



The Media and the War: Soldiers Find a Voice

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

Politicians and generals have always been able to have a public voice during wartime. Individual soldiers, however, have not. And often, what the individual soldiers experience is very different from what's expressed in the "official" viewpoint. During the U.S.-Mexican War, more soldiers found outlets for their opinions in some of the newspapers and periodicals that were just coming into existence. These outlets gave the soldiers their own public voice. In the 21st century, more technological breakthroughs have allowed soldiers at war to express themselves to the public even as they are on the battlefield. The blogs of the U.S. soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan have sent messages home that would not usually be found on the nightly news (at least, not in the personal and unedited manner that they are expressed on a blog). In this activity, students will look at how soldiers have found their voices through the media, then and now. After doing some research, students will present oral reports in which they will read passages from their favorite soldiers' blogs and explain why they are meaningful to them.

Objectives

Students will:

- Explore messages sent home from soldiers at war, both in published letters and in blogs.
- Consider the ways that this information is qualitatively different from that expressed in the "official" viewpoint and in other media created by reporters and not soldiers.
- Research and read some of the many blogs written by American soldiers overseas.
- Prepare and present an oral report on their favorite soldiers' blogs.

Materials Needed

This activity can be completed using a computer lab where students can access the articles and soldiers' blogs. It can also be done by having a classroom discussion and then allocating a separate time (in school or



at home) for students to do their online research and to prepare their oral reports. These are the articles that the students will need:

- o "[Latest from the Army](http://pbsvideodb.pbs.org/resources/usmexwar/primary/dearfather_posterxl.htm)" from the periodical *Yankee Doodle* (http://pbsvideodb.pbs.org/resources/usmexwar/primary/dearfather_posterxl.htm)
- o "[Soldier blogs bring the front line to the folks at home](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0419/p01s05-ussc.html)" from the *Christian Science Monitor* (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0419/p01s05-ussc.html>)

The following site includes links to a great number of soldier blogs:

- o [Yahoo!](http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/Military/War_in_Iraq/Weblogs_and_Diaries/) (http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/Military/War_in_Iraq/Weblogs_and_Diaries/)

IMPORTANT NOTE: If you are concerned about your students being exposed to graphic language, you may want to explore some of these blogs ahead of time and then make recommendations for your students. Many of the blogs do contain graphic language and graphic descriptions of their authors' experiences during wartime.

Procedure

Pre-viewing Activity: Discuss with students that in the 19th century during the U.S.-Mexican War, most of what people heard about the events of the war came from the government. There were for the first-time some front-line reporters (the leading war correspondent at the time, George Kendall, was, in fact, a more or less embedded journalist attached to General Taylor's army). But the telling of the story of the war was still largely left to the government. Individual soldiers' views of the war could be very different from the "official" view. And because of some of the technological advances of the 19th century, some of these views were actually presented to the public in some of the many new newspapers and periodicals that were being published. Have the students read the letter from a soldier that was published at the time of the war in the periodical *Yankee Doodle*: http://pbsvideodb.pbs.org/resources/usmexwar/primary/dearfather_posterxl.htm

Then review the letter with the students. What are the students' responses to it? Does it sound like anything they've ever heard about war? Do they think that it would be shocking to its 19th century readers? How do they think the soldier felt to see his letter published in this periodical (if, in fact, he did)?

Explain that students will now flash forward to look at a new media that soldiers are using to tell their stories directly to the public: blogging. Tell students that they will do research on the phenomenon of soldier blogging and then read some blogs. They will then select a passage from one of their favorites and present it to the class in an oral report along with their thoughts on why that particular blog speaks to them.

Have the students read the following article for background on soldier blogging:
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0419/p01s05-ussc.html>.

Viewing Activity: Either have the students use the following website to find their own soldier blogs: [Yahoo!](http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/Military/War_in_Iraq/Weblogs_and_Diaries/), or pre-select blogs yourself to have them read. Have the students look at a minimum of five soldier blogs to get a feel for the variety that exists among them. Have the student choose a passage from their favorite and print it out so they can read it to the class. Also, have them prepare a short oral report explaining particularly focusing on what moved them about the blog they've chosen.



Post-viewing Activity: Have students present their oral reports including their readings from their favorites. Have the students ask each other questions and offer feedback. Ask students whether doing this activity gave them any new insights into what it means to be a soldier? What are those insights? Do they think that it's a good idea for soldiers to have access to the media so they can tell their stories?? What could be the possible downsides of such a thing?

Classroom Assessment

To assess the students' work, consider the following:

- Did the students show an understanding of the differences between how the media is used for "official" purposes and how it is used by individuals to express themselves.
- Did the students' oral presentations show that they had done sufficient research?
- Did the students speak clearly and present their report in a coherent manner?
- Did the students offer thoughtful feedback to their classmates?

Extensions and Applications

Students can go to the following site to learn more about the short-lived 19th century magazine, *Yankee Doodle*: <http://www.oldmagazines.com/private/history8.htm>.

Have students learn more about soldiers blogging and some of the security concerns it has raised in the U.S. Military by reading the following articles: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3867981> and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/11/AR2005081102168.html>.

After students have read the articles, have them write an essay expressing their opinion as to whether or not the military should be able to "shut down" soldiers' blogs.

National Standards

McRel K-12 Standards Addressed:

Language Arts

- Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.
- Standard 4: Gathers and uses information for research purposes.
- Standard 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.
- Standard 8: Uses listening and speaking strategies for different purposes.

Civics

- Standard 14: Understands issues concerning the disparities between ideals and reality in American political and social life.
- 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.
- Standard 23: Understands the impact of significant political and nonpolitical developments on the United States and other nations.



LESSON PLANS

U.S. History

- Standard 10: Understands how the industrial revolution, increasing immigration, the rapid expansion of slavery, and the westward movement changed American lives and led to regional tensions.
- Standard 11: Understands the extension, restriction and reorganization of political democracy after 1800.
- Standard 31: Understands economic, social, and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

Online Resources

Below are the links for sites referenced in this activity:

- The U.S.-Mexican War (1846 - 1848)
<http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/>
http://pbsvideodb.pbs.org/resources/usmexwar/primary/dearfather_posterxl.htm
- Background on blogging
<http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0419/p01s05-ussc.html>
- Links to blogs
http://dir.yahoo.com/Government/Military/War_in_Iraq/Weblogs_and_Diaries/
- Extension activities
<http://www.oldmagazines.com/private/history8.htm>
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=3867981>
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/08/11/AR2005081102168.html>