

# JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY OF MOTION PICTURE ENGINEERS

---

Vol 47

NOVEMBER 1946

No. 5

---

## THE NEWSREEL—ITS PRODUCTION AND SIGNIFICANCE\*

*Summary.*—The following symposium on the production and significance of the present-day newsreel was one of the discussions in the series of popular subjects arranged by the Atlantic Coast Section of the Society to promote a wider knowledge of motion picture industry techniques and practices. Newsreel operation in peace and war and a résumé of the details of production are described by staff members of Movietone News.

### EDITING THE NEWSREEL

DAN DOHERTY\*\*

On behalf of our producer, Edmund Reek, it gives me sincere pleasure to welcome you here tonight. We have full knowledge and appreciation of the splendid contributions to the motion picture industry made by members of your learned Society and it is with a certain degree of temerity that we stand before you to tell you something about our little segment of motion picture making.

Screen journalists believe that the newsreel is one of the most vital units in the industry, but for all that, we are often neglected and sadly misunderstood. There is a tendency to too casual an acceptance of our noblest efforts and to too bitter criticism of our slightest foibles. One of the most rankling criticisms leveled at us is made by way of odious comparison, or I might put it "invidious comparison," in that it is based on a false premise.

Why, we are asked over and over again, cannot the newsreels present the news like newspapers, or like news magazines, or like picture magazines? To ask such questions, in our corporate opinion, shows a complete lack of understanding of a newsreel's function. While the newsreel at times can be the most complete reporter—wit-

---

\* Presented Apr. 17, 1946, at a meeting of the Atlantic Coast Section of the Society held in the studios of Movietone News, Inc., New York.

\*\* Assignment Editor, Movietone News, New York.

ness recent UNO coverage, the battles of World War II, the assassination of King Alexander, Foreign Minister Barthou of France at Marseille, the Hindenburg disaster, the Jap attack on the *Panay*, the Pearl Harbor disaster—it cannot cover every item presented in the *New York Times*, or *Time* magazine, or *Life*, or the *Reader's Digest*.

The newsreel editor cannot, for many reasons, attempt to cover all the news. In the first place, the cost of keeping a camera staff capable of the noble effort would be prohibitive. In the second place, what would we do with it when we had it? Newsreel presentation time in theaters is limited. The newsreel editor has at most 1800 ft a week in which to present the news of the world!

By this confining fact alone his task is, therefore, not one of attaining total coverage but of selection, and selection based on an intimate knowledge and understanding of the medium.

But now I hear our critic saying, "Well, if that is so, why select all the trivia that newsreels are notorious for presenting, and why all those hardy annuals that year after year crash their way to the screens of the world via the newsreel releases?" Well, gentlemen, there you step on our pet corn, and we plead guilty. But there are extenuating circumstances, as I shall describe.

In the first place, a lot of the hardiest annuals are of national interest—the horse races, football games, world baseball series, Rose Bowl, Mardi Gras, *etc.* On occasion we have taken rein and passed up covering one or another of these stories. The howl which arose from exhibitors over our neglect would put a pack of wolves to shame. A given section of the public likes to see these well-advertised spectacles and all we can do is give it to them. You should see our mail with requests from exhibitors for stories of sectional interest only. For instance, exhibitors in the Michigan area want that hardy annual from Holland, Michigan, which shows the goodly descendants of those highly sanitary Dutch burghers turning out en masse to clean their city streets. This is picturesque only the first time you see it, but Michiganders expect it every year. So, we make a special of it for that territory. Almost every section of the country has a fête or celebration of this kind that the populace thereof thinks as much of as do the Michiganders about their exhibition of cleanliness.

Other trivia is partly our editorial responsibility. The policy of Movietone when there is a slack in the international picture is to present a balanced and entertaining reel. Therefore, we have our animal corner, our daffy Lew Lehr, our Donner Fashions, sport

features, "cheesecake" charm, and baby shows. You cannot always have Papal Consistories, with their medieval pomp and UNO meetings with their dramatic fireworks. You have to include a launching now and then, cover Washington doings, and so forth.

In fact, some of our greatest pictures have come from routine assignments. We had seriously considered passing up the arrival of the *Hindenburg* on the day it exploded because we had taken it arriving at Lakehurst many times without incident. Can you imagine what would have happened to our whole staff if we had not sent our man out there that day? We would all have been fired and justifiably so! An editor must have a sixth sense and anticipate things like that. Another incident happened during the very routine assignment of covering Mrs. Truman christening a plane. We got the laugh picture of last year. A subject we released on three ducks playing with a kitten was kept on many theater screens as long as eight weeks.

We are asked, "Why not controversial subjects?" I will be ready after this meeting to take suggestions from anyone who will tell me about a controversial subject that will fit into newsreel footage. Our newsreel policy is to be strictly objective, to let the camera tell the story. During the recent steel strike we had a prominent steel company thinking we were against them. Because of its far-reaching implication, when the strike broke we decided to cover it and sent men to the mills, *etc.* Then we went to the union involved and the company and asked for statements from the heads of each. We got one from the union but failed to get one from the company. Our release followed and then a call came from the company: the president would make a statement for us now. They were told politely that we did not want it then. We had three other talks in our reel coming up and the steel company was just backed off the front page as far as we were concerned. They swallowed hard, but took it. What else could they do—and for that matter, what else could we do?

That the newsreels do as good a job as they do with their limited staffs is a major wonder to me. However, we are by no means satisfied with ourselves and we are continually looking to improvement. About the future and television, I am sure you technically minded men are better informed than we, but we believe television to be our "oyster," that is, editorially. We have developed the techniques of covering news for motion and sound, and whether the picture goes on

a theater screen or a television receiving set, we know how to get it there with the greatest efficiency. You men have made the machines to do it—we think we have the editorial acumen to use them. Mergenthaler did not run Horace Greeley or Charles Anderson Dana out of business.

We have many violent critics, but in high places we have a few friends. We have the sympathetic understanding of such executives as our own president, W. C. Michel, and our parent company's president, Spyros Skouras, its vice-president in charge of distribution, Tom Connors, and our chief production executive, Darryl Zanuck. All of these men take a lively interest in our affairs, are first to praise us when we are good, and are not bashful with criticism when they believe it is justified. One of the most sincere tributes ever paid a newsreel was made by our late president, Sidney Kent. I would like, in conclusion, to read it to you:

"The newsreel is a Gulf Stream flowing through the motion picture industry, warming it with its vigorous, ever-young spirit of enterprise.

"With a long record of accomplishments the newsreel has earned an enduring place on every theater program. It is the standard short reel—never failing to make its screen time memorable, instructive, and entertaining. Its multitudinous activities, always carried out with breathtaking speed, amaze and inspire those who know the difficulties of production.

"We have only to review the record of Movietone News in any given year to appreciate the perfection of newsreel organization.

"Editorially and technically Movietone News has been a thing of clarity and precision. Balanced, poised, daring, and courageous it has steered an honest course through the labyrinth that is the history it records.

"In every country in the world it commands respect for the strict impartiality of its policies, wherein no whit of its independence is sacrificed. We are pleased to congratulate its executives and associates on the newsreel for the unsparing zeal with which they carry on through the endlessness and unexpectedness of their task of reporting the news of the world."

And that, gentlemen, is the significance of newsreels. It makes me sick to see some producers and theater men cringe before cheap politicians when their industry commands such an influential journalistic arm that can call on the Bill of Rights to maintain its journalistic prerogatives of free speech.