the size of the world, and to make events that happened far away seem that much closer and hence more relevant to people in different countries. There are three factors that define news as news: from whom it comes, when it is delivered, and the audience to whom it is delivered. News is not an absolute – it is selected, described and published in a particular form by an identifiable producer, for we need to know from whom it comes to assess what sort of news it is. Then it has to be current, as far as possible of the day, because yesterday's news is news no longer. The history of all modern news media is one of speed, wanting to get the intelligence about what has happened to a public as soon as possible. And then the audience is crucial to the definition of news, because what is news to one person is not necessarily going to be news to another. They have to be interested in it as *news* for it to be recognised as news.

Film was not ready in 1896 to be a deliverer of news on a mass scale. The potential was there in the medium itself, but it was held back by technical limitations, by the lack of a worldwide distribution infrastructure that took time to build up, by the slowness of international transportation, but most of all because it took ten years or so for film to find its own audience. News on film had existed since 1895, when the British film pioneers Birt Acres and Robert Paul produced fleeting reports of the Oxford-Cambridge Boat Race and the Epsom Derby for exhibition in the peepshow Kinetoscope viewer.³ These were films of events, of news value to a particular audience, whose value could be confirmed by the films being exhibited before that audience while such news was still current.

³ John Barnes, *The Beginnings of the Cinema in England* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1976), p. 202.

Similar news reports became common in the first ten years or so of film exhibition, with particular emphasis on sporting events, ceremonial occasions and war reportage (notably the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, and Russo-Japanese War of 1904-05). However, such films were exhibited irregularly in music halls and variety theatres. They lacked a fixed audience. When cinemas of various kinds began to emerge in the late 1900s, with the general solidifying of the motion picture exhibition business, people adopted regular habits of attendance, usually going to the cinema once or twice a week. The audience was fed a consistently-structured programme of films, with the knowledge that different titles, nevertheless offering up more of the same, would be available to them at their next visit. News thrives on such regularity, because what makes the news is not simply the content of the news medium but the expectations of a particular audience. News is defined by the locality, outlook and understanding of its specific consumers; as has been said, what is news to one audience may not be news to another. Cinemas created a particular audience clientele; they created the newsreels.

The first newsreel is generally said to have been *Pathé Fait-Divers*, initially exhibited in Paris in 1908 and then across France when it became *Pathé Journal* in 1909. Pathé established the newsreel form from the outset. The reel brought together disparate stories, some national, some international (a strength of the multinational Pathé organisation), all linked by a shared topicality, and released weekly. Newsreels from its French rivals Gaumont, Éclair and Eclipse soon followed, and Pathé exported the model overseas. The first British newsreel was *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, established in June 1910, and rapidly followed by *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle* (1910), *Gaumont Graphic* (1910) and *Topical Budget* (1911). In America, *Pathé's Weekly* appeared in 1911, and was soon joined by such indigenous offerings as *Vitagraph Monthly of Current Events* (1911), *Mutual Weekly* (1912) and *Universal Animated Weekly* (1913). Newsreels sprang up at the same time in other countries. By the time of the First World War, Germany had *Tag im Film* (1911), *Union-Woche* (1913), *Eiko-Woche* (1913) and *Messter-Woche* (1914). Russia had *Mirror of the World* (produced by Pathé); Australia had *Australasian Gazette*; many other countries, such as Spain, relied on issues imported from Pathé or Gaumont, with the occasional locally-shot story inserted.

A review of the debut issue of Britain's first newsreel *Pathé's Animated Gazette* in the film trade journal *The Bioscope* reveals much about the content, ambitions and perceptions of the newsreel as a distinctive offering for the cinema-going public:

There is no mistaking the smartness of Messrs Pathé, and their latest achievement — the production of a weekly cinematograph paper, *The Animated Gazette* — has just about beaten all records for the interest which it has awakened among the great B.P [British Public]. The daily Press has been devoting considerable space to it, with the result that curiosity has been aroused, and people are now busily discussing the latest thing in moving pictures.

Briefly the idea is to incorporate the usual journalistic methods of writing into filming, and to portray, in lengths of about 80 odd feet, the chief items of interest that have happened during the week. Thus the illustrated newspaper is being superseded by *The Animated Gazette*, which depicts the actual scenes of contemporary history in living and moving reality.

Mr Valentia Steer, a well-known journalist, is editor of this moving picture periodical, and he has a staff of photo-correspondents, who are stationed in all the big cities of Europe, besides another staff at home. Last week's news consisted of pictures of the cross-channel flight, Oxford University Eights' trial, Peary at Edinburgh, Roosevelt at Cambridge, besides many interesting 'glimpses' from home and abroad.

This week's contents bill announces motor-racing at Brooklands, the manoeuvres at Salisbury Plain, the departure of the *Terra Nova*, Chinese mission in Paris, quarrymen's strike, Caruso in the street, *Modes* in Paris, and other 'newsy' films.

That the idea will catch on is undoubted, and it is perhaps not looking too far into the future to anticipate the time when the weekly *Animated Gazette* will become an indispensable 'daily'.⁴

This first review positions the newsreel as a correlative to the illustrated newspaper. In 1904 Harmsworth had converted another of his newspapers, the *Daily Mirror*, which had been floundering for a year as a newspaper aimed at women, into a general paper illustrated by photographs.⁵ This had not been technically possible beforehand, and it changed how news could be presented. For the *Mirror*, what was visually emphatic became newsworthy, and often the picture alone (plus any suitable caption) was all the justification that was needed, just so long as it caught the eye. Other British newspapers were slow to follow the *Mirror's* lead, and only the *Daily Sketch* in 1908 set itself up directly in competition as a photo-illustrated newspaper before the First World War. But the idea of news that you would want to look at was one that the newsreels seized upon immediately.

The correlation between the two news media is not exact, of course. There were many more stories in the newspaper; there was a large amount of text; it could devote greater detail to news stories including background texts and human interest angles; there was advertising. Despite the assertion of that first review in *The Bioscope*, the newsreel was not really the successor to the illustrated newspaper, and certainly not a threat to its existence. Instead it fed off and complemented the kinds of stories that the newspaper favoured, and which it had established as visual news. The newsreel provided you with the moving pictures of what another medium had established as being news. It was the next link in the chain.

⁴ Nimrod, 'My View of Things', *The Bioscope*, 9 June 1910, p. 13.

⁵ Matthew Engel, *Tickle the Public: One Hundred Years of the Popular Press* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1996), pp. 147-149.

There was also the difference in periodicity. The newspaper could be published daily; the newsreel never could be, owing to the handicaps of film processing and distribution. The periodicity of newsreels was largely dependent on geography. In America, newsreels came to be issued weekly; in smaller Britain, the norm was bi-weekly, though for a short period Pathé experimented with three issues a week. Each newsreel could be expected to be shown in cinemas daily until supplanted by the next issue, but many cinemas showed older newsreels, which were priced according to their degree of freshness. Newsreels in Britain could have a shelf life of six weeks or more, which meant that at any one time cinemas might be showing newsreels of a variety of ages, in a complex maze of distribution, according to the prices cinemas were prepared to pay for them. Consequently, the newsreels came to favour stories that were not particularly tied to a specific date, such as scenic stories, novelty items, or items which privileged a striking image of some kind, because these best fitted a medium that had to appear relevant over a period of weeks, as well as being up-to-the-minute where it could.⁶ This was news that was both immediate as it could be and effectively timeless, or time-free. Once again, it favoured the visual.

A closer connection between newsreels and newspapers is indicated by that review of the first Pathé newsreel in Britain. The 'moving picture periodical', as it is called, was edited by 'Mr Valentia Steer, a well-known journalist'. Steer was indeed a newspaper journalist over several years' standing, who had worked for Alfred Harmsworth's *Daily Mail* and for Arthur Pearson, publisher of a number of illustrated magazines.⁷ From the outset newsreels preferred their editors to have come from a newspaper background rather than to have a film background.⁸ Other British newsreel editors at this time who has newspaper experience included Patrick McCabe (a successor to Steer at Pathé), George Woods Taylor at *Topical Budget*, and Alec Braid at *Gaumont Graphic*. Steer himself made the connection between the two professions in his 1913 book *The Romance of the Cinema*:

On each of these 'animated newspapers' the editor sits at his desk just like any newspaper editor, keeping an eye on forthcoming events, and with a tape-machine at his elbow ticking out the latest news ... Everything is done exactly as on a newspaper, with the exception that instead of saying, 'Jones, go and write me a half-page column of the wreck at Dover', or whatever it may be, the editor says, 'Go and get me 50 feet', or whatever length he thinks the subject requires⁹

Frederick A. Talbot, in his *Moving Pictures: How They are Made and Worked*, published in 1912, considered the nature of newsreel compared to the newspaper, finding that there were marked

⁶ Luke McKernan, *Topical Budget: The Great British News Film* (London: British Film Institute, 1992), pp. 64-67.

⁷ Valentia Steer', *News on Screen* database, British Universities Film & Video Council, <http://bufvc.ac.uk/newsonscreen/search/staff/detail.php?id=33236>

⁸ Nicholas Hiley, 'British Newsreel Staff 1910-1920', in James Ballantyne (ed.), *Researcher's Guide to British Newsreels: Volume II* (London: British Universities Film & Video Council, 1988), pp. 30-31.

⁹ Valentia Steer, *The Romance of the Cinema* (London: Arthur Pearson, 1913), pp. 84-85.

differences in how they delivered news stories but equally strong similarities in their competition of over the reporting of the visual.

Will the cinematographic newspaper ever supplant its printed rival? By no means. It acts rather as an illustrated supplement to printed details; it renders the latter more comprehensive by bringing scenes and actors vividly and naturally before the eye, thereby causing a more living and detailed impression than can be obtained through the medium of words. On the other hand, it is beginning to rival the illustrated paper, which depends upon photographic contents, and this competition will be felt more keenly as time goes on.

The day is probably still far distant when a man, instead of giving a penny for a printed daily newspaper to see what has happened during the previous twenty-four hours, will spend the same sum to enter a picture palace, and devote a quarter of an hour to seeing in full animation what paper and ink merely describe. The modern business man acknowledges that he only has time to glance through the staring headlines of his morning newspaper; and surely comprehensive titles and a series of excellent pictures would perform the same service for him, and more besides. Producers would aid the development by giving careful attention to titles and headlines.¹⁰

The newsreels were often compared to the newspapers, not least by themselves. Their names alone: *Pathé's Animated Gazette*, *Gaumont Graphic*, *Topical Budget*, *Warwick Bioscope Chronicle* each echoed common names for British newspapers. But crucial difference was that the newspaper was a private choice, whereas the newsreel was part of a programme, and indeed seldom the chief reason why someone went to the cinema. This was reflected in numbers of titles for the two media. There were just five newsreels on the British market by 1914, but there were dozens of newspaper titles - morning and evening titles, national and regional. Of course, newspapers had been around for many years, while newsreels were just a few years old, but newsreels in Britain did not expand beyond that number of five, because they were not what the audience was choosing exclusively to see – instead it was cinemas, the place to see films and hence the place to see newsreels, that greatly expanded in number. Newspapers were purchased individually, and reflected people's different political tastes, personal interests, where they were lived, and the time of day that they wanted to read. Interestingly, however, the price was the same. A penny was the usual price for a visit to a cinema at this time, and a penny or half-penny was the standard price for the mass readership newspapers.

Comparisons with newspapers are further complicated when it comes to considering the newsreels' impact. Harmsworth's *Daily Mail*, the market leader in Britain, had a circulation of over a million, but by 1912 *Pathé's Animated Gazette* was boasting that it was seen by more than ten million people weekly, though the likely figure seeing any one issue of the newsreel was probably closer to three

¹⁰ Frederick A. Talbot, *Moving Pictures: How They are Made and Worked* (London: Heinemann, 1912), pp.285-296.

million.¹¹ This demonstrates how significant the newsreels were, even at this early stage of their development when not every cinema took a newsreel (something that did not occur in Britain until the end of the First World War). But it is misleading to compare one newsreel title with one newspaper title. A newsreel was not a newspaper – it delivered its information in a quite different way, it was not consumed in the same way. The two media were wholly different in the environment in which they were potentially apprehended – the one (newspapers) clearly more expansive in its use of words and in its range of subject matter, and a medium which did not constrict the consumer in terms of time spent; the other (newsreels) a time-delimited swift report on events, with an emphasis on headlines, easy summaries, and of course the visual in motion. It was also part of a cinema programme and could therefore not be consumed alone. Moreover, one has to say ‘potentially apprehended’, because how a newspaper *might* be read is not necessarily the same as how it *will* be read. We skim over headlines, we read the beginning and ending of reports, we ignore those stories that do not interest us, we look at the pictures, we create our own news construction out of the multiplicity of choices offered by the newspaper form.

The newsreel was not, on the face of it, as complex a medium as the newspaper, and effectively it could only be consumed in the one way. But the newsreel did not exist in isolation. It was consciously constructed as part of a chain of news provision, serving the needs of a cinema audience already informed about what other media, namely newspapers, had determined the news should be. This was explicitly stated in an article on newsreel production written in 1915:

If you were to visit the editorial offices of *The Animated Gazette* at Messrs. Pathé Frères, or of *The Topical Budget* at the Topical Film Company ... you would find quite a number of people busily engaged in reading the day's papers with scissors in their hands. For this is one of the means by which subjects suitable for filming are found, and it results in quite a sheaf of cuttings being placed upon the editor's table for his consideration. At the same time, moreover, letters, telegrams, and telephone messages are constantly arriving from agents and employees in all parts of the world, describing events which have happened or which are about to happen ... The great aim of the editors is to have film reproductions of subjects which are illustrated in the daily papers.¹²

The newsreel can be considered in isolation, as any media phenomenon might be, but it is misguided to assess its impact as a medium on this basis. The newsreel was only one part of a wider process of apprehension of the news, of how the news of the moment was visualised and comprehended by a public which was being offered the news through a multiplicity of outlets, in a variety of forms, which then can be seen as contributing collectively to a wider form of the news.

¹¹ See frame still from edition 105 of the newsreel reproduced in Luke McKernan (ed.), *Yesterday's News: The British Cinema Newsreel Reader* (London: British Universities Film & Video Council, 2002), p. 15.

¹² 'Running the Topical Films', *Cassell's The Saturday Journal*, 29 May 1915, p. 2.

Consider how one reads the news today. One may hear the radio news in the morning, or catch breakfast television. A journey into work might mean a newspaper, to be read in a variety of ways according to time available or personal interest – one can, of course, read a newspaper and consciously avoid anything that might be described as ‘news’. Gradually one pulls together a composite picture of what one wants the news to be, seeking out confirmation through headlines, web pages, RSS feeds, mobile phones and podcasts, according to one’s degree of media literacy. We make the news what we want it to be.

This is very much the case for us in 2011, but how true was it for 1911? The mass media were still in their infancy and audiences were still learning how to assimilate all of this information and entertainment into their daily lives. We can calculate the numbers who went to cinemas and saw newsreels, or who bought their daily newspaper; and we can estimate to which branches of society they belonged and which news media were most commonly directed at them. But we do not have any evidence beyond the anecdotal as to how they assimilated news information from different sources. There is documentary evidence for the newspapers people chose to read and how they chose to read them. There is evidence, though not as much as we might like, for how audiences received newsreels – often vocally, and with enthusiasm. But if there is contemporary evidence for how audiences went in pursuit of news across the different media to form their own understanding of what the news should be, then I have yet to find it.

Hugo Münsterberg, in *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*, published in 1916, wrote of revolutionary apprehension of reality that the experience of viewing films offered to the viewer:

The objective world is molded by the interests of the mind. Events which are far distant from one another so that we could not be physically present at all of them at the same time are fusing in our field of vision, just as they are brought together in our own consciousness ... Our mind is split and can be here and there apparently in one mental act. This inner division, this awareness of contrasting situations, this interchange of diverging experiences in the soul, can never be embodied except in the photoplay.¹³

However this awareness of contrasting situations was not unique to cinema, or indeed to the photoplay; it is fundamental to the way that we read newspapers. We are presented with multiple places and events, in an interchange of diverging information, presented to us through the single medium. This is what the mass media of the wireless telegraph, the newspaper and cinema each promised – the collapsing of time and space, so that that which was distant was made immediate, and events and people which seemed separate could be brought together, creating a new understanding of their inter-relationships, or new importance to viewers made apparent by those inter-relationships. Viewers were being led to compare and select by the very nature of mass media. The logical

¹³ Quoted in Allan Langdale, *Hugo Münsterberg on Film – The Photoplay: A Psychological Study and Other Writings* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), p. 96.

extension of such a situation is that the individual news medium encouraged a view of the world made up of multiple viewpoints, so the viewer would then be in a position to choose from those media.

The idea of choice is important. The mass media were both a product of and an encouragement towards the democratization of society. They were aimed at everyone, and to do so you must assume that everyone is equally worth attracting. The individual becomes central to the equation, and the individual in a democratic society enjoys choice. That choice includes deciding what matters to you, and what news you require to keep you informed about the world you inhabit. Newsreels positioned themselves as a constituent part of a chain of news provision right from the outset. They knew that they were destined to be 'late' with the news, but they deliberately positioned themselves in a chain of news provision at whose head stood – at that time – the newspapers. You could not learn everything about what was happening in your world simply by watching a newsreel; but your understanding of that world could be reinforced or enriched by what the newsreel could show you.

The audience already knew what the news was when they entered the cinema – now they wanted to see the pictures, to have brought to them a visualisation of topicality. The newsreels completed the news picture determined by the newspapers. As they grew in sophistication, they provided a summary of events that was succinct or simplistic, according to taste. They did not act alone, and never saw themselves as acting alone. They were a link in a chain, an interdependent communication network that grew in complexity as illustrated journals, then radio, and in the post-war period television, added to the rich nexus of news media from which the public selected and determined their understanding of what was 'news'. And the newsreels were deeply conscious of this wider world of news provision into which they fitted, and conducted themselves accordingly.

That the newsreels were an integral element of news provision was soon recognised by newspaper owners. News empires had existed before through the ownership of different newspaper titles, but now the opportunity opened up from ownership of different news media. In America, William Randolph Hearst ventured into the newsreel world in 1914 with the *Hearst-Selig News Pictorial*, the first of numerous Hearst associations with newsreel series that would last into the 1960s. In 1919 Edward Hulton, owner of the British photo-illustrated newspaper the *Daily Sketch*, took over the Topical Budget newsreels and ran it as one part of his news organisation; followed in 1920 by Lord Beaverbrook, owner of the *Daily Express*, who acquired a half-share in the Pathé organisation in Britain.¹⁴ The business relationship between newsreels and newspapers would go on to be an uneven one, but it was nevertheless recognised quite early on that the two new media forms complemented one another.

Recently, the American academics Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone have provided a refreshingly different perspective on newspaper history, by looking beyond the study of its content (the traditional interest of scholars) to examine its particular form. Their book, *The Form of News*, looks at the ways

¹⁴ Raymond Fielding, *The American Newsreel 1911-1967* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), p. 86); McKernan, *Topical Budget*, pp. 13, 127.

newspapers present themselves – how they are written, how they are organised, how space is managed, the positioning of pictorial material, their typography, and offers a new analysis of the relationship between changing newspaper form and the function that the medium plays in society. *The Form of News* suggests ways not only to examine newspapers, but to consider other forms of news provision, including the newsreels.¹⁵

According to Barnhurst and Nerone, the newspaper form holds a special sanctity which derives from its relationship to civic culture. Historically, the newspaper acquired, and has maintained, a particular respect as an instrument of democracy; a sacred mission often at odds with the newspapers' commercial operations. The newspaper, therefore, brings with it a set of assumptions and expectations. These are expressed in the form in which the newspaper presents itself, not simply in how it looks or arranges itself, but in how it represents itself to its public, and the ways in which it makes itself available.

The newsreel had no such roots in civic expectations. Its form derived from the demands of the cinema audience, which came to favour a mixed programme of film content spread over part of an evening. It was accepted, rather than have expectations demanded of it. Cinemas did not inevitably have to have newsreels – there was no positive demand for them as such, but they were popular, and they contributed to the variety of the programme. They were a part of an evening's entertainment, and being a small part meant they had little economic weight. They were recognised as part of the cinema programme, but they were not the reason why anyone went to the cinema. The expectations that they carried with them, that made them recognisable, were therefore quite different to the newspapers. They were expected to reflect an image of the news, to do so in an entertaining manner, and to do so at speed.

Speed is the newsreels' dominant metaphor. Stories about newsreel cameramen obtaining stories are dominated by notions of speed – rushing the film to the labs ahead of your rivals, getting the hastily processed film to the major cinemas in a matter of hours, exhibiting films of cup finals on the evening that they took place, and so forth. Speed was in the length of the newsreels – in the early cinema period, a half-reel of film, five minutes to display half a week's news, and not a minute to be allowed over that time. As newsreels developed, in particular as they acquired sounds in the 1930s, there was speed in the presentation of the news itself. To watch the newsreels when they matured as a medium is to be amazed at how rapidly their subjects pass by. Shots are seldom held beyond five seconds; the action is propelled along by urgent music and an insistent commentary. The viewer today must wonder at just what the audience of the time was expected to make of such a rapid flick through the stories of the hour. Scholars citing the newsreels in media histories sometimes express puzzlement at how fleeting and seemingly uninformative newsreel stories of matters of great moment can appear to be. The *Gaumont-British News* report on the bombing of Guernica lasts for some thirty

¹⁵ Kevin G. Barnhurst and John Nerone, *The Form of News: A History* (New York: Guilford, 2001).

seconds – four or five shots, then on to the next story, a *Roving Camera Report* on relay races in Philadelphia.¹⁶

The speed of the newsreels naturally ran contrary to a deep consideration of the news – instead, they offered a summary, or a checklist of news events, and crucially a visualisation of those events. They conferred visibility upon things, even while whisking away the one image to be replaced by the next. Their part in that chain of news provision was to confirm visibility and thereby to confirm newsworthiness, for to be seen was indeed to be in the news.

Newsreel form grew into a rapid succession of the familiar. It meant a triumphalist opening with a logo akin to those found at the start of feature films, then a series of stories each introduced by a headline with music appropriate to the tone of the story, and then the off-screen commentator reading out the story's salient details and import, the words tightly edited to the whirl of images that collectively made up each story. No particular order to the stories – newsreels were often constructed simply in the order in which the individual filmed stories came out of the labs – only a shared topicality to bind them together, before another triumphal sign off, and then lights up and time for ice creams. Its form supplied meaning, because newsfilm of itself is otherwise meaningless. It needs to have a focus, to have a specific relevance to an audience situated in a particular time and place for it to take on news relevance. It has to be recognised as news.

In being part of the nexus of news provision, the newsreel was not so much at the end of the chain as but one link in a circle; that is, to be in the newsreels was to be news, and such visibility would then be reflected in other news media. People became famous through being shown on the newsreels. Newspaper photo pages increasingly emulated the multiplicity of shots and angles offered by newsreel coverage. Newsreels contributed to what was seen, how it was seen, and to a sense of news in motion. Their very existence contributed to a transference and accretion of meaning which one can now read in the distribution of digital news images today.

To see how the news moves today across computer networks, and in particular how it presents itself on the web, is to see what a complex and elusive concept news really is. No one form can hold it, and web news pages do not really present the news as such, but instead offer an infinite variety of news options through an extensive system of cross-references. The news is to be selected from across the choices made available on the web page, or else is at a remove, always a hyperlink away. Web pages offer the news in abundance, inviting selection, expecting one's personal interpretation, so that for every person a news web page is different, just as the BBC News web page promises to be updated every minute of every day. Taking things to their logical extension, one can never get the same news twice.

¹⁶ *Gaumont-British News*, issue no. 350, release date 6 May 1937.

This sense of news in flux, of complex interaction of the visual, the textual and the aural, of the necessity of choice, is there for all to see in the present digital environment, but also offers a useful means to consider the provision of news across the past century. The news has always been like this, ever since technological revolutions at the end of the nineteenth century gave us those modern communication systems whose news products interact to give us our composite picture of the news. The news is, ultimately, a personal choice made by the consumer who selects and aggregates their particular news agenda from the variety of communications media on offer. There is a larger news form, outside any one medium. What exactly that form might take is hard to describe or to summarise, but a characteristic point must be the need for the news media to fit in with the human daily round, with certain regular kinds of human activity – like switching on the radio in the morning, like reading a newspaper on the train, like going to the cinema and seeing the newsreel. All contribute to a particular news environment. None can be seen in isolation.

The newsreels inform our picture of the past so effectively because they were central to the creation of that visibility in the first place. They reflected the news, but equally they made it, and they cannot be ignored nor can they were viewed in isolation. They were an integral part of the bigger picture – indeed, it could not be otherwise, since the news must always be greater than those individual media that play their part in carrying it. For this reason, and because of the millions who watched them from their earliest years and whose understanding of their world was enlarged and enriched by them, the newsreels are important. The experience of viewing newsreels should be used to gauge other news media, not just looking at the content but at the mode of delivery and the complexity of its meanings. The newsreels are an indivisible part of the visualisation and comprehension of the news agenda of the twentieth-century.