

Carrying the Banner: The Portrayal of the American Newsboy Myth in the Disney Musical *Newsies*

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For roughly two weeks in 1899, an informal workforce of children, mostly boys under the age of 14, quieted the two loudest presses in the country, Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* and William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. Incensed over the refusal of the *New York Journal* and *New York World* to roll back the wholesale price of bundled newspapers to the pre-Spanish-American War level, more than 5,000 newspaper deliverers in New York City went on strike on July 18, 1899. Distribution was curtailed not only in New York, but also in Providence, Newark, and a dozen other East Coast cities.<sup>1</sup> The *New York World* cut its press run by two-thirds as a result of the strike.<sup>2</sup> Newsboys, already iconic figures both on the American cityscape and in the public imagination, overturned delivery carts, ran off adult scabs, tussled with police, and blocked loading docks. Their leaders spoke at rallies and held trials to resolve internal disputes.

The newspapers did not roll back the wholesale price for a bundle of 100 newspapers, which could be sold for a penny a piece, from 60 cents to 50 cents, as the strikers demanded. But by the end of July, they agreed to allow newsboys to return the papers they failed to sell, and the little independent contractors began returning to work. The two papers considered powerful enough to have dragged the nation to war were forced to adjust their business model to calm the informal army of street urchins.<sup>3</sup>

Other New York newspapers, including the *New York Times*, *New York Tribune*, and

*New York Sun*, delighted in the spectacle of their gargantuan rivals being tormented by children. Historian David Nasaw credited coverage of the 1899 strike in out-of-town papers with inspiring a wave of strikes by newsboys, shoe-shine boys, and messenger boys in cities up and down the East Coast and as far west as Cincinnati, Ohio.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, he wrote that the episode quickly receded to obscurity:

The story of the 1899 strike has never been told. In his mammoth history of journalism, Frank Luther Mott refers to it in a sentence. No one else, to my knowledge, has ever given it that much notice. Children bringing down big-city newspapers by unionizing and striking is too improbable a scenario for anyone, even historians, to take seriously.<sup>5</sup>

The newsboy strike finally was noticed in 1992, but in a way that made it even harder to take seriously: as a Disney musical. Based on the historical events, *Newsies* featured a cast of child actors, led by future *Batman* Christian Bale, singing and dancing across a Universal Studios back lot. This research compares the historical record with the movie's depiction of the strike, showing how the film distorted journalistic history while also successfully dramatizing it in a way that preserved the strike in popular memory.

Like the strike itself, *Newsies* initially seemed destined for obscurity. The \$15 million film opened to poor reviews and worse ticket sales, bringing in less than \$3 million at the box office and winning a Razzie Award for the worst original movie song, "High Times, Hard Times."<sup>6</sup> Two prominent critics, Janet Maslin of the *New York Times* and Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, panned the film for its story, which Maslin described as "tedious."<sup>7</sup> Ebert dismissed the movie as a badly told fairy tale:

I am sure that shortly before the turn of the century, newsboys organized a strike against the greedy Joseph Pulitzer, and were cheered on by a dance-hall madam with a heart of gold. Nor do I doubt that the lads, some of them boys of 9 or 10, hung out in saloons and bought rounds of beer while making their plans, or that the proprietor of an evil city orphanage made

himself rich by collecting fees from the city. I don't even doubt that the newsboys printed their own strike paper on an old flatbed press in the basement of Pulitzer's building. Of course I believe.

Yes, Virginia.

What I find hard to believe, however, is that anyone thought the screenplay based on these actual events was of compelling interest.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the poor initial reception, *Newsies* became a success on video, generating \$18 million in domestic rentals and a cult following, largely among teen-aged girls. The Yahoo Internet directory lists 32 online role-playing games based on the movie and 13 sites featuring “fan fiction.” The movie has been adapted for performance as a high school musical and has a place on a labor education guide produced by the California Federation of Teachers.<sup>9</sup> It is also the only history of newsboys or newsboy strikes most people are likely to see.

The 1899 New York newsboy strike was not an isolated event, but rather one of many child strikes around the turn of the nineteenth century. The 1899 newsboy strike against the *New York Journal* and *New York World* was covered by rival newspapers in far greater detail than were the strikes by child telegram messengers and bootblacks that were going on at the same time.<sup>10</sup> In an entry in the *Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, Jon Bekken catalogued more than two dozen newsboy strikes dating back to 1886 with this caveat: “Certainly a great many other newsboy strikes have taken place of which no record survives, as these workers were often too marginalized to establish permanent organizations or secure coverage from a press with a direct material interest in seeing their efforts fail.”<sup>11</sup> Because of the coverage in rival newspapers, the 1899 New York newsboy strike was the best documented example of the larger phenomenon of child labor activism, highlighting social and economic tensions of the period.

Newsboys also had cultural significance that extended beyond this event. By 1899,

newsboys, and New York newsboys in particular, occupied a poignant place in American iconography. They may have been at the bottom, but they were seen as having hope and hustle, “an incarnation of the [commercial] spirit of the day,” in the words of an 1844 short story writer.<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Franklin started as a newsboy. So did Thomas Edison. Industrious newsboys played prominently in many of the 106 hardcover novels written by Horatio Alger prior to his death in 1899, some of which may have been penned in the New York Newsboy’s Lodging House operated by the *New York Sun*.<sup>13</sup> Newsboys were perceived as social problems and potential criminals, but they were also torchbearers for the American dream. The film *Newsies* transmits an updated version of this mythology to a contemporary audience, becoming the most prominent representative of an episode in recent history that had been overlooked.<sup>14</sup>

### **Literature Review**

While *Newsies* dramatizes news delivery rather than the reporting of news, the story of newsboys who sing, dance, and print their own newspaper fits into the genre of journalism movies, defined by Matthew C. Ehrlich as embodying “myths colored by nostalgia” that address America’s cultural ambivalence about the function and the power of the press.<sup>15</sup> *Newsies* offers insight into the place of journalism in popular consciousness, as well as a view of an overlooked historical episode. Examinations of the historicity of notable journalism movies have reached varying conclusions, in some measure as a result of uncertain standards for truth when it comes to movies. Ehrlich suggested *Citizen Kane* may have been “poor history,” because details were changed in the hope of placating William Randolph Hearst, on whom the central character was based. Nevertheless, he judged the film a success in part because Hearst was considered as enigmatic as his on-screen doppelganger.<sup>16</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr. declared that the 1931 version of *The Front Page* captured “the legend of

Chicago in the Roaring Twenties ... a myth not too far from reality,” despite the film’s farcical tone and lack of any particular historical antecedent.<sup>17</sup>

*All the President’s Men* was filmed in a painstaking replica of the *Washington Post* newsroom with a cast chosen in part because of their physical resemblance to the actual players. William E. Leuchtenburg pronounced that the movie “demonstrates that a film can be accurate without being true,” because it overstated the role of the press in bringing down President Richard Nixon.<sup>18</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, on the other hand, recognized that *All the President’s Men* overstated the roles of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, yet applauded the film for “making the complex web of intrigue understandable through a study of personalities.”<sup>19</sup> He praised the movie for conveying an emotionally strong message, capturing the physical and mental environment in which the reporters worked and offering a “boldly opinionated picture of an important episode from American political history.”<sup>20</sup> The historians agreed that movies may achieve truth beyond accuracy, but differed on whether *All the President’s Men* achieved it.

Demands of the silver screen often get in the way of making factually accurate movies. Toplin, editor of film reviews for *American Journal of History*, argued it was unlikely that a strictly accurate cinematic rendition of history could be a commercial or artistic success. He argued that to make successful cinematic history, filmmakers would be advised to follow eight “generic strategies”: portraying morally uplifting stories; offering a partisan view with heroes and villains; simplifying plots by featuring a few representative characters; injecting romance into the plot; the use of images and sound, as well as words; simplifying events and excluding details; adherence to the three act story arc; and speaking to a contemporary audience.<sup>21</sup> These strategies provide a template to identify which distortions in a film are inevitable marks of the

moviemaker's art.

Toplin's typology of strategies for commercially viable historical films acknowledged what Robert A. Rosenstone described as "the issue that torments all historians who deal with film: the fact that the dramatic feature film inevitably and always indulges in fabrication and invention – of characters, incidents, events, moments, dialogue, settings ... ." <sup>22</sup> Despite the "small lies" inevitable in cinematic history, Toplin maintained that the form could still tell larger truths. <sup>23</sup> However, Rosenstone suggested that there were different kinds of truth, beyond factual accuracy. He responded to a call that historical films focus on telling the truth by asking, "But what truth? The factual truth, the narrative truth, the emotional truth, the psychological truth, the symbolic truth? In drama, biography, even historical writing, these are often at odds." <sup>24</sup>

This study evaluates *Newsies* as a work of cinematic history by comparing the film to the historical record. Examining a movie as history requires some accommodation. A two-hour movie, let alone a musical, inevitably deviates from the strict realism arguably provided by print. But movies can also tell truths. Toplin's eight generic strategies are used to locate the deviations from historical record that are customary for a commercially viable film. After taking the constraints of commercial moviemaking into account, the truthfulness of *Newsies* is evaluated using the five areas of "truth" offered by Rosenstone: whether the movie is accurate in its representation of 1899 newsboy life, or its factual truth; whether it is accurate in its portrayal of the narrative arch of the strike, or its narrative truth; whether it is accurate in its portrait of the emotional and psychological lives of its subjects, or its emotional and psychological truths; and whether the larger lessons drawn by the movie are supported by the record, or its symbolic truth.

### Generic Strategies in *Newsies*

On the audio commentary to the *Newsies* DVD, screenwriters Bob Tzudiker and Nomi White described becoming interested in the 1899 newsboy strike after noticing a brief mention of the strike in a *New York Times* book review.<sup>25</sup> Likely, the paragraph that caught their eye was in a 1985 review of David Nasaw's *Children of the City*.<sup>26</sup> Like Nasaw, the writers drew source material from contemporary newspaper coverage of the strike in period newspapers, including character names and some incidents. "I don't know how much the newspapers were to be believed, at the time, but it was . . . really one of my favorite parts," Tzudiker said. Their screenplay was originally envisioned as a drama. It was snapped up by producer Michael Finnell and associate producer Marianne Sweeny, who attracted the interest of Disney. The studio then approached director Kenny Ortega to direct the dramatic play as a musical.<sup>27</sup>

After alerting viewers that the story is "based on actual events," *Newsies* opens with a boisterous song and dance, as teen newsboys wake from their bunks in the Newsboy Lodging House and roll onto the streets. Main characters David Jacobs, who is forced to drop out of school to support his family, and street-savvy, parentless Jack "Cowboy" Kelley meet in line to purchase bundles of newspapers. Meanwhile high above the streets, Joseph Pulitzer hatches a plan to conspire with other publishers to raise newsboys' cost for a bundle of 100 newspapers by a dime. Outraged, the newsboys organize to strike Pulitzer and Hearst.

Cowboy Jack begins a romance with David's sister and the boys try to remain a step ahead of a corrupt orphanage administrator. The boys stick together, and, with the help of a sympathetic reporter, publish a newspaper promoting the cause of child laborers and exposing corruption at the orphanage. Publication of the *Banner* brings an end to the strike by

galvanizing the child workers and attracting the attention of New York Governor Theodore Roosevelt, who intercedes on the newsboys' behalf.

As might be expected from a big budget Disney musical, *Newsies* was profoundly conventional. In plot and structure, the movie conformed closely to the strategies that Toplin described as typical for commercially viable historical films.

***Cinematic history portrays morally uplifting stories about struggles between Davids and Goliaths.*** The David and Goliath comparison is even made by the reporter in *Newsies*, but the subject matter was particularly amenable to this treatment. Nasaw characterized the New York press in 1899 as “cheering the boys on in what they described as a mock epic struggle of dirty-faced Davids against the twin Goliaths.”<sup>28</sup>

***Cinematic history offers partisan views of the past, clearly identifying heroes and villains.*** The film's sympathy is entirely with the striking newsboys, and Pulitzer especially is caricatured as a greedy villain. The same partisanship was on display in coverage of the strike in 1899 by the New York press. Although the newsboys were quoted widely in stories in the *New York Times*, *New York Sun*, and *New York Tribune*, their statements were never balanced by statements from the publishers or their representatives. The cheering tone was sufficient to cause the *Washington Post* to chide that “several able editors used their news columns to encourage the belligerent newsboys who resorted to unlawful means to prevent the sale of the *Journal* and the *World*.”<sup>29</sup>

***Cinematic history simplifies plots by featuring only a few representative characters.*** *Newsies* reduces the host of newsboy leaders named in newspaper accounts to two lead newsboys. Additionally, the movie dramatizes the role of Pulitzer as villain-in-chief while keeping Hearst largely offstage.<sup>30</sup>



*Cinematic history frequently injects romance into its stories, even when amorous affairs are not central to its historical events.* The chaste romance between Cowboy Jack and David's sister does little to add to or detract from the historical veracity of the film.

**Cinematic history often communicates as powerfully in images and sounds as in words.** *Newsies* is, of course, a musical, filmed on back lots owned by Universal and Warner Brothers studios.<sup>31</sup> Exuberant musical numbers with dozens of dancers communicate high spirits and teamwork, even solidarity.

**Cinematic history simplifies historical evidence and excludes many details.** Toplin wrote that to make history understandable and exciting, cinematic historians must focus on only a few events and a brief period of time. In *Newsies*, events of a two-week strike are compressed to cover a few days. The strike is portrayed as beginning immediately when the publishers' price hike for wholesale papers is announced, and not a year afterwards, when sales had slumped from their Spanish-American War high, as was actually the case.<sup>32</sup>

The historical record contains some ambiguity as to whether newsboy strike leaders Kid Blink, also known as Mugs Magee, and union president Dave Simons broke ranks and crossed the picket line, although the musical's representation of this complication is not out of keeping with what was reported. Newspaper accounts during the strike described how Blink and Simons, the strike leaders most widely quoted in earlier coverage, were denounced as scabs after being spotted wearing new clothes and selling copies of the banned papers. In the musical, this is a brief episode involving only Cowboy Jack and is quickly overshadowed when he switches sides again to lead the newsboys to climactic victory. In reality, allegations of treachery were followed by a trial by the newsboys, from which Blink and Simons emerged as union officers but of reduced rank.<sup>33</sup> The newspaper clippings did not provide a final answer as

to the pair's guilt or innocence, although the measured response by those who would have been most deeply affected suggested reason to withhold judgment.<sup>34</sup>

***Cinematic history appears in three acts, featuring exposition, complication and resolution.*** The newsboy strike did not begin, as portrayed in *Newsies*, with stirring oratory on the publisher's steps, nor did it end with a sudden concession by Pulitzer while an army of strikers cheered outside his gates. In truth, the strike began slowly, with a revolt by a few boys in Long Island City against a crooked *New York Journal* delivery man, and built up steam for a week before newsboys held their massive rally in Irving Hall.<sup>35</sup> Its conclusion was similarly ill-defined, with newsboys slowly drifting back to work following concessions by Hearst and Pulitzer.

***Cinematic history speaks to the present.*** The most prominent fabrications in the film are the invention of a crooked warden who seeks boys for his orphanage and the intercession of Governor Teddy Roosevelt to throw him in jail and pressure Pulitzer to settle the strike. These additions imply that paternalistic forces, albeit remote or corrupt, are concerned for the homeless children, perhaps in order to make their situation more palatable to contemporary children. The movie also presents the resolution of the strike as an unambiguous victory for the children, which was not in fact the case. The newsboys won an important concession from the publishers in 1899, but they did not win the price cut for bulk newspapers that was their primary demand.

### **Narrative and Factual Truths**

The newsboys left behind few records, and little was known about the actual strike leaders beyond their names. The narrative of *Newsies* fills in gaps in the historical record with invented romance and personal complications. There were no facts behind the main characters'

stories, so there is little basis to judge “narrative truth,” one of the five truths suggested by Rosenstone. Another truth, “factual truth,” could only be judged as a matter of degree. There were many small errors of fact not mentioned above: newspapers featured on screen did not reflect period design; Joseph Pulitzer was not in New York and was nearly blind by 1899; a lit “exit” sign is visible in the background of one scene. However, these small errors did not prevent *Newsies* from being generally accurate as a film portrayal of newsboys, characters already shrouded in mythology at the time of the historical strike.<sup>36</sup>

The main *Newsies* cast members appeared slightly older than suggested by the few systematic studies of newsboys conducted in the first decade of the twentieth century by child welfare activists.<sup>37</sup> A 1904 study of 1,000 Chicago newsboys found that they ranged in age from 5 to 22, with 12 percent under the age of 10.<sup>38</sup> A similar 1903 attempt to document the working conditions of the roughly 2,000 Buffalo, New York, newsboys concluded that 83 percent were under the age of 14 years and 26 percent under the age of 10. The New York Legislature attempted to regulate newsboys under the age of 10 in New York and Buffalo with a 1903 law requiring that they get a badge requiring the signatures of both guardians and school officials. About 4,500 badges were issued in New York City, but the law was rarely enforced and considered ineffectual.<sup>39</sup>

Both social reformers and historians agreed that the ranks of newsboys included representatives of all elements of diverse immigrant cities and included a small minority of girls. Young girls were estimated to make up about 2 percent of Chicago’s newsboy population.

The situation of the children doing this type of work may have improved since the

1860s, a period when one Horatio Alger Jr. biographer claimed the population of New York child street workers included drummer boys mustered out of the Union Army.<sup>40</sup> Only 2 percent of newsboys in the Buffalo survey were orphans, and 7 percent had lost one parent. In Chicago, the child welfare reformers found that nearly all of the 1,000 newsboys studied were from families wealthy enough not to have asked for charitable support. About two-thirds of the children claimed to be attending school.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the city streets were children's playgrounds. A large majority of newsboys probably lived with their parents in conditions of less than desperate poverty and attended school (or played hooky) before taking to the streets to play and pick up some pocket change selling the afternoon papers. But that was only part of the story. In 1890, Jacob A. Riis described an army of homeless boys, "street Arabs," who lived under docks and in coal chutes, and gravitated to Newspaper Row.<sup>41</sup> By 1899, that world was shrinking. Yet in 1903, Ernest Poole, writing for *McClure's*, found the underworld of penniless, homeless children and the newspaper industry still intertwined:

The paper is sold in a twinkling, and like a flash the little urchin is off through the crowd. We admire his tense energy, his shrewd, bright self-reliance. We hear of newsboys who in later life have risen high; and we think of street work, if we think of it at all, as a capital school for industry and enterprise. Those who follow deeper are forced to a directly opposite conclusion. The homeless, the most illiterate, the most dishonest, the most impure – these are the finished products of child street work.<sup>42</sup>

By 1912, Riis was told, "The newsboy of today is a commercial little chap who lives at home and sells papers after school hours," by the superintendent of a newsboy's lodging house, which by then served primarily drifters and "bums."<sup>43</sup>

*Newsies'* portrayal of newsboy life reflects both parts of the historical record. One of the central characters, David, lives at home and contributes his earnings to the family. His

buddy Cowboy Jack lives in the world of lodging houses, orphanages, and doorways. Central to this world is the Newsboy's Lodging House, in reality founded by Charles Loring Brace's Children's Aid Society in 1854 in a loft of the *New York Sun*. The lodge, which charged boys 6 cents a night, with an extra 4 cents for supper, moved to larger quarters at 49 Park Place in the 1860s, where it housed up to 250 boys nightly, with about 8,000 boys passing through each year.<sup>44</sup>

The great publicist for newsboys, Horatio Alger Jr., was a regular visitor to the lodging house for several years in the late 1860s, befriending the superintendent and using young tenants as models for his fictional characters.<sup>45</sup> Alger wrote appeals for donations to support the lodging house's work, which included lessons for the boys in English and scripture. "Here are one hundred and forty neat beds, which must seem luxurious to the weary newsboy, who not infrequently finds a less comfortable bed in an empty box or old wagon, or on the hard pavement in some arched passage," he wrote.<sup>46</sup> Alger's description of the lodging house's three, fifth-floor rooms connected by folding doors was consistent with *Newsies*. A brief eulogy for an 18-year-old newsboy in 1898 suggested that the lodging house was still used by newsboys at that time.<sup>47</sup>

A *Newsies* subplot about a corrupt warden at the New York Refuge, presented as an easily escaped orphanage for convicted kids, has no clear historical antecedent, but there was traffic between Newspaper Row and New York's reformatory. A 1905 article reported that of 311 boys who had worked prior to commitment to the New York Juvenile Asylum, 40 percent were newsboys, and about two-thirds of them began that work when they were between 4 and 12 years of age.<sup>48</sup> The association between child street workers and crime concerned child welfare activists, including Brace:

All the neglect and bad education and evil examples of a poor class tend to form in others, who, as they mature, swell the ranks of ruffians and criminals. So, at length, a great multitude of ignorant, untrained, passionate, irreligious boys and young men are formed, who become the “dangerous classes” of our city.<sup>49</sup>

The cheerful vice and street accents of the newsboys in *Newsies* corresponds with both reformers’ concerns and period newspaper coverage. The newspapers appeared to delight in transcribing the same thick newsboy accents that were rendered as “mudder, fadder, daughter, son” in the Disney musical.<sup>50</sup> The *New York Sun* quoted 11-year-old Boots McAleenan in a short article announcing the strike: “We’re here fer our rights, an’ we will die defendin’ ’em. Ad de rates des give us now we can’t make on’y four cents on ten papes, an’ dat ain’t enough to pay for snipes.”<sup>51</sup> “Snipe,” according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was turn-of-the-century slang for a discarded cigarette or cigar butt.

The life of a street newspaper salesman was certainly at times more dismal than portrayed in *Newsies*. The vendors were subject to abuse by publishers or their agents, who at times pressured newsboys to take more papers in order to boost circulation. Children could get caught up in rivalries among themselves for good street corners and in battles between rival newspapers. Publishers in Cincinnati and Milwaukee hired thugs to run off newsboys who sold their rivals’ products; in Chicago, at least 27 newsboys were killed in circulation wars up to 1912.<sup>52</sup>

However, even when newsboys were still common sights on city streets, their lives were romanticized in the public imagination. Due in part to Alger’s tales, the young, vocal salesmen were seen to personify a range of conflicting values. Hawking newspapers was viewed as a ticket to upward mobility, an admirable embodiment of the commercial spirit. But newsboys also had reputations for exaggerating headlines, making up personal sob stories, and

withholding change from customers in order to boost profits and sales. Mott described the newsboys:

The ragged, shouting, insistent New York newsboy of the 1830s was something new in the world. Often he was a thorough street gamin, with virtually no home except the streets and alleys of the city, and developed into a “rough,” a gambler, or saloon keeper. But again, he was the sole support of a widowed mother, and selling papers was for him a stepping stone to independence and fortune: such as he were the heroes of many edifying novels and plays. The newsboys were “gallery gods” at the Bowery Theatre, they were smart and tough, and they furnished one of the most picturesque elements of city streets.<sup>53</sup>

By 1899, newsboys were so ingrained in the fabric of New York City that newsboy swimming expeditions in the fountains of City Hall Park were celebrated by *New York Times Sunday Magazine* as a sign of summer.<sup>54</sup>

Because newsboys were not newspaper employees but rather independent merchants, the newspapers were not held responsible for their situation. The newsboys were perceived as little entrepreneurs. “Their energy, spirit and enthusiasm were qualities to be admired and encouraged, not condemned,” wrote Hugh D. Hindman in his history of American child labor. “Here was an army of children, all of whom were, in their own way, attempting to bootstrap themselves or their families to a better life. This was the stuff of which the American Dream was made.”<sup>55</sup>

The movie does not adopt the dark truths of child welfare reformers or muckrakers but the more romantic truth lodged in the popular imagination. This may have been a deliberate sanitation of the past. The movie characters are appealing: their desperation is rendered as exuberance, their difficult lives are brightened, and their vices are made fun. This perspective was not an invention of Disney, however, but a reflection of both period newspaper coverage and a well-worn American myth. The presentation of newsboys in *Newsies* reflects the

historical record, through the distortion of a historical stereotype.

### **Psychological and Emotional Truths**

In New York in 1899, it must have seemed as though everyone was on strike. In the *New York Sun*, the first news of the newsboy strike ran at the end of 12 full columns extending over three pages about a streetcar strike that paralyzed the city and featured violent battles with police. While the newsboys were on strike, other New York unions to walk out included coat tailors, messenger boys, and wool pullers, as well as freight handlers in Jersey City. A bomb plot during a streetcar strike in Cleveland made front page news. In the first *New York Sun* story, 11-year-old Boots told the reporter that newsboys picked the moment to strike because they knew police were busy elsewhere.<sup>56</sup> The newspapers diagnosed it as strike fever and the newsboys, too, felt it in the air.

Period newspapers provide a remarkably rich record of what the boys involved in the strike felt and believed about their situation. Although the press of 1899 was known for taking liberties with the truth, reports about the strike are consistent among the New York papers, even in articles published on the same day. In coverage of the newsboy rally that drew thousands to Irving Hall, the *New York Times*, *New York Sun*, and *New York Tribune* included lengthy quotations from named newsboy leaders that were substantially the same. Given the consistency, the newspaper accounts provide the best available record of what the boys told each other they were doing. Although it seemed improbably high-minded for a group of children, the discourse of fairness, non-violence, and solidarity by strike leaders in the Irving Hall scene of *Newsies* reflects the historical record. The *New York Sun* quoted Kid Blink as saying:

“Yer know me, boys!” began the Kid, and there were cries of “yer bet we do.”  
 “Well, I’m here to say if we are to win this strike we must stick like glue and



never give in. Am I right? [Cries of “Yes! yes!”]

“Ain’t that 10 cents worth as much to us as it is to Hearst and Pulitzer? Well, I guess it is, and if they can’t spare it, how can we?”

“Soak ‘em, Blink,” yelled an enthusiast.

“Soak nothin’,” remarked the Kid. “I’m tellin’ the truth. I’m tryin’ to figure how 10 cents on a hundred papers can mean more to a millionaire than it does to a newsboy, an’ I can’t sco it. Now boys, I’m goin’ ter say like the rest: No more violence. Let up on the drivers. No more rackets like that one the other night where a *Journal* and a *World* wagon was turned over in Madison street. Say, to tell the truth, I was there myself.”

“You bet yer was, Blink, an a-leadin’, too,” came a voice.

“Well, never mind, we’re goin’ to let up on the scabs now an win the strike on the square. Kid Blink’s a talkin’ to yer now. Do yer know him? We won in 1893 and will win in 1899, but stick together like plaster.”<sup>57</sup>

Blink’s speech followed one in which union president Dave Simons also called for an end to violence. “We can’t gain nothing by banging these fellers around. Let’s fight on the level, and see if we can’t win that way,” he called from the podium.<sup>58</sup>

The boys knew that their words and the strike were playing to a larger audience than the 2,000 boys in Irving Hall and the 3,000 more crowded outside. The chairman of the meeting, Racetrack Higgins, requested that newspaper reporters present not quote the speakers as saying “dese,” “dose” or “youse.”<sup>59</sup> The boys’ renunciation of violence during this era of extraordinarily violent strikes earned approval of the papers and was repeatedly mentioned in the voluminous coverage, even alongside boys-will-be-boys accounts of “soakings,” similar to the stone throwing and beatings portrayed in *Newsies*, which likely resulted in black eyes and bruises but not mortal harm. The call for non-violence led the *New York Tribune* to conclude: “The unbiased spectator last evening could not fail to be impressed with the resolute, manly fight the little fellows are making, and their zeal in following up the force of their convictions

indicates clearly that the small American boy is truly the father of the big American man.”<sup>60</sup>

The reports also suggested the boys were successful in winning the sympathy of the city. “The good natured attitude of the public toward the strikers has helped their cause not a little,” the *New York Tribune* wrote. “As a rule, people are satisfied to accept the papers they are selling.”<sup>61</sup> The public sympathy apparently extended as far as the homeless in the Bowery, who were offered the opportunity to do newsboys’ work. The *New York Sun* talked to one of the men:

“I’m a Bowery bum,” he said, “and one of about a hundred that’s signed to take out *Worlds* and *Journals* tomorrow, but say, we ain’t a-going to do it. It’s all a bluff. We told them scouts that we’d do it just when they offered \$2 a day, but every one of us has decided to stick by the newsboys and we won’t sell no papers. Put that in the pape and tell the public that it is on the level.”<sup>62</sup>

Historical newsboys were not only as angry and rebellious as the movie characters, but they also used similarly high-flying rhetoric and voiced similarly high-minded ideas. An unlikely truth of *Newsies* was in the emotional and psychological portrait of idealistic, passionate children determined to fight for their rights.

### **Symbolic Truth**

*Newsies* portrays the fate of the newsboy strike as closely tied to its coverage in the papers. In the movie, a front page story in the *New York Sun* is the boys’ first success. Later in the movie, the New York newspaper publishers meet in a smoky back room to conspire against further coverage of the newsboys. Publishers did collude frequently to present a united front against labor, as when New York newsboys went on strike again in 1918.<sup>63</sup>

In the film, sympathetic *New York Sun* reporter Bryan Denton tells the boys that publishers suppressed further coverage of the strike because “they are terrified the newsy strike will spread.” The conversation is a turning point:

**Cowboy Jack:** “Well, there is really not much chance of that as long as they’ve got the power.”

**Denton:** “Sometimes all it takes is a voice. One voice that becomes a hundred, and then a thousand. Unless it’s silenced.”

**Cowboy Jack:** “Why can’t we spread the strike? Have anudder big rally, an get the word out to all the sweatshop kids. Why not?”<sup>64</sup>

The heroes decide to follow this path by printing their own newspaper. The inaugural issue of the *Banner*, with a lead story about orphanage corruption, draws thousands of boys to protest in favor of the strike at Pulitzer’s gates. As the protesters chant outside, Cowboy Jack yells at Pulitzer in a final, face-to-face confrontation:

**Cowboy Jack:** “There’s a lot of people out there and they aren’t going to go away. They’ve got voices now and they are going to be listened to. Putting them in jail is not going to stop them. That’s the power of the press, Joe.”<sup>65</sup>

Although this exchange did not take place in 1899, the historical newsboys, with their street-level view of the newspaper industry, did try to harness the power of the press for their cause. As in the movie, the newsboys took their fight for higher wages to the public, fighting their battle through the press.

Of the “truths” proposed by Rosenstone, symbolic truth was at once the most important and the least verifiable. Setting aside the tyranny of details to get at an underlying meaning of history was the great promise of a cinematic history, but inevitably this was an act of interpretation. The seed of *Newsies*’ story of young people who triumph by working together and harnessing “the power of the press” is embedded in the historical event. Exaggerating the success of the strike in order to put these “truths” in high relief (and create the Hollywood ending) is explicable. More troubling is the interjection of concerned, paternal forces to grease the way to this resolution. In both reality and mythology, homeless newsboys were on their

own, independent merchants scrabbling to improve their own lots. Roosevelt did not rush down from Albany to come to the boys' aid. Period newspapers were amused by the boys' behavior, not outraged by their situation. Headlines included "Bluecoated Servants of Capital [the police] Break Up the Parade of Labor and Arrest a Lot of Her Unnoted Martyrs," and "No More Violence, Their Orators Tell Them, and a Voice Responds, 'Oh, Soytenly Not!'"<sup>66</sup>

Ironically, the Disney musical took the strike more seriously than period journalists did, even when it showed signs of becoming a children's general strike.<sup>67</sup> Although *Newsies* distorted journalistic history, it also successfully dramatized it in a way that preserves the strike in popular memory. The underlying importance of the event was seen only from the perspective of history.

*Newsies* does not burn through the layers of mythology to provide an unvarnished view of its subject, although the view it presents is accurate in important respects. The newsboy myth was itself a piece of history, fading as urban newsboys were replaced with adult-operated newsstands, then vending boxes. The process continues today, with child deliverers on bicycles on suburban routes being replaced by adults, often in cars.<sup>68</sup> *Newsies* does a service to journalism history by putting iconic newsboys on display in big city streets for another generation to appreciate. Presenting the newsboy myth in an accessible context, and in a format unlikely to be mistaken for unvarnished truth, may be movie's greatest contribution to journalism history.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The strike against the *World* and *Journal* was joined by newsboys in Long Island City, Brooklyn, Mount Vernon, Staten Island, Yonkers, Troy, and Rochester, New York; Jersey City, Plainfield, Trenton, Elizabeth, Patterson, and Ashbury Park, New Jersey; New Haven, Connecticut; and Fall River, Massachusetts. See David Nasaw, *Children of the City, At Work and at Play* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1985), 173.

<sup>2</sup> After accounting for unsold returns, the number of *New York World* copies that actually reached readers was reduced 73 percent, from about 304,000 daily prior to the strike to 81,000 daily by strike's end, based on figures provided in Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 176.

<sup>3</sup> Frank Luther Mott suggests that there is "great probability" that there would not have been a Spanish-American War had Hearst not challenged Pulitzer to a circulation battle based on inflammatory war reporting. See Frank Luther Mott, *American Journalism: A History: 1690-1960* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), 527.

<sup>4</sup> Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 177.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>6</sup> The Golden Raspberry Foundation, which anyone can join for \$25, has awarded Razzies in recognition of the year's worst filmmaking annually since 1980. These anti-Oscars are given the day before the Oscars and generally receive attention in the press. See <[www.razzies.com](http://www.razzies.com)>.

<sup>7</sup> Janet Maslin, "They Sing, They Dance, They Go on Strike," *New York Times*, April 10, 1992, C17.

<sup>8</sup> Roger Ebert, "Ho-hum 'Newsies' Hits the Streets with a Thud," *Chicago Sun-Times*, April 10, 1992, 41.

<sup>9</sup> The resource guide for teachers is online at <<http://www.cft.org/about/comm/labor/RG02.pdf>> (accessed on February 28, 2006).

<sup>10</sup> Many of the brief articles about messenger and bootblack strikes in the *New York Times*, *New York Sun*, and *New York Tribune* also included quotations from company management, a feature entirely absent from newsboy strike coverage.

<sup>11</sup> Jon Bekken, "Newsboy Strikes," in *The Encyclopedia of Strikes in American History*, ed. Aaron Brenner, Benjamin Day and Immanuel Ness (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2009), 611.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Jon Bekken, "Newsboys: The Exploitation of 'Little Merchants' by the Newspaper Industry," in *Newsworkers: Towards a History of the Rank and File*, ed. Hanno Hardt and Bonnie Brennen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 191.

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<sup>13</sup> John Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger and the American Dream* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 10.

<sup>14</sup> Less overlooked since the release of the movie, however. As well as attracting a modicum of scholarly attention, the 1899 newsboy strike has been featured in a footnoted book for children. See Susan Campbell Bartoletti, *Kids on Strike!* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Matthew C. Ehrlich, *Journalism in the Movies* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 72, 76.

<sup>17</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The Front Page," in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 200, 203.

<sup>18</sup> William E. Leuchtenburg, "All the President's Men," in *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies*, ed. Mark C. Carnes (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1995), 288.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 180.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Brent Toplin, *Reel History: In Defense of Hollywood* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 17. For a discussion of each of the generic strategies in depth, see 17-51.

<sup>22</sup> Robert A. Rosenstone, "Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?" *History and Theory* 41 (December 2002): 141.

<sup>23</sup> Toplin, *Reel History*, 61.

<sup>24</sup> Rosenstone, "Does a Filmic Writing of History Exist?" 141.

<sup>25</sup> Audio Commentary, *Newsies*, Collector's Edition DVD (Disney, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> The review of *Children of the City* was one of only a few reviews printed during the appropriate period that mentioned newsboys, and the only one located that mentioned the newsboy strike. See Avery Corman, review of *Children of the City, At Work and At Play*, by David Nasaw, *New York Times Book Review*, April 28, 1985, 15.

<sup>27</sup> Audio Commentary, *Newsies*.

<sup>28</sup> David Nasaw, "Dirty-Faced Davids and the Twin Goliaths," *American Heritage*, April/May 1985, 42.

<sup>29</sup> *Washington Post*, August 6, 1899 (No headline, page 6).

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<sup>30</sup> As well as serving a dramatic purpose, it is interesting to speculate that the minimization of Hearst in the Disney movie could have been related to financial relationships between the Hearst and Disney corporations. However, Hearst and Disney did not enter into their first major financial relationship, a partnership in ESPN, until three years after *Newsies* was released. For information about that venture, see Rich Brown, "ESPN on Course in Merger's Wake (Disney purchases parent company Capital Cities/ABC)," *Broadcasting & Cable*, August 7, 1995, 21.

<sup>31</sup> Audio Commentary, *Newsies*.

<sup>32</sup> Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 168.

<sup>33</sup> See "Newsboys Get New Leader," *New York Sun*, July 28, 1899, 2; "Tried for High Treason," *New York Tribune*, July 27, 1899, 2; "'Kid' Blink Arrested," *New York Tribune*, July 28, 1899, 2; and "Newsboys Still Hold Out," *New York Times*, July 28, 1899, 4.

<sup>34</sup> Progressive social programs of this period encouraged newsboys to exercise a degree of self-governance. In 1909, Boston school officials established a newsboy court, with judges elected by newsboys, to regulate their profession. See Edward N. Clopper, *Child Labor in City Streets* (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 80.

<sup>35</sup> Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 169.

<sup>36</sup> Faced with minor historical errors in the film *Glory* (1989), Pulitzer Prize winning historian James M. McPherson concluded, "The story that producer Freddie Fields, director Edward Zwick, and screenwriter Kevin Jarre chose to tell us is equally important – and, in that sense of 'the underlying meaning of things,' equally true." See James M. McPherson, "The 'Glory' Story," *New Republic*, January 8 and 15, 1990, 22, 26.

<sup>37</sup> Lead *Newsie* Christian Bale was 16 when the musical was filmed. See Audio Commentary, *Newsies*.

<sup>38</sup> Myron E. Adams, "Children in the American Street Trades," in *Selected Articles on Child Labor*, ed. Edna D. Bullock (Minneapolis: H.W. Wilson, 1911), 97.

<sup>39</sup> Edward Clopper, *Child Labor in City Streets* (New York, McMillan, 1912), 16.

<sup>40</sup> John Tebbel, *From Rags to Riches: Horatio Alger, Jr., and the American Dream* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 67. During the Civil War, residents of newsboy lodging houses in New York, Boston, and Philadelphia joined the Union Army in large groups. See Vincent Richard DiGirolamo, "Crying the News: Children, Street Work and the American Press, 1830s-1920s" (Ph.D. dissertation., Princeton University, 1997), 211.

<sup>41</sup> Jacob A. Riis, *How the Other Half Lives* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 147-149.

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<sup>42</sup> Ernest Poole, "Waifs of the Street," *McClure's*, May 1903, 40.

<sup>43</sup> Hugh D. Hindman, *Child Labor: An American History* (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2002), 242.

<sup>44</sup> The original Newsboy's Lodging House was so popular that several other lodging houses, including one for girls, were soon opened elsewhere in the city. See Gary Scharnhorst with Jack Bales, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger Jr.* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1985), 78; and Edwin P. Hoyt, *Horatio's Boys: The Life and Works of Horatio Alger Jr.* (Radnor, Penn.: Chilton, 1974), 86-8.

<sup>45</sup> While noting that "all earlier biographers agree that HA virtually lived in the Newsboy's Lodging House," sleeping and dining there frequently, Scharnhorst concluded that "though HA doubtless became a frequent visitor to the lodge after he moved to New York, not a scrap of evidence actually exists he ever ate a meal, spent a night, or wrote a sentence within its walls." See Scharnhorst, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger Jr.*, 173.

<sup>46</sup> The quotation comes from a sketch of the New York Newsboy's House that Alger wrote for the *Liberal Christian*. See Scharnhorst, *The Lost Life of Horatio Alger Jr.*, 78.

<sup>47</sup> "Plucky Boy's Brief Career," *New York Times*, February 7, 1898, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Adams, "Children in the American Street Trades," 103.

<sup>49</sup> Quoted in Joshua Brown, *Beyond the Lines: Pictorial Reporting, Everyday Life and the Crisis of Gilded-Age America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 99-100.

<sup>50</sup> Lyrics to "Santa Fee" in *Newsies*.

<sup>51</sup> "Newsboys 'Go Out,'" *New York Sun*, July 20, 1899, 3.

<sup>52</sup> Bekken, "Newsboys: The Exploitation of 'Little Merchants' by the Newspaper Industry," 195.

<sup>53</sup> Mott, *American Journalism*, 314.

<sup>54</sup> "How New Yorkers Keep Cool," *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, July 23, 1899, 4.

<sup>55</sup> Hindman, *Child Labor*, 214.

<sup>56</sup> "Newsboys 'Go Out,'" *New York Sun*, July 20, 1899, 3.

<sup>57</sup> "Great Meet of Newsboys," *New York Sun*, July 25, 1899, 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*



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<sup>59</sup> “Newsboys Act and Talk,” *New York Times*, July 25, 1899, 3.

<sup>60</sup> “Boys Forsee a Victory,” *New York Tribune*, July 25, 1899, 1.

<sup>61</sup> “Newsboys’ Word Stands,” *New York Tribune*, July 23, 1899, 3.

<sup>62</sup> “Newsboys’ Strike Swells,” *New York Sun*, July 23, 1899, 2.

<sup>63</sup> Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 184. The American Newspaper Publishers’ Association, which negotiated on behalf of the industry with the National Industrial Recovery Administration, was formed in 1887. See Mott, *American Journalism*, 490.

<sup>64</sup> *Newsies*, Collector’s Edition DVD.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> See “Newsboys’ Strike Swells,” *New York Sun*, July 23, 1899, 2; and “Great Meet of Newsboys,” *New York Sun*, July 25, 1899, 2.

<sup>67</sup> Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 177.

<sup>68</sup> See Nasaw, *Children of the City*, 192; and Bekken, “Newsboys: The Exploitation of ‘Little Merchants’ by the Newspaper Industry,” 213-215.