

Teaching & Learning Topic

Using newsreels as historical evidence

Discipline

History

Level

Undergraduate: Parts 1, 2 and 3.

Contact Staff

Roy Wolfe,
Department of History,
University of Reading
RG6 6AA

Email: r.i.wolfe@rdg.ac.uk

Phone: 01183787736

Project Aims

1. To introduce and evaluate newsreels as a source of evidence for contemporary history,
2. To encourage the use of newsreel alongside other contemporary sources of evidence,
3. To encourage critical evaluation of evidence through deconstruction of newsreels,
4. To encourage independent learning through historical project work which builds on newsreels,
5. To develop IT skills through the use of images and links within PowerPoint presentations.

Main Conclusions

The Case Study has enabled me to work with newsreels with history undergraduates at different levels, and in different contexts.

The main conclusions are:

1. Traditionally, students have not been accustomed to thinking of newsreel as a historical source, but have found that the newsreels have “brought to life” events and individuals they have been studying, and have enjoyed working with the medium.
2. Students enjoyed both finding and using newsreels, and some have continued to make use of newsreel within subsequent history modules.
3. Further attention needs to be given to the way images are constructed, and to the way sound-track and voice over are used. This should help enhance a more critical stance to more familiar sources of evidence, such as newspaper reports.

4. The various newsreel resources, now available on-line, offer a considerable range of material, and allow for students to find material themselves across a range of different types of history.
5. Although there are some technical questions which need to be addressed, such as the capture of stills from newsreels, students did not find it difficult to take working with newsreels in their stride, and are increasingly confident in using IT and web based multi-media materials.

Abstract

The initial phase of the project involved working with around sixteen Part 2 students on individual projects which included making use of Pathé newsreels as evidence. Their research culminated in their giving a PowerPoint presentations based on a selection of the materials found and studies. These were based on their own chosen theme in the context of a twentieth-century British history survey.

Funding has enabled me to have the assistance of a post-doctoral student, DR Georgina Sinclair, in giving undergraduates individual help within timetabled workshop sessions, to discuss their research strategy, choice of topic, and selection of primary sources, especially Pathé Newsreel and clippings from The Times (on-line).

Positive feedback from students has encouraged us to consider ways of introducing the use of newsreels at an earlier stage of the degree programme, and has now resulted in the use of newsreels in at least two contexts in the first year. We are also promoting the use of newsreel in appropriate Part 3 modules, as well as in independent dissertation work at Part 3.

Methods

The main project ran along side a weekly student-led seminar which covered broad social, economic and political themes in twentieth-century British history. This provided students with an understanding of the context within which they researched their chose topic in some depth, and encouraged them to draw on social, economic and political factors.

Newsreels had the attraction of being freely available on the internet, covering a broad chronological spread, to allow a theme to be pursued over time, and offering material on a wide range of issues. In addition, the newsreels are well indexed. It was easy to download Pathé newsreels in an appropriate format, and software was available for subsequent editing of clips and stills. (Windows Movie Maker 2). Since we began our case study, still images from newsreels have before more easily downloadable.

Weekly workshops in a PC classroom were held for the first seven weeks, offering tutorial support, which allowed for students to offer each other mutual help and support, as well as receive individual tutorial attention where needed. They were all aware of each others topical, and shared ideas and technical hints. Each student was able to work on their own networked machine, and projection facilities were available for final presentations.

Initially we had considered focussing the study on newsreels and a series of British General Elections, but after due consideration we decided that this would be too narrow a focus, and that students would be more highly engaged if pursuing their own interest. We also agreed that the students would have to make use of other evidence in conjunction with the Pathé

newsreel, and suggested cartoons and clips from The Times, as these offered well-indexed on-line materials which could easily be downloaded from our subscription to The Times archive..

A broad range of topics were chosen by the students. These included women's suffrage and the feminist movement, the Wall Street Crash and the Depression, the Labour Party, Welsh nationalism, film censorship, post-war crime rates, Olympic Games, Youth culture and popular music, Ireland, and bathing-beauty contests.

At the start, students were given an example of the type of PowerPoint presentation they were expected to produce, and they were told not to exceed twenty slides. Casino Gaming was chosen as the theme for the "model" presentation, as it was a controversial topic which could be explored historically, drawing on social, economic and political aspects.

I am attaching the PowerPoint presentation : [gaming-example-wolfe.ppt](#)

We found that over the time span of ten weeks, students were able to build up enthusiasm for both their own work, and to develop an interest in the projects of the others on the group. Attendance at the workshop sessions was very good, and the final oral presentations of the PowerPoint slides were all well received by the group as a whole. Due to the pressure of time these were limited to 15 minutes, with five minutes for questions.

A low staff-student ratio enabled quite a high level of support to be given as the students collected their materials and made decisions about what to select and present. We decided to allow students to develop their own style of presentation, rather than impose a particular PowerPoint template. With hindsight some students might have been advised to limit the use of some of PowerPoint's wizardry.

We were pleased that students quickly chose historical themes which interested them, sometimes needing help to refine or focus. Within the context of a survey module it was helpful to have had a wide variety of different themes chosen, and students were encouraged to think about these themes against the background of the material covered in the seminar strand. It was sometimes possible to refer to the ongoing project work within the parallel weekly seminars.

As an example the students work, the PowerPoint presentation on Morecambe's bathing beauty competitions has been included here. [Korneeva-morecambe-wolfe.ppt](#)

We felt this study illustrates the imaginative effort which the students put into their project, as well as some of the technical shortcomings, partly as a result of the limited time available.

At the end of the ten week module students were asked for their evaluation of their experience of working on this through a detailed questionnaire, and the responses were on the whole very positive. However, a number of useful points arose from both student feedback, and from assessment of their PowerPoint slides.

Ideally we should have ensured that greater attention be given in the PowerPoint presentations to an analysis of newsreel image and sound track, and more explicit evaluation be made of newsreel as an historical source. Although these issues were part of an ongoing

discussions, and oral presentations, we should have made it a requirement that the results of their reflection on, and appraisal of newsreels, be included in their written assignments.

Further Developments

As a result of our positive experience in using Pathé Newsreels we decided to develop their use in two directions.

History students will now have had some introduction to using newsreel as evidence at an early stage. Then, at Part 3, students have been encouraged to consider using newsreels as an historical source where appropriate. Some students have made quite substantial use of newsreels when working on dissertation such topics as Propaganda and the Cold War, and Suez and the British Media. On other topics newsreels as evidence have played a less prominent role, but have been included as part of their research on topic such as Irish Nationalism. Within some Special Subject history modules, where primary sources are studied in depth, Pathé Newsreels have been of great value, such as the 1945 general electoral addresses on the study of the Home Front in the Second World War. Here students have not hesitated to deconstruct the newsreels and present their analyses at an appropriate level, seeing the newsreels as valuable evidence, contributing to their understanding of the outcome of the 1945 General Election.

We have also decided to present a variety of Pathé newsreels for discussion at ice-breaking sessions at the very start of the history students' academic year. Subjects covered have ranged from Reading University Rag Weeks (1920s and 1950s), male fashion show (1950s), and decolonisation, with the Mau Mau rebellion (1950s), and the French troubles in Algeria (c.1958). This has enabled us to make students aware of the range of historical subjects which can be pursued, as well as questions relating to evidence and national bias – the British coverage of a French “crisis” providing a good example.

In the second term at Part 1, one session in a lecture series on 1945 as an historical turning-point is based around an analysis of on particular Pathé newsreel, where the reflections of the historian Professor George M. Trevelyan raise important questions about historical method and perspective, such as “whig history”, gender and class. By exploring particular frames, and the way images and meanings are constructed, students have an opportunity to consider the problematic nature of newsreel as evidence. Further development of our Blackboard software as a means of making electronic sources available to students, is taking place, allowing students to review the materials discussed in the lecture. In future students will be asked to complete a quiz exercise, and to engage interactively with questions about both the content and construction of Trevelyan's end-of-year newsreel look at 1945.

Conclusion

The integration of newsreel resources into our modern history teaching is an ongoing development. The freely available Pathé newsreels offered a very good starting point, although the quality of the moving images is low, and the copyright statement on the downloadable stills is unfortunate.

However, new sources of downloadable newsreels are coming available, offering further opportunities for extending this type of material into our undergraduate history teaching. The [British Universities Film & Video Council](#) provide a helpful web site with links to additional sources, including Italian and German newsreels.

Additional resources, such as [Movietone newsreels](#), are now available as streamed files, and offer further opportunities for comparative analysis, making it possible to explore different national perspectives on the same event.

In a recently published study of British newsreel coverage of Indian Independence Philip Woods has observed,

“There is now far less reason for historians to fight shy of newsreel as a source because much of the footage and its accompanying documentation is available on the internet.”

[Woods, Philip. 'Business as Usual'? British Newsreel Coverage of Indian Independence and Partition, 1947-1948. in C.Kaul ed: Media and the British, Palgrave, 2006]

With most students now comfortable with using IT and web-based resources, modern historians have the opportunity to exploit the newsreels and integrate their use into students work at undergraduate level. Hopefully students will find this exciting and creative, leading to a deepening of their historical understanding, as well as a critical appreciation of the evidence they are considering.