

Mass-Observation File Report 444

NEWSREEL REPORT 3

LE 7.10.40

In the period under review, May to September 1940, exactly 100 newsreels were observed. Most of the observation was done in various parts of London, in Watford and in Northwood, but reports are also included from Orpington, Chelmsford, Ipswich, Birmingham and Southport.

Public opinion of the newsreels

Included in a Mass Observation questionnaire in December 1939, and also in August, 1940, was the question 'What do you think of the newsreels?'. Briefly the results are as shown in the table (see also Appendix 1).

	Like them	Dislike them	Doubtful
1939	61_%	15%	23_%
1940	24_%	50%	25%

Percentage giving as their reason for dislike that the newsreels have 'no news':

1939	12%
1940	35%

It will be seen from these figures that the newsreels have lost a very considerable amount of their popularity in the last six months, and the number of those who actively dislike the reels has trebled and reached 50 per cent. In December nearly a quarter of the people questioned liked the newsreels immensely: 'They are interest number one', 'I go to see them'. In the following August less than 10 per cent of those who like them are really enthusiastic about the reels.

The reason for this decline in popularity is simply that the newsreels contain no news; 35 per cent of the 50 per cent who dislike them give this as a reason, and they come from both sexes and middle and working class alike. In December only 12 per cent criticised the reels on the grounds that there was no news, and these were almost all men under 30.

The attitude of the newsreels to the problem of news

The fact that the 'no news' complaint has strengthened so much between Christmas and Summer is made even more remarkable when the actual incidents of the war are considered. Between September and December 1939 the only major incident of the Anglo-German war was the capture of the *Graf Spee*; there was in addition the Russo-Finnish war. But between May and August 1940 the newsreels dealt with the following incidents among others:

- The evacuation from Norway
- The cabinet crisis, and Mr Chamberlain's resignation
- The invasion of Norway and Holland
- The Dunkirk evacuation
- The collapse of France Invasion preparations
- The battle in the air

The entry of Italy into the war

There is surely more news of interest here than there ever was in peacetime.

The newsreels are not unaware of the position. Paramount, in showing the Italian version of an engagement in the Mediterranean which had come via America, said in its commentary 'Why leave all the propaganda to the enemy? Give British newsreels a chance to show America what the British navy is doing'. W.J. Gell, head of Pathe, in a statement in the *Kine* (22.8.40) said that newsreels could not be longer without becoming boring, as military and naval authorities refused permission to a great many shots. The blame is laid in the same quarter by the Ministry of Information (see 13th Report of the Select Committee of National Expenditure, page 8):

The difficulty in obtaining newsreels lies not with the newsreel companies but with the fighting services from whom facilities are largely required. One of the functions of the Films Division is to obtain these facilities. Repeated requests by letter and telephone and in personal interviews have produced little result. The fighting services have in a general way declared their willingness to provide facilities but in practice few facilities have been obtained ... The Sub Committee feel that the fighting services have not fully appreciated the value of propaganda as an integral part of the war effort.

Efforts of the companies to meet the situation

Though the absence of news may be due in the main to the fighting services, the newsreels themselves can hardly be said to have made the best of what facilities they have. In the first place, they have not always seized the opportunities that they have had. For example, the cabinet crisis at the beginning of May reached its climax on Tuesday May 7th, and must have been foreseen before this date. But the newsreels released on the Thursday of that week contained no reference to the crisis, while those of the following Monday consisted merely of shots of the cabinet drawn from old stock.

In the second place, there seems to have been very little effort by the newsreels to replace news by something more interesting. In the first months of the war when there was very little news, some of the reel was made up of reconstructed or faked news and some by the inclusion of comedies. The Crazy Gang appeared frequently and Pathe launched a highly successful series of skits on Lord Haw-Haw. The newsreels, in other words, were becoming more of interest shorts, but they were holding public attention.

There are now very few attempts at reconstructions, for the shots of the war that can be shown are good, many of them action shots of convoys being bombed, or of aerial battles. But there have been no comedies and little attempt to provide interesting material other than 'topical news'. But occasionally what is almost a short documentary has been included and sometimes a trailer with an appeal or advice. These two must be considered separately.

1. Documentary. The news of the Dunkirk evacuation was held up a little by the censor, and there was time for the newsreels to develop the shots by cutting into a well told story. Pathe in particular used this technique and built up the story of Dunkirk in a way that provoked very high audience reaction; each service was dealt with individually and the part that they played explained. This system of part news - part documentary was further exploited after the collapse of France. Gaumont, for instance, produced 'This Land of Ours', beginning with shots of English countryside and of English people enjoying themselves in peace time: 'we had hoped to enjoy these things in peace, the simple things'. But war comes and we must put our backs into the war as we did into sport in peace time. The item closed with a shot of the King decorating war heroes, thus bringing it up to date.

Pathe had an item 'The British Empire's Unity', showing troops from all parts of the Empire joined together with a common cord. Our own army and airforce and navy; 'Often have we said in jest "Thank God we've got a navy", now we can say it in earnest'.

But this documentary idea was not long lived. It is possible that it was killed by the Mol shorts which were first introduced about this time (June-July).

2. At the end of the newsreel, trailers have been added giving advice about taking cover in air raids, covering Andersons with earth, looking out for Fifth columnists, and so on. Sometimes these have been carried by all reels with the same commentary spoken by the various commentators, or with the same pictures and a different commentary. Occasionally they have been included in the middle of the reel — an appeal for nurses in a Pathe reel, for instance — and there have also been a series of appeals for National Savings by such people as Patsy Hendren, Leslie Henson and Vic Oliver.

The most ambitious effort observed was Gaumont's 'You Have Heard of the Fifth Column — You Can Wipe It Out' which lasted about three minutes and warned the man in the street against lights being used for signalling, rumours being spread, photographs being taken, leaflets spread, German wireless listened to, cars left unattended, and so on. But, for the most part, such trailers last no more than half a minute and help only in a very small degree to solve the problem of 'no news'.

In the main the newsreels have been content to show what news they have unadorned. The following are some items which have been considered of sufficient general interest to merit inclusion:

- Elephants in a USA zoo
- Arrival of a USA ambassador in Australia
- Croydon 'carrying on' after being bombed
- Rioting in Mexico
- Inspections of troops in USA
- ATS Sports Day
- Jewel sale at Christies
- The Duchess of Gloucester inspects a Red Cross centre

These are not items chosen at random from particularly bad newsreels. The Pathe reel on Dunkirk, for instance, which was so exceptionally well received, lasted only for about 4 minutes and was preceded by:

- River Plate heroes convalescing in South Africa
- Park railings being used for munitions
- War wedding of the Queen's cousin
- The Duchess of Gloucester inspects a Red Cross centre
- A special appeal for nurses

British Movietone News at the beginning of the Blitz preceded their pictures of bombed London with:

- Britain's Day of Prayer
- More Canadian troops arrive
- Duchess of Kent visits a hospital
- 'Dead' Guard (VC) is prisoner of war
- New Zealand band plays popular airs for Londoners
- US ambulances for Great Britain

Occasionally a newsreel devotes the whole of its 9 or 10 minutes to one incident; Gaumont did it to some particularly fine shots of bombs falling round a convoy and an aerial battle ensuing, while Paramount devoted their first issue after the beginning of serious raids to describing the damage in an item entitled '45,000,000 Heroes Can't be Wrong'.

AUDIENCE REACTION

Personalities

Though audience opinion of newsreels has declined, the amount of audience response to newsreels has increased. The table shows the response to the most important personalities in newsreels since the beginning of the war. The table is divided into three periods representing the following months:

Period 1 October 1939 to January 1940 (middle)

Period 2 January 1940 to April 1940

Period 3 May to September 1940

In the first column is the percentage of appearances of each character in observed newsreels; the second column indicates the percentage of their appearances on which they were applauded.

Figure	Period 1		Period 2		Period 3
	apps	applause	apps	applause	
King	27%	16%	44%	14%	46%
Queen	27%	27%	44%	9%	24%
Windsor	20%	75%	-	-	4%
Churchill	10%	60%	16%	50%	14%
Chamberlain	8%	50%	2%	-	4%

The appearances of the King have steadily increased in number since the beginning of the war though in the first months of 1940 he was seen more often and clapped less frequently. But now he is more than twice as popular than at any other period of the war, and he appears far more often. The applause as well as being more frequent is also longer; on the occasion of his last speech, as recorded by Gaumont, he was clapped for 17 seconds, the longest applause for one man ever noted in the cinema.

The Queen, on the other hand, though more popular than at the beginning of the year, is not as well received as she was in 1939 when she was the best liked of all the royal family. The emphasis has shifted from the Queen to the King; possibly this also indicates a shifting from a personal attitude to a patriotic one. In the early days of the war when there were less surface signs of patriotism, the Queen was most applauded as she was the member of the royal family most liked. Now the King is clapped, not so much as a man, but as a symbol of the country.

The Duke of Windsor retains his great popularity; the only occasions on which he has been seen this year are at his installation as Governor of the Bahamas, and of four renderings of this in the newsreels three were applauded. Once the reel was seen in a half empty West End cinema where response is usually very low; here he was applauded 7 seconds, a very long period.

Other members of the royal family have appeared occasionally but have not been applauded at all. The Duchess of Kent has made 7 appearances, the Duchess of Gloucester 3, and the Princesses 3; the Duke of Gloucester has not been seen at all and the Duke of Kent only three times.

Among politicians Churchill still remains easily the most popular. Though only appearing in 14 newsreels, he has been clapped in 11 of them: this makes a percentage of applause of 77 per cent a higher figure than for any other personality or even for any of the services.

Politicians have not been seen a great deal during the period under review; they have been seen en masse at the cabinet reshuffle and at a service at Westminster Abbey, but individually only six have been seen. Mr Chamberlain has been seen 5 times and been applauded once. Mr Eden has been seen 5 times and applauded twice — in the previous period he was seen 5 times but not applauded at all. The three Labour leaders, Attlee, Bevin and Morrison, have been seen but not applauded at all. Sir Archibald Sinclair has made one appearance.

There has been a surprisingly high response to foreign figures, just as there has been to foreign troops (see below). General de Gaulle alone of all personalities in newsreels has been applauded on every single one of his appearances (all made before the Dakar incident), while on 3 out of 5 occasions he was clapped for more than 5 seconds. Reynaud was well applauded on his only appearance, so was Heile Selassie [sic]. Leopold was cheered loudly at an appearance in May, and was equally loudly hissed when seen in September.

The only figure that has not appealed to the public imagination is Queen Wilhelmina of Holland. She has appeared more frequently than any other foreign ruler — 7 times — and on one occasion made a long speech, but has not been clapped at all.

Response to American personalities still remains very varied. In the earlier part of the year Roosevelt was hissed on some occasions and clapped on others, and there is still a divided audience when he appears. Willkie has always been received in silence.

Finally Hitler and Mussolini. In period 1 Hitler was seen once in the distance (a shot of the burial of the Munich victims) and there was no response. In period 2 he was seen 4 times and laughed at twice. In period 3 he has been seen 6 times, on 4 of which occasions he was hissed and the other 2 laughed at. In other words he has become a figure of much greater interest than before, but one that is not so easily laughed at. On every occasion the response was immediate and widespread.

Mussolini was not seen at all in newsreels — except for a brief shot at the Brenner pass meeting — until Italy's entry into the war. This shot was seen in three different cinemas and was invariably greeted with immediate and loud hissing. One inv saw it on a Saturday night, and reports that he has never seen such an outburst in any London cinema; there were catcalls, boos, hisses from all parts of the cinema, though it was in a middle-class area where response is usually less vigorous.

The Services

During the first part of this year the activities of the Navy were the mainstay of newsreels, and were applauded on 55 per cent of their appearances. The RAF and the Army both appeared far less frequently but while the Army was not once applauded until the middle of April, and the beginning of land warfare, the Air Force was applauded on 30 per cent of its appearances.

Between May and September the percentage of appearances has altered little, but there is a considerable levelling in response to the various services. The Navy is still most frequently seen — in 59 out of 100 newsreels at least one sequence was concerned with the sea — but it was only applauded on 46 per cent of its appearances. The RAF, seen 45 times, was applauded 20 times, or on 44 per cent of its appearances, an increase of 14 per cent on the previous period. The Army has only been seen 29 times but has been applauded on 14 occasions, or on 47 per cent of its appearances.

There is now very little to choose between the forces; the lowest percentage of applause is 44 per cent, the highest 47 per cent. The Army distinguished itself at Dunkirk, and the Air Force in the aerial war of the last few months, and both services have increased their popularity. The Navy, on the other hand has had little spectacular to do in the last few months and has declined a little in popularity while still being applauded as much as either of the other services.

There has been a high response both to colonial troops and to foreign troops fighting for Britain. Australians, Canadians, New Zealanders have been applauded on 25 per cent of their appearances; the most popular of all Empire troops have been the Indians. Czechs, Poles, Frenchmen, Dutch, shown in training in this country, have been applauded on 43 per cent of their appearances.

The women's army is still laughed at and never applauded, except when an individual woman is shown having won a medal for gallantry. The LDVs have been clapped on only 3 occasions out of 15. The ARP services were laughed at until the beginning of the Blitzkrieg, but since then they have been loudly applauded. In exactly the same way were shots of all troops laughed at before the war broke out; first the Navy proved its worth and became popular, and then the Army and the Air Force. But until the beginning of August both the women's army and the ARP were always regarded as funny. The ARP has now joined the fighting services in being well applauded.

Air raid shots

In thirty-two observed newsreels, sequences of air raid damage have been included. For the first few months the shots were of damage in France and Belgium, and the main reaction of the audience was one of disgust and horror. Of the 16 shots of air raid damage shown between May and the middle of June, 8, or 50 per cent, were received mainly with exclamations of disgust. Comments overheard in the cinema, and letters to the Picturegoer, seem to indicate that the excessive and unpleasant reality of these shots was not at all popular; the attitude is summed up in the frequently heard remark 'I forgot all about the war until the newsreel came on, and that showed me all the horrors'.

Through July and August only a few air raid pictures were shown and most of these were in a rather facetious vein; a damaged pub with the locals playing darts in the ruins, for example. Then when the serious raids on London began air raids again filled the greater part of the news. This time, however, the pictures were not so terrifying; there were no action pictures of steeples crashing or bombs actually exploding; there was no emphasis on the suffering of the homeless and the refugees; above all, there were none of the pictures that had formerly caused most horror, those of dead bodies, or men and women armless or legless. Perhaps as a result of this toning down, perhaps because air raid damage is nothing strange these days, the pictures have been received in silence, often in bored silence.

This absence of horror is not limited to London which has experienced the Blitzkrieg. Reports from Watford and Southport also indicate that the reels have been received in silence with no expressions of disgust or repulsion.

MISCELLANEOUS

Commentary

In the last five months the newsreel commentaries have become far more dramatic and emotionalised. Movietone produced a sequence in May containing nothing but old shots of Hitler with a vituperative commentary, and the same newsreel celebrated Italy's entry into the war in an item entitled 'The Italian Assassin' with similar abuse. All the shots of air raid damage in London are accompanied by such phrases as 'this cold blooded murderer', 'this damned assassin' and so on. Paramount showed shots of German

prisoners with a commentary that argued that the people were as bad as their leaders; Movietone, on the other hand, in 'The Italian Assassin' was more tolerant:

The King of Italy did not want to fight ... (during shots of damage in Soho) For the first time we are at war with Italy. The windows smashed are probably the results only of private grudges ... It would be wise to treat the Italian navy seriously and many of their troops are good.

If abuse of the enemy has increased considerably, patriotic sentiments have doubled themselves. This began at Dunkirk which Gaumont news almost turned into a glorious victory, and was followed up in the patriotic shorts mentioned earlier. Gaumont finishes every reel with a Union Jack.

Criticism or satire is now less prominent than ever before. The only remark noted which could be called criticism was a reference in Paramount to the 'tea-party politics of Chamberlain' some weeks after Mr Chamberlain had resigned.

Propaganda element

One interesting point that emerges from the comparative questionnaires is a changing attitude towards the use of the word 'Propaganda'. In December 1939, 12 per cent of those asked their opinion of newsreels objected on the grounds that they were 'propaganda' on two or three occasions simply the word 'propaganda' was sufficient on its own to condemn the newsreels.

In August 1940, on the other hand, nobody objected to the newsreels on the ground that they were propaganda, but 7 per cent said that they were good propaganda. These were not enthusiastic over the point and nobody said that they liked the reels because they were propaganda; but this does seem to indicate a changing attitude towards the word.

General conclusions

1. The newsreels are losing much of their popularity, the reason being that they are said to contain no news
2. The newsreels are aware of the position, but put the blame on to the Services
3. But little attempt has been made by the newsreels to liven up their reels
4. The Royal Family is increasing in popularity, the King is now more popular than the Queen
5. Churchill is still highly popular and the only popular politician
6. Foreigners who are helping Britain's cause are highly popular
7. Hitler is being more seriously treated than before
8. The Services are now about equally popular; ARP and foreign troops are also well received
9. Shots of air raid damage, very frequent in reels, were received with disgust in April and May but in silence in September when air raids are known to the audience
10. Commentaries have become more emotionalised
11. The propaganda element in newsreels has become less unpopular

APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire

Q. What do you think of the newsreel? (asked in December 1939 and August 1940)

	Men		Women		Total
	1939	1940	1939	1940	
Like them	54%	34%	70%	23%	61_ %
Doubtful	20%	19%	25%	29%	23%
Dislike them	26%	53%	5%	48%	15%
				1939	1940
Dislike them on the grounds of 'no news'				12%	35%
Dislike them on the grounds of being propaganda				12%	-
Think they are good propaganda				-	7%

APPENDIX 2

Details of observations

No on chart	Date	Place observed	Obs	News
1	1.5.40	Regal, West Norwood	LE	B.M.N.
2	1.5.40	Academy, Oxford Street	LE	G.B.
3	8.5.40	Gaumont, Streatham	LE	G.B.
4	8.5.40	Select, Chelmsford	ES (P)	Pathe
5	9.5.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA (P)	G.B.
6	11.5.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	G.B.
7	13.5.40	Monseigneur, Trafalgar Sq	LE	B.M.N.
8	14.5.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
9	16.5.40	Embassy, Bristol	LE	Paramount
10	17.5.40	Picture House, Rickmansworth	JA	B.M.N.
11	18.5.40	Odeon, Ipswich	PM (P)	G.B.
12	20.5.40	Odeon, Sidcup	KM (P)	G.B.
13	21.5.40	Gaumont, Watford	GW	G.B.
14	21.5.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
15	22.5.40	Embassy, North Harrow	GW	Pathe
16	24.5.40	Regal, West Norwood	LE	B.M.N.
17	27.5.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
18	28.5.40	Rex, Northwood Hills	GW	Universal
19	28.5.40	Odeon, Eltham Hill	KM	G.B.
20	29.5.40	Gaumont, Bromley	KM	G.B.
21	29.5.40	Gaumont, Streatham	LE	G.B.
22	29.5.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Paramount
23	3.5.40	Regal, Watford	JA	Paramount
24	31.5.40	Carlton, Haymarket	LE	Paramount
25	31.5.40	Carlton, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
26	3.6.40	Carlton, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
27	3.6.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
28	5.6.40	Odeon, Rickmansworth	GW	G.B.
29	6.6.40	Gaumont, Watford	KM	G.B.
30	7.6.40	Odeon, Sidcup	JA	G.B.
31	7.6.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
32	8.6.40	Gaumont, Watford	GW	G.B.
33	10.6.40	Odeon, Well Hall	KM	Paramount
34	10.6.40	Empire, Watford	JA	Paramount

No on chart	Date	Place observed	Obs	News
35	11.6.40	Regal, Sidcup	KM	Pathe
36	11.6.40	Odeon, North Watford	JA	B.M.N.
37	13.6.40	Regal, Watford	JA	Paramount
38	15.6.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
39	15.6.40	Stirchley Hall, B'ham	GD (P)	B.M.N.
40	15.6.40	Regal, West Norwood	LE	B.M.N.
41	17.6.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
42	21.6.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
43	21.6.40	Odeon, Sidcup	KM	G.B.
44	28.6.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
45	29.6.40	Savoy, Lee Green	KM	G.B.
46	1.7.40	Rex, Northwood Hills	GW	Universal
47	3.7.40	Gaumont, Streatham	LE	G.B.
48	3.7.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
49	5.7.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
50	6.7.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
51	8.7.40	Odeon, North Watford	JA	B.M.N.
52	10.7.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
53	11.7.40	Astoria, Streatham	LE	Paramount
54	12.7.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
55	12.7.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
56	13.7.40	Gaumont, Bromley	KM	G.B.
57	15.7.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
58	16.7.40	Empire, Leicester Square	LE	G.B.
59	17.7.40	Regal, Watford	JA	Paramount
60	17.7.40	Odeon, Sidcup	KM	B.M.N.
61	22.7.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
62	31.7.40	Gaumont, Streatham	LE	G.B.
63	5.8.40	Marble Arch Pavilion	GW	G.B.
64	6.8.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Paramount
65	7.8.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
66	8.8.40	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe
67	8.8.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Paramount
68	8.8.40	Empire, Leicester Square	GW	G.B.
69	10.8.40	Warners, Leicester Square	GW	G.B.
70	10.8.40	Embassy, TCR [Tottenham Court Road]	GW	G.B.
71	10.8.40	Tatler, Charing X Road	GW	B.M.N.
72	15.8.40	Ritz, Ipswich	PM	Pathe
73	19.8.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
74	19.8.40	Tatler, Charing X Road	GW	B.M.N.
75	20.8.40	Rex, Northwood Hills	GW	Universal
76	21.8.40	Odeon, Rickmansworth	GW	G.B.
77	21.8.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Paramount
78	22.8.40	Blue Hall, Edgware Road	GW	Paramount
79	22.8.40	Carlton, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
80	23.8.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Paramount
81	24.8.40	Plaza, Regent Street	GW	Paramount
82	26.8.40	Odeon, Wealdstone	GW	G.B.
83	28.8.40	Carlton, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
84	29.8.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
85	2.9.40	Regal, Watford	JA	Paramount
86	3.9.40	Gaumont, Watford	GW	G.B.
87	4.9.40	Odeon, North Watford	JA	B.M.N.
88	5.9.40	Gaumont, Watford	JA	G.B.
89	9.9.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.

No on chart	Date	Place observed	Obs	News
90	11.9.40	Regal, Marble Arch	GW	Pathe
91	12.9.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Paramount
92	14.9.40	Warners, Leicester Square	GW	G.B.
93	14.9.40	Empire, Watford	JA	Paramount
94	16.9.40	Palladium, Stockport	YS (P)	G.B.
95	16.9.40	Plaza, Watford	JA	Universal
96	19.9.40	Odeon, North Watford	JA	B.M.N.
97	21.9.40	Empire, Watford	JA	Pathe
98	24.9.40	Odeon, Watford	JA	B.M.N.
99	29.9.40	Empire, Watford	JA	Pathe
100	31.9.40 [sic]	Regal, Streatham	LE	Pathe

[Editorial note: Appendices 3 and 4, which chart personalities and subjects in the newsreels over this period, are in handwritten tables and have not been reproduced here]