The Creation of the Nippon Newsreel Company
—Nihon nyūsueiga-sha—

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Abstract
Japan’s war in China contributed to the growth of Japanese newsreels, but shortages and rations caused by the war also lead to calls in the late 1930s to merge the newsreel operations of Japan’s three major newspapers and the Dōmei News Agency into a single company. Some of those calling for the merger were from the news industry and the creation of the Nippon Newsreel Company [Nihon nyūsueiga-sha] in 1940 demonstrates that media control was not necessarily carried out through government mandates.

The China-Pacific War, 1931–1945 was a total war for Japan. All aspects of Japanese society, culture, politics and government, were affected. The news media was no exception. An examination of the creation of Nihon nyūsueiga-sha [Nippon Newsreel Company] in 1940 reveals that it was not the product of draconian government policy to control information. Both government and the news industry were involved with its organization and operations.

Newsreels are short films, about ten-minutes long, on current events shown along with cartoons and other short films between the two major features at movie houses. Their heyday was the 1930s to the 1960s, after which the changing nature of news dissemination — the growth of evening TV news — and the changing nature of the movie-going experience — the rise of multiplex theaters and the end of double features — made them obsolete. As a subject of study, newsreels seem to fall between the cracks: their regular, often weekly, release schedule produced films too artless to be taken seriously by students of film studies and their close association with movie studios, especially in America, often resulted in stories too frivolous and superficial to be seriously considered journalism. American newsreels were described as a “series of disasters followed by a fashion show” (The Reel World of News). And yet, although quaint relics of the early 20th century, the newsreels, staccato narration and their screen headline format remain part of popular culture even today.
Newsreels and Japan

Newsreels grew out of European film making. Both Thomas Edison and the Lumière brothers invented their movie cameras in the mid-1890s, but Edison’s camera was too big to move, so its subjects had to be brought to the studio, resulting in more “entertainment” oriented film making. Auguste and Louis Lumière’s invention, on the other hand, was portable and could be taken to its subject. Soon European cameramen began to film “actualities,” scenes of unmanipulated everyday life, and then “news films,” film on a single newsworthy subject. Although the newsreel was a product of European film making, the idea was reportedly conceived in the United States. Leon Franconi, a cameraman employed by French film producer Charles Pathé, came up with the idea in 1909 while covering the inauguration of US president Taft during a snowstorm. Pathé saw the potential in a weekly film “magazine” on recent events and introduced *The Pathé Journal* in 1910. The idea quickly crossed the English Channel and Atlantic Ocean. “Catastrophe,” notes newsreel historian Raymond Fielding, always provided newsreels their “most colorful and dramatic subject matter,” and World War I, with its disasters on an unprecedented scale, proved a boon to both American and European newsreels. By the 1920s the newsreel had made its place in the media on both sides of the Atlantic (Fielding, 4–108; quote 48).

Within a year of their invention, both the Lumières’ *Cinématographe* and Edison’s *Vitascope* had been introduced to Japan. The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 and the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 were the subjects of Japan’s earliest *kirokueiga* [documentary, literally “record film”], but it was not until 1934 that the first *nyūsueiga* [newsreel, literally “news film”] was produced by the Asahi Newspaper Company. Soon, *Asahi sekai nyūsu* [Asahi world news] was followed by the Mainichi Newspaper Company’s *Daimai Tōnichi nyūsu* [Mainichi Osaka- Tokyo daily news] and the Yomiuri Newspaper Company’s *Yomiuri nyūsu* [Yomiuri news]. Within months of its creation in 1936, the Dōmei News Agency [*Dōmei tsūshin-sha*] also launched its own newsreel operation, *Dōmei nyūsu* [Dōmei news]. Because Japanese newsreels were the products of the country’s news industry, they reflect a more serious approach to their subjects and were given the nickname *me de miru shinbun* [“newspapers you watch”] (Kitajima, 520).

The Creation of *Nihon Nyūsueiga-sha*

Just as the catastrophes of the First World War helped spur the popularity of newsreels in Europe and America, Japan’s full-fledged war in China, which began in 1937, did the same for
Japan. It ushered in “the golden age of newsreels” in Japan. As one article noted, “these vivid war films completely seized the public attention and fascination in the war we [the Japanese] are invested” (“Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umareru made,” 154). Families with members at the front flocked to newsreel screenings in hopes they might glimpse a shot of a father, brother, or son. If they were lucky, they would enjoy a sukuriin-gotaimen [meeting on the screen] with a loved one. Such occasions even made the headlines in the press (Kiyomizu, 23). Special newsreel theaters sprung-up throughout the country, where for ten sen one could see all four companies’ newsreels plus short educational films and documentaries. Before the outbreak of the “China Incident”—the term the Japanese for its war in China—in 1937, there were no more than three newsreel theaters in Japan and all in Tokyo (Satō, 183). By the end of that year, however, there were 23 newsreel theaters Tokyo and 78 in Kyoto, Osaka, and Kobe, each accommodating up to 300 patrons per showing. A full showing of newsreels and other film shorts ran about 1 hour and was repeated ten times a day. Movie house owners also found showing film reels very profitable. Major movie houses showed newsreels along with their feature film and the “nightly show” of newsreels became very popular (Hamasaki, 34–35).

The newsreel production was also helped when the government issued a new Film Law in 1939 which required theater operators to show newsreels or “culture films” with each screening of the feature movie (Uchikawa, 235). With the war and the Film Law, the number of newsreel prints distributed in Japan more than doubled. Before the China War, the Asahi, Mainichi, and Yomiuri companies produced about 195 prints a week. Once the war started in 1937, the three newspaper companies, along with Dōmei’s newly created operations, produced over 510 prints a week (Satō, 183).

By the end of the 1930s there were calls from government leaders and members of the news industry to combine the four newsreel operations into a single company. Several reasons emerged during the debate over the future of newsreels: the growing scarcity of resources, the unpatriotic nature of profiting from the war, and better control of information. To movie audiences, however, the single most obvious reason was, as one writer put it as early as 1937, all the newsreels “simply show the same things” (Iwasaki 262).

The competition among the four companies was seen by many as wasteful and the companies themselves were beginning to feel the pinch of wartime shortages. By the late 1930s a number of government leaders, businessmen, and journalists began to advocate merging the four newsreels operations as a means to keep down costs and conserve resources (Eiga no tomo, June 1940). Competition and rivalry among the four major news companies was the rule, not the exception. Wartime journalist Itō Masanori wrote in 1943 that the major metropolitan
dailies—the Asahi, Mainichi and Yomiuri were “born in rivalry, raised in rivalry and became great through rivalry; papers not please with compromise and cooperation” (Itō, 443–444).

To keep up with each other, the size of newsreel crews on the China front had more than doubled by 1938 to fourteen or fifteen men. To fill the shortage of personnel, Dōmei and the newspaper companies had to draft newsreel cameramen from their still photography departments. By the end of the 1930s film was being rationed so shortage of raw film was also a problem. Cost overruns proved another worry for the operations. Furuno Inosuke, the president of the Dōmei News Agency, joked with his newsreel division, “you’ve already spent this month’s budget. There better not be any more news!” (Furuno Inosuke denki henshû iinkai, 280). Added to the shortages of personal and film was the time government censors had to spend inspecting the thousands of feet of newsreel footage. Figures from a 1939 New York Times article cited that the amount of newsreels footage inspected by the censors jumped from 11,000 feet for the first six months of 1938 to 14,000 for the last six months. The article added that the censorship office also had to handle 120,944 reels in 1938, over 50,000 more than the year before (New York Times 13 April 1939: 18: 6).

Another factor that led to the call to merge the four company’s newsreel operation was their profitability. It was thought that making profit on reporting the war was unpatriotic. As one film industry publication wrote, “the rivalry among newsreel operations should not profit from [soldiers’] heroic sacrifice” (“Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umar eru made,” 154). This concern about profit may have also been directed to the competition among newsreel theaters, which were springing up “like clumps of bamboo after a rain” (“Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umar eru made,” 157).

A final reason, although never publically articulated, was the control of the flow of information. Because the tenet of a free press is so enshrined in the West’s civil religion, it is almost inevitable that some may see the merger as an example of Japan’s authoritarian government’s efforts to control the news media. But rather than being draconian and heavy handed, the creation of a single newsreel producer and distributer shows the Japanese government taking a more nuanced approach to information control. After all, newsreel coverage of war had been universally positive. Government film censorship records for the late 1930s also show newsreels regularly passing inspection without any apparent problem or delay (Eiga ken’estu jihô). But the speed of newsreel coverage was being propelled by competition. According to Itō Yasuo, head of the production department of the newly established Nihon nyūsueiga-sha and former head of the Asahi Newspaper’s newsreel operations, the biggest difference between newsreel operations before and after the merger
was speed versus deliberation. When four companies were competing, said Ito, speed in production and distribution was primary. But now, with a single company, deliberation and planning was primary. Ito explained that he and the editors of Nihon nyūsueiga-sha met every Tuesday to plan the upcoming newsreel’s content (“Nyūsueiga wo katarisōdankai,” 174–175), something that apparently was not done previously. Even though the Asahi, Mainichi, Yomiuri and Dōmei newsreels stories were supportive of the war, showing Japanese audiences moving images of the imperial army and navy’s victorious battles in China, the Japanese government—and mostly likely all governments in war or peace—preferred a single narrative to promote “knowledge and virtue” throughout the nation, rather than competing accounts (Fuha, 73).

Some connected with Japan’s wartime news media and information even argued that government leaders actually failed to maximize the propaganda and promotional potential of newsreels. In a discussion about the differences between film coverage of the 1936 Berlin Olympics and the 1940 East Asia Games, Col. Fujita of Army Intelligence Division noted that there were more camera angles and shots of the crowds in Berlin. He further explained that Hitler’s entourage included cameramen, giving the German press better access. The importance of film as a propaganda medium, according to Fujita, was not understood by the higher ups in the government. “You cannot deny that the leaders at the top do not feel the need for propagandists,” he complained (Nyūsu wo katarisōdankai, 176). (His word for “propagandists,” sendenjin, might also be translated as “public relations agents.”)

In 1938 the Cabinet Information Department met with the four major newsreels producers, the Asahi, the Mainichi, and Yomiuri newspapers and the Dōmei News Agency to discuss merging their operations (“Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umarreru made,” 156). Also included in the discussion were representatives from the Foreign, Home and Education Ministries and the Army and Navy. One of the chief advocates of merger was Furuno Inosuke. In Spring of 1939, shortly after becoming president of Dōmei, he sent a letter to the public information section of the Cabinet Information Department (Furuno Inosuke denki henshū iinkai, 283).

Since Japan does not have an abundance of resources, they will become increasingly scarce because of the war. At a time like this raw film is an important resource, because of the competition all four companies are using it up in vast quantities. This is certainly wasteful. For example, the four companies all used a great deal of film to shoot the same military review. One film would have been sufficient to show home and abroad the correct image of Japan.
But not all parties favored the merger. According to an article in *Nihon eiga* [Japan film] which coincided with the initiation of the new newsreel company, some members of the news industry were reluctant. The discussion apparently stalled and even Cabinet Information Department chief Yokomizo Mitsutero’s “earnest persuasion could not break the stalemate” until the discussion was “re-ignited” with the passing of the Film Law (*Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umarareru made*, 156). In October 1939 negotiations with the heads of the four news companies reconvened (Hamasaki, 47). Discussions progressed in secret. “The work for national regulations for newsreels was epoch making, so no distractions could be permitted” (“Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umarareru made,” 156–57).

On 15 April 1940, after nearly two years of discussion, the four newsreel operations were finally merged and, with the approval of the Home Ministry, *Nihon Nyūsueiga-sha*, also called *Nichie* for short, “was born.” (The company’s name was later changed to *Nihon eiga-sha* [Nippon film company].) Two months later it began releasing its weekly newsreel, *Nihon nyūsu* [Nippon news] (“Nihon nyūsueiga kaisha ga umarareru made,” 156). It was reported that some members of the Education Ministry preferred the term *jijieiga* [literally “current event films”], but the majority of those involved with the discussion preferred “*nyūsueiga*” which was also in current use. Besides its own films, *Nihon nyūsu* also used footage from the German newsreel company Deutsche Wochenschau and, until the attack on Pearl Harbor, from American newsreel companies like Paramount and RKO. It also distributed footage to foreign newsreel companies (“Nyūsueiga wo katarisōdakai,” 172).

To ensure a smooth transition the newsreel operations of the Asahi, Mainichi, Yomiuri and Dōmei were transferred to the new company. *Nichie* was organized into three divisions: the general affairs department, which oversaw the whole company, the production department which produced the newsreels, and business office which was not unlike the sales office in a regular film studio. Furuno Inosuke, president of the Dōmei News Agency was also named head of the new newsreel company (*Nyūsueiga wo katarisōdankai* 174), although he described it as a nominal “robot” position (Furuno 1942, 62).

After a few pilot films, the first official *Nihon nyūsu* newsreel was issued on 11 June 1940 and contained five stories. The first story was coverage of the emperor’s visit to Ise, the Imperial mausoleum and Imperial Palace in Kyoto as part of the preparations for the upcoming 2,600 year commemoration of the founding of the state of Japan. The second item was the East Asia sports meet at Meiji Jingu Stadium in Tokyo, also in conjunction with the 2,600 year commemoration. The third item was coverage of the Japanese army’s crossing the Han River and its capture of Yizhang in central China. The last two stories were from Europe: the German
victory in Norway and an air-sea battle in the North Sea between German planes and the British Navy. *Nippon nyūsu* newsreels were issued weekly until the final months of the war. In March 1945 the newsreels were issued irregularly as shortages of resources and fire-bombing of cities took their toll on the country.

**Conclusion**

*Nichie* produced 254 newsreels until Japan’s surrender in August 1945 and then issued another ten under the supervision of the Allied Occupation. Its last newsreel, issued on 31 December 1945, began with two major stories — the round-up of war criminals and the final sessions of the 89th Diet. These were followed by a series of “current topics” which included a story of “X’mas” in Tokyo, the introduction of a new cigarette called “Peace,” and the plight of war orphans (*Nihon nyūsu* no. 1, 11 June 1940; no. 264, 31 December 1945; see also Kitajima). In January 1946 the company was reorganized, although under the same name.

The consolidation of the four newsreel operations into *Nihon nyūsu eiga-sha* reveals that the government and the news industry worked together. While Japan’s wartime government, like most governments in war, may have wanted to control information its leaders were not always very skilled at manipulating news for public consumption. Moreover, it did not or could not impose its will on the news media. The news industry was involved in the establishment of *Nihon nyūsu eiga-sha* and was able to delay and shape its creation.

**Notes**

1. *Senden* 「宣伝」, the term the Japanese used at the time, has a broader meaning in Japanese which also includes “advertisement,” “publicity,” and “public relations” as well as “propaganda,” similar to the early 20th century usage of the English word “propaganda”. In the West the word “propaganda” did not take on a negative connotation until after WWI when government propaganda departments changed their names to *counter*-propaganda (Irwin, 3). The Japanese generally use the “loan word” *puropaganda* 「プロパガンダ」 to express the negative meaning of the word propaganda.

**Works cited**


Furuno Inosuke. “Kokka no rieki ga dai-ichigiteki” [national profit is number one]. *Eiga junpō* [film
Nihon nyūsū [Nippon news]. Film.
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要 旨
日中戦争、そのものが、日本のニュース映画の発展に一躍かっている事は確かである。しかし戦争による材料および人員不足が1930年代後半、日本三大新聞社と同
盟通信社合併の動きに拍車をかけた。合併支持者の中には、マス・メディアの者も
いた。「日本ニュース映画社」設立（1940年）は、単に日本政府の命令だけで成し
えたものではないのである