The Media and the War

Grade Level(s):
9 - 12

Subject Area(s)
Language Arts - Reading and Writing, Civics, Geography, U.S. History

Estimated Time
Three lessons each covering 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. In this lesson, students will explore the role of the media and the war in the following three lessons:

1. The Penny Press, Walt Whitman and the War
2. Is the Media Part of the Story?
3. Soldiers Find a Voice
Lesson 1: The Penny Press, Walt Whitman and the War

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:

- Penny Press worksheet
- Video Clips Library (http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/resources/video_library.html)
- Interactive Timeline Map (http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar/timeline.html)

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 American 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 out 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](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](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar) to access the video clip for this activity (or display the video with a projection device in your classroom). Distribute the [Penny Press worksheet](http://www.pbs.org/usmexicanwar) 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/](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/newmedia/mediahistory.

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/picayunefiles.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.
- 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
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?
Lesson 2: Is the Media Part of the Story?

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 Joaquin 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

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 American 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 American 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 U.S.-Mexican War website to access the video clip for this activity (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 American media contributed to actually provoking the war. With the Vietnam War, many feel the American 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.humboldt.edu/~jcb10/spanwar.shtml)
  [http://www.pbs.org/crucible/journalism.html](http://www.pbs.org/crucible/journalism.html)

- **Vietnam War**
  [http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june00/vietnam_4-20.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june00/vietnam_4-20.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 the 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/](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://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwbrady.html](http://rs6.loc.gov/ammem/cwphtml/cwbrady.html)
- [http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/icon/brady.html](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/ihas/icon/brady.html)
- [http://www.npg.si.edu/exh/brady/gallery/gal03.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?
Lesson 3: Soldiers Find a Voice

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:

- "Latest from the Army" from the periodical Yankee Doodle (http://pbsvideodb.pbs.org/resources/usmexwar/primary/dearfather_posterxl.htm)
- "Soldier blogs bring the front line to the folks at home" 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:

- Yahoo! (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](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](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!, 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.

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