



The Media and the War: Is the Media Part of the Story?

Grade Level(s):

9 - 12

Subject Area(s)

Language Arts - Reading and Writing, Civics, Geography, U.S. History

Estimated Time

One to two 45-50 minute class periods with additional time for the students to conduct research

Overview

The U.S.-Mexican War was the first war to be covered by mass circulation newspapers. The coverage of the war excited Americans about the conflict that was taking place so far away from them. And the newspaper stories not only reported news about the war; they also had an influence on the events of the war (as they would again in other wars in the future). Newspapers and other media also gave ordinary soldiers something that they had not had before: the chance to speak as individuals directly to the public.

Summary

There have been many times in history when the media has not just *reported* the events of a war. It has also *influenced* those events. One such instance happened just prior to the U.S.-Mexican War when a Mexican newspaper article likely contributed to the downfall of President José Joaquín de Herrera and subsequently eliminated a chance for the countries to negotiate a peace. In this activity, students will learn about this event and consider the media's role in it. Then students will research other historical examples in which the media has been thought to have had an impact on the course of a war. Students will write a 2-3 page essay based on their research.

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn how the media can greatly influence public opinion around matters of war and peace, here exemplified in the case of the fall of Mexican President Herrera.
- Do substantial online research to explore other specific instances when the media is thought to have had a profound impact on a war (the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War).
- Write an essay summing up their research and explaining whether they think the media did truly have an influence in each case, and if so, what that influence was.

Materials Needed

This activity can be completed using a computer lab where students can access the [video clip](#), [interactive timeline](#) and handout via The U.S.-Mexican War website and where they can also do further online research. It can also be done by using one classroom computer with a projection device. In the second scenario, you will need to provide the students with the following handout:

- [Media/Story worksheet](#)



- [Video Clips Library \(http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html\)](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html)
- [Interactive Timeline Map \(http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/timeline.html\)](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/timeline.html)

Video clip used:

- “Mexican news stories lead to the downfall of President Herrera”

In the second scenario, you will also need to give students an alternative time to do their online research; such as during a study hall or library period or at home. Regardless, students will probably do their research and writing on one day and turn in their essays on the next.

Procedure

Pre-viewing Activity: Ask students to consider whether they think that media reporting can influence the course of a war or even whether or not a war actually happens. Have them discuss possible examples of this, either from the present time or from their studies. Do they think it's appropriate for the media to be a part of the story? Why or why not?

Prepare students for the viewing activity. Explain that U.S. President Polk has just sent an emissary, John Slidell, to meet with Mexican President Herrera. Polk wants Slidell to convince Herrera to sell the Mexican territories of New Mexico and California to the United States. Mexico, however, is still angry about the U.S. annexation of Texas, which the Mexicans still consider to be part of their territory. Herrera is hoping to avoid what he imagines will be a devastating war with the United States and would probably be willing to negotiate with Slidell. However, news of Slidell's mission appears in the Mexican press and causes a major shift in public opinion.

Distribute the [Media/Story worksheet](#) and briefly go over the questions on it with students before they watch the video clip and work with the interactive timeline:

- What do you think was the role of the media in this story?
- What were some of the events in the lead-up to the war just before and after Slidell's failed mission?
- What do you think might have happened if the news about Slidell's mission had never appeared in the Mexican press?
- Do you think that would have been a better or worse result than what actually happened?

Viewing Activity: Have students visit the “The U.S.-Mexican War” website to access the video clip “Mexican news stories lead to the downfall of President Herrera” (or display the video with a projection device in your classroom). Then have the students access the interactive timeline at the same site to learn about the events just before and after those portrayed in the video clip. Have students make notes on the questions from the worksheet.

Post-viewing Activity: Go over the content of the video with the students, focusing particularly on the role of the media. How did it influence the historical events here? Have students discuss their thoughts on the worksheet questions.



Now explain that the students are going to apply their learning by exploring two other wars in which the media is thought to have had an impact: the Spanish-American War and the Vietnam War. In the case of the Spanish-American War, many think that the U.S. media contributed to actually provoking the war. With the Vietnam War, many feel the U.S. media helped to end the war. Have half of your students work on the Spanish-American War and half work on the Vietnam War. Tell them that they will research the role of the media in their assigned war and then write a 2-3 page essay in which they will demonstrate their research and offer their opinions about the impact of the media in their war. Emphasize that students must support their opinions with their research. They can also adapt the [Media/Story worksheet](#) and use the questions to help direct their research. Students can do their research on the sites of their choice but below are some that may prove especially helpful:

- Spanish-American War
<http://www.humboldt.edu/~jcb10/spanwar.shtml>
<http://www.pbs.org/crucible/journalism.html>
<http://www.smplanet.com/imperialism/remember.html#Remington>
- Vietnam War
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june00/vietnam_4-20.html
<http://www.c-span.org/classroom/vietnam.asp>
<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/vietnam/nguyen.html>

Students will likely complete the essay as an overnight assignment. Have a discussion on the following day so they can share what they have learned and offer each other feedback.

Classroom Assessment

To assess the students' work, consider the following:

- Did the students present their ideas clearly and persuasively in their essays?
- Did the students' writing exhibit that they had done a broad range of research?
- Did the students' writing show that they had synthesized that research?
- Did the students support their opinions with their research?
- Did the students offer constructive feedback to their classmates in the follow-up session?

Extensions and Applications

Have the students read the following excellent article about the power of war photography to influence public opinion: http://www.palmbeachpost.com/news/content/news/special_reports/war_photos/. (This article does contain some disturbing images, most of which have been shown on television many times.)

Have the students learn about the work of photographer Mathew Brady, whose Civil War photographs displayed the reality of war to the people back home. The following sites show his work and describe its impact:

- <http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/brady-photos/>
- <http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwbrady.html>
- <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihhas/icon/brady.html>



- <http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/brady/gallery/gal03.html>

National Standards

McRel K-12 Standards Addressed:

Language Arts

- Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Standard 2: Uses the stylistic and rhetorical aspects of writing.
- Standard 3: Uses grammatical and mechanical conventions in written compositions.
- Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
- Standard 6: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Civics

- Standard 1: Understands ideas about civic life, politics and government.
- Standard 19: Understands what is meant by "the public agenda," how it is set, and how it is influenced by public opinion and the media.

Geography

- Standard 13: Understands the forces of cooperation and conflict that shape the divisions of Earth's surface.

U.S. History

- Standard 9: Understands the United States territorial expansion between 1801 and 1861, and how it affected relations with external powers and Native Americans.
- Standard 21: Understands the changing role of the United States in world affairs through World War I.
- Standard 27: Understands how the Cold War and conflicts in Korean and Vietnam influenced domestic and international politics.
- Standard 28: Understands the domestic policies in the post-World War II period.

Online Resources

Below are the links for sites referenced in this activity:

- The U.S.-Mexican War (1846 - 1848)
<http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/>
- On the Spanish-American War
<http://www.humboldt.edu/~jcb10/spanwar.shtml>
<http://www.pbs.org/crucible/journalism.html>
<http://www.smplanet.com/imperialism/remember.html#Remington>



- On the Vietnam War
http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june00/vietnam_4-20.html
<http://www.c-span.org/classroom/vietnam.asp>
<http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/vietnam/nguyen.html>



Media/Story Worksheet

Make notes on the following questions based on the video clip you just watched and your work on the interactive timeline.

1. What do you think was the role of the media in this story?
2. What were some of the events in the lead-up to the war just before and after Slidell's failed mission?
3. What do you think might have happened if the news about Slidell's mission had never appeared in the Mexican press?
4. Do you think that would have been a better or worse result than what actually happened?