



The Media and the War: The Penny Press, Walt Whitman and the War

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

In 1833, the Penny Press became a phenomenon in New York City where Benjamin Day, the publisher of the *New York Sun*, used new technologies, increased ad revenues and clever editorial choices to create the first newspaper specifically designed for the common man and woman. And this daily newspaper only cost a penny! By 1841, there were two more dailies, the *New York Herald* and the *New York Tribune*, that also only cost a penny. Featuring sensational reporting, these newspapers became immensely popular. They soon found their perfect subject in the U.S.-Mexican War, and the war became the first to be covered widely in newspapers. Many editorial writers of the Penny Press, including *Brooklyn Eagle* editor Walt Whitman, used their newspapers as soapboxes to drum up support for the war. In this activity, students will learn about the Penny Press and then apply their knowledge by writing a "Penny Press"-style article about an event from the U.S.-Mexican War.

Objectives

Students will:

- Learn about the Penny Press and the onset of mass-circulation newspapers.
- Learn about some of the ways that the Penny Press impacted the U.S.-Mexican War.
- Do online research to explore the writing style of the Penny Press newspapers.
- Write a short article using the Penny Press style (as represented by Walt Whitman's editorials).

Materials Needed

This activity can be completed using a computer lab where students can access the [video clip](#) and handout via [The U.S.-Mexican War website](#) and where they can do internet research on the *Brooklyn Eagle* website



(<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/>). 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:

- o [Penny Press worksheet](#)
- o [Video Clips Library \(http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html\)](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html)

Video clip used:

- “American news reporting promotes the war to an excited nation”

In the second scenario, you will also need to give students an alternative time to do their research on the *Brooklyn Eagle* site; such as during a study hall or library period or at home.

Procedure

Pre-viewing Activity: Introduce the idea of the Penny Press and talk about its impact on America in the 19th century. Talk about some of the factors that created an environment where the Penny Press could come into being, among them new and improved technologies and the high regard with which a free press was held by the U.S. founding fathers. Also explain to students that the U.S.-Mexican War was the first war to receive widespread media coverage and that this had a great impact at the time. Ask students to consider all of the various kinds of media with which they interact every day (TV, cell phones, iPods, the web, etc. etc.). Then ask them to imagine having none of these things. For Americans in the early 19th century, who had had access to virtually no media, the Penny Press provided a much-desired window to a larger world.

Have the students read the following section from an article on the history of the newspaper: http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761564853_5/Newspaper.html. It contains a short overview of the Penny Press.

Viewing Activity: Tell students that they are now going to learn more about the Penny Press and the writing style of some of the Penny Press writers, in particular *Brooklyn Eagle* editorial writer, Walt Whitman. Have the students go to “The U.S.-Mexican War” website to access the video clip “American news reporting promotes the war to an excited nation” (or display the video with a projection device in your classroom). Distribute the [Penny Press worksheet](#) and have students answer the questions based on what they learn in the video.

Then have students do more research on Whitman's editorial writing by visiting the *Brooklyn Eagle* website: <http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/>. Once at the site, students can navigate to specific issues of the newspaper in the following manner:

Enter the Site > Date Search (which should come up automatically)

Students can then use the drop-down menus to enter particular dates to see that day's *Brooklyn Eagle*. Some good choices are the dates around the time that Polk declared war on Mexico (May 13, 1846). Another good choice is July 7, 1846, where students can read Whitman's editorial that was mentioned in the video clip. December 10, 1846, has another of Whitman's spirited editorials about Polk and the war effort. (And students do not need to be limited by these dates; they can also do searches by keyword.) Tell students that Whitman's



editorials are always found in the upper left corner on page two of each issue (and that he edited the *Brooklyn Eagle* between 1846 and 1848).

Post-viewing Activity: Ask students to discuss Whitman's editorial writing style. What are some of its components? Do the students think this style was appealing to readers in the Penny Press era? Can students compare Whitman's style to anything in the modern-day media? (Some may find it akin to the style of talk-radio and cable-news pundits.) Do the students think that modern-day readers would find Whitman's style persuasive? Why or why not? After this discussion, have the students write a short article about the end of the U.S.-Mexican War in the manner of one of Whitman's editorials. Explain to students that they do not need to know the exact circumstances of the end of the war. All they need to know is that the U.S. won the war and they should write about it as they imagine Whitman would.

When the students are done writing, have them share their articles with the class; then have the students offer each other feedback on their work.

Classroom Assessment

To assess the students' work, consider the following:

- Did the students' answers on the worksheet show an understanding of the material?
- Did the students successfully use Whitman's "Penny Press" style in the article that they wrote?
- Did the students offer good feedback to their classmates?

Extensions and Applications

Have the students do further research on the history of the media at this PBS site:

<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/mediahistory.html>.

Have them learn more about Benjamin Day and the history of the New York Sun here: <http://www.common-place.org/vol-03/no-01/henkin/henkin-2.shtml>.

Another great character of the U.S.-Mexican War was George Kendall, who is credited with being the first real war correspondent. Students can learn about him here: http://www.geocities.com/kendall_dar/gwk.html

They can also read transcriptions of some of his articles here: <http://www.library.ci.corpus-christi.tx.us/picayune/picayunedates.htm>.

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 5: Uses the general skills and strategies of the reading process.



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- 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 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 12: Understands the sources and character of cultural, religious, and social reform movements in the antebellum 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/>
- Background on the newspaper and Penny Press
http://encarta.msn.com/encyclopedia_761564853_5/Newspaper.html
- The *Brooklyn Eagle* site
<http://www.brooklynpubliclibrary.org/eagle/>
- Other sites noted for potential extension activities
<http://www.pbs.org/now/politics/mediahistory.html>
<http://www.common-place.org/vol-03/no-01/henkin/henkin-2.shtml>
http://www.geocities.com/kendall_dar/gwk.html
<http://www.library.ci.corpus-christi.tx.us/picayune/picayunedates.htm>



LESSON PLANS

Penny Press Worksheet

Answer the following questions based on the video clip you just watched.

1. How did the newspaper articles about the U.S.-Mexican War impact the American readers at home?

2. What kind of style did Walt Whitman use in his editorial about the U.S.-Mexican War?

3. What was Whitman's goal in writing his editorial?

4. Do you see Whitman's style used in modern-day newspapers?

5. Do you see his style used in any other kind of modern-day media?