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Read all about it: John Curtin's key to generating positive news coverage, 1941-1945¹

Abstract

As an orator, writer and former journalist, Australia's Prime Minister John Curtin led significant innovations that transformed the media and created a legacy in political communications. Few publications exist on his use of the mass media to secure popular support during World War II. This paper aims to take his journalism strategies away from the margins, where they have not previously received much scholarly attention. I will investigate the question: How did Curtin achieve success in his use of the news media? The paper will focus on his groundbreaking initiatives in the press, film and radio. My research will be located in the multimethod field of scholarship developed by John Curtin historians such as Bobbie Oliver and David Black, political scientist Chris Hubbard, as well as based on the theories of journalism experts Steve Mickler and David Pyvis. Within this context, the paper will argue that Curtin was a brilliant media strategist, providing valuable lessons for managing information needs.

Six keywords

Australia, John Curtin, Journalism, Mass news media, Political communication, World War II

Discovering the secrets of a successful mass news media strategist

“The power of the press is greater than that of the Caesars of the school books, or the statesmen of our existing Legislatures”, John Curtin wrote in his Perth newspaper editor’s office at *The Westralian Worker* in 1922. “It shapes and moulds the thought of millions, even as the potter shapes the clay spinning on his wheel” (1922). As a forceful orator, skilful writer and former hard-hitting journalist, this Australian wartime Prime Minister led significant innovations that transformed the nation’s media and created a legacy in global political communications. His appointment as the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Prime Minister began on 7 October 1941 and his second term ended unexpectedly with his death on 5 July 1945. During these years, Curtin initiated twice-daily, confidential news conferences; direct radio speeches to his Allied partners, Britain and the United States; and developed more independent radio programs, newsreels and movies along with other creative media strategies that will be discussed in this paper (Lloyd 1988; Curtin 1942a, 1944; Pyvis 1993; National Film & Sound Archive 2008a).

When he became Australia’s leader, the nation was embroiled in political upheavals, a foreign war on Nazism and the bitter memories of the deep 1930s economic depression. The turmoil escalated with the sudden death of the conservative United Australia Party (UAP) Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, on 7 April 1939. Over the next two-and-a-half years, political divisions intensified under the Governments of three successive non-Labor Prime Ministers—Earle Page, Robert Menzies and Arthur Fadden—until Curtin was appointed to the role during World War II (hereafter the war). Through his ingenious efforts to publicise Australian determination to help defeat totalitarian Axis enemies, he achieved his aims to

unify a troubled nation and build strong international alliances. His policies gained powerful US support, evidenced in a confidential memorandum sent to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the 1942 Pacific battles. The American Legation in Canberra advised Roosevelt:

No other member of the [Australian Federal] Cabinet has stood the test of recent months as well as John Curtin. He is today, I believe, trusted and respected throughout the Commonwealth because of his obvious sincerity, directness and integrity of character (Records of Franklin Roosevelt 1942, p.102).

The next year a strong majority of voters re-elected Curtin, who achieved the greatest Federal victory for the ALP at the time (Black 2008; Oliver 2003). Despite his significant investment in public communications, a major gap exists in the literature about his relationships with the expanding news media. This article aims to take his journalism strategies away from the margins, where they have not previously received much scholarly attention, by investigating the following question: How did Curtin achieve such success in his use of the mass news media to secure popular support for his international war policies? By focusing on his groundbreaking initiatives in the press, film and radio broadcasts, this paper will argue that he was a brilliant media strategist due to his persuasive skills in influencing reporters to back his foreign policies, providing valuable lessons for managing information needs during global conflicts.

Literature review: delving into Australia's journalism history

While many researchers focused on Curtin's family life and public policies, there has not been a comprehensive, scholarly study of his media strategies. Australia was in a critical period. Major forces converged with the emergence of another global war, new radio and film industries expanded rapidly, and a skilful communicator well-known for his passionately

anti-conscription views during World War I was appointed Labor national leader. Yet “there is not much of a history of journalism” about the nation, according to Ann Curthoys, Julianne Schultz and Paula Hamilton (1992, p.45). Media scholar John Henningham agreed: “After 200 years of Australian history, we have not produced a comprehensive study of Australian journalism” (Cryle 1992, p.101). Significantly, Curtin was recognised as leading Australia in an entirely new direction to becoming a fully independent nation, a shift from British imperial domination (Black 2004; Coatney 1997; Hubbard 2008; Oliver 2001).

Impelled by Curtin’s directives, the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) management began promoting “Australian speech” instead of the “exaggerated English accents” that had been so prevalent since the station began operating in 1932 (Pyvis 1993, pp.4, 8). As many wartime, mainstream media owners were conservative, some journalists viewed themselves as independently overseeing the Labor Government (Lloyd 1988; Petersen 1993). Such news reporters invoked the “Fourth Estate” concept, believing the media should autonomously monitor the executive, legislative and judiciary branches of government and publish stories deemed to be in the public’s interest. This democratic ideal, inspired by the European Enlightenment, was generally upheld in Australian journalism although notions of objectivity were set aside by some media owners and commentators (Fernandez 2007; Fitzgerald 2008; Lucy & Mickler 2006).

A few scholars wrote of Curtin’s top-secret, twice-daily news briefings, which were more frequent than those given by his predecessor, Menzies (Grattan 2000, Lloyd 1988, Lloyd and Hall 1997, Ross 1977, Serle 1998). In the US, Roosevelt conducted regular, twice-weekly news conferences. Neither the wartime British Prime Minister Winston Churchill nor

Canadian leader William Lyon Mackenzie King held daily interviews (King 27 April 1939, Lloyd 1988). No researcher has published a detailed analysis of the private notes of wartime Canberra correspondents, Joseph Alexander of *The Herald* (1939-45) and E.H. (Harold) Cox of *The Sun News-Pictorial* (1944-45). Only one book included a discussion of the private “off-the-record” reporters’ notes of Frederick Thomas Smith, the Canberra bureau chief of Australian United Press during the war (Lloyd and Hall 1997). A review of the literature revealed a need to identify Curtin’s successful film, radio and press strategies as well as their relevance to contemporary political communications.

Multimethod approaches

Through a new examination of rarely viewed primary source documents, it will be shown that overall, the mass news media positively portrayed Curtin and his groundbreaking foreign policies that aimed at forging a closer connection to the US. Due to a lack of published research and Curtin’s personal reminiscences, it was necessary to investigate documents provided by his contemporaries. This material included secret diaries, oral histories, reporters’ notes, newspapers, confidential Allied memoranda and cables. It was possible to assess Curtin’s journalism relationships by finding material in digitised archives at the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library. Therefore the broad theoretical and conceptual approaches to this question were derived from media and journalism studies, combined with archival research methods developed in the discipline of history.

First, this paper will identify the innovative aspects of Curtin’s media strategies during his two terms as Australian Prime Minister. Analyses will be made of relevant wartime newspaper reports about his initiatives. This study will be based on the Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism formula that a press article was deemed

“positive” if two-thirds of the statements appeared to support a national leader (2008, *Experts assess President Obama’s strategy with media* 2009). Second, specific examples will be investigated pertaining to Curtin’s press relations, newsreel speeches and radio broadcasts. His rhetoric will be compared with Roosevelt’s US radio “fireside chats” in terms of the key words, accessibility and public impact (Lim 2003, pp.437-64). The newsreel analyses will use semiotic film conventions to examine whether the moving images portrayed Curtin as a heroic, dynamic and strong leader (Hansen et al. 1998, Lucy and Mickler 2006). Third, the Prime Minister’s private discussions will be compared with his public image as revealed in “on-the-record” news interviews and media statements. To investigate his journalism contacts within the Allied 1940s milieu, his media strategies will be contrasted with those of three other democratic leaders of the era: Churchill, Roosevelt and Canada’s Mackenzie King. Thus this study will provide an international context to evaluate the closeness of Curtin’s journalism relationships and appraise his ability to minimise negative reports and promote positive coverage of his Pacific war strategies.

New findings on prime ministerial-journalism relations

This multimethod investigation revealed that Curtin set many journalism precedents that contributed to his ability to develop favourable relationships with news correspondents. Australia’s mass news media favourably promoted the announcement of a new Prime Minister, who was appointed after the Labor Opposition and the two Independent Parliamentary members voted to reject the conservative Government’s budget on 3 October 1941. Previously, the fragile UAP-Country Party Coalition Government had depended on the support of the two Independents, Arthur Coles and Alex Wilson, to govern with a majority. When Coles and Wilson helped to remove the Coalition from office, the Country Party Prime Minister at the time, Arthur Fadden, advised the Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, that Curtin

should be commissioned to lead the nation. The local press welcomed the news that Curtin had become the first Western Australian to be Australia's Prime Minister. The appointment was reported positively in twelve mainstream, metropolitan broadsheets and tabloids throughout the country.² Characterising Australian people's attitudes towards Curtin, newspaper articles included expressions of "loyalty", "support and cooperation", "trust", "respect and esteem", as well as "good wishes" and the affirmation that it was "Labour's [sic] right to govern" (Australian Prime Minister's Office 4-10 October 1941, np). The press owners favoured his victory as a shift from the infighting within the previous UAP-Country Party Coalition Government.

Reporters also emphasised his unique professional background as a former State president of a press union, the Australian Journalists' Association. Through Curtin's union leadership, in 1919 the first university classes for professional Australian reporters began in WA, resulting in the introduction of a Diploma in Journalism (University of Western Australia 1929, Lloyd 1985). He had been the editor of the trade union publication, *The Timber Worker*, in Victoria from 1913 until his resignation in 1915, as well as of the labour-oriented Perth newspaper, *The Westralian Worker*, from 1917 until he was elected to be the Federal Member of Fremantle in the House of Representatives in 1928 (Black 1995). Even as he became the national leader, he recognised the importance of journalism relationships and appointed Australia's first full-time Prime Ministerial press secretary, Don Rodgers, to increase communications with Canberra correspondents (Rodgers 1971). In their coverage of the new Government, reporters emphasised Curtin was a "journalist by profession", known for his "graceful" sentences and "suave" manner, indicating they viewed him as a colleague (Australian Prime Minister's Office 6 October 1941, np).

When his two-month-old administration was confronted by aggressive Axis Japanese forces, Curtin initiated new media strategies to ensure citizens' support for Australia's role in the new Pacific war. To secure journalists' consensus, he held unprecedented, twice-daily news conferences, sharing top-secret war information on a regular basis. Curtin's Prime Ministerial predecessors limited "direct personal contact" with the Parliamentary Press Gallery and only released important information directly to editors (Alexander 1971, np). As he briefed senior Canberra political correspondents on 1 December 1941 on an expected "attack on Thailand", he trusted they would honour the confidentiality agreement by communicating this news tip only to their employers. They abided by the prescribed censorship system. After an interview on 5 December, *The Herald's* Joseph Alexander noted in his private diary that Rodgers "warned us to be ready for the gravest development". The next day Alexander wrote: "We are on the brink of war with Japan". On 8 December at 6.30am, Rodgers sent a message to Alexander about the Japanese bombings on the US naval base of Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, as well as on Manila in the Philippines (Alexander 1-8 December 1941, np). Shortly after the Pearl Harbour attack, Japanese forces also launched assaults on Hong Kong, the Malay peninsula, Midway Island and Guam on 8 December, local time.

Although reputable international media reported the Pearl Harbour disaster as a "surprise attack", Curtin made extraordinary efforts to ensure the Canberra Press Gallery was well prepared for the new war on Japan (*Japanese planes bomb Pearl Harbor*, 1941, Coatney 2009, p.95, Toto 2001). Also on 8 December he became the first Australian leader to make an independent declaration of war over a radio broadcast (Oliver 2001). Speaking to "Men and women of Australia", he affirmed: "This is our darkest hour" (Curtin 1941a, np). The next day his announcement was publicised as "vital" on page one of *The Sydney Morning Herald*;

as “important” on the cover of *The Age*; as well as endorsing “[d]rastic plans” and “a total war footing” in *The Canberra Times* lead. His speech was copied almost verbatim in *The Sydney Morning Herald* while repeated substantially in *The Age*, *The Canberra Times* and *The West Australian* (9 December 1941). As a result of his close press relationships, reporters not only honoured the media embargo on enemy military manoeuvres; they positively portrayed Curtin as a strong war leader.

As he forged a military alliance with Roosevelt, Curtin wrote a newspaper editorial about “Australia looks to America”, resulting in an “immense sensation” in diplomatic, political and journalist circles. In his diary, Alexander wrote he requested Curtin to write “a special article for the Herald dealing with the outlook for 1942” (28 December 1941). *The Herald* managing editor, Sir Keith Murdoch, did not immediately recognise the impact of the column and it was “held for a couple of weeks” until he decided to transfer the copy, originally planned for the magazine pages, to the front page of the issue on Saturday, 27 December 1941 (Black 2006). Rodgers was credited with crafting many media statements (Hall 1998). Yet journalists reported Curtin liked to edit and write additional material, sometimes at the last minute before publication (*The Herald* 9 December 1941, *The Age* 27 July 1943). He asserted in the editorial: “Without any inhibitions of any kind, I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pang as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom” (1941b, np). The next day Alexander wrote: “The Sunday Telegraph pinched it and had it today. Other Sunday papers gave it great publicity and it is being widely discussed in England ... KM [Keith Murdoch] is very amazed about it” (28 and 30 December 1941, np).

Many mainstream, daily newspaper owners endorsed Curtin's assertive policy by publishing positive press reports backing his "realism" in Australia, London and New York (Australian Prime Minister's Office 27 December 1941 - 1 January 1942, np).³ Affirming their traditional Empire loyalties, a small minority of Australian newspaper publishers initially disapproved of these "looks to America" (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 29 December 1941, 6, *The Courier-Mail* 30 December 1941). Soon afterwards, however, journalists acknowledged the US Government's deployment of troops to Australia "vindicated" Curtin's Pacific war strategies (Australian Prime Minister's Office 1 and 5 January 1942, np). About 90,000 US servicemen were in Australia by August 1942. They were either stationed in Australian bases or were in transit to New Guinea in accordance with Curtin's plans (Saunders and Taylor 1995). Through his newspaper editorial, he encouraged a vigorous, democratic and informed debate of his strategies in the public sphere.

As the Pacific battles intensified in 1942, Curtin developed new radio strategies that enabled him to speak directly to Australian listeners during national emergencies. The first ABC Federal reporter, Warren Denning, joined the Press Gallery in 1939. The Curtin administration inaugurated a national news service by February 1942 and the ABC began employing more overseas correspondents. Commercial radios used ABC wartime bulletins free of charge. The bulletins were broadcast three times each day and in a survey, ninety one per cent of Australian radio listeners said they heard the news relays regularly (Australian Commonwealth Archives Office 3 May 1945, Lloyd 1988, Moses 1982, Petersen 1993). Also by 1942, Curtin was releasing important war news directly to radio listeners rather than relying on press journalists to communicate information to readers. In an anonymous editorial, *The Sun* proprietor, Frank Packer, questioned Curtin's reliance on radio by publishing the following statement: "Again and again the ABC is used as the first medium of

announcements by himself [Curtin] and other members of his Government. This even includes the dissemination of war news of the highest importance to the Australian public” (Australian Prime Minister’s Office 20 March 1942, np). Defending newspaper institutions, Packer warned: “There are also dangers in national broadcasting”. According to the editorial, radio addresses were a problem because: “They are less perfectly interpreted by the public, and with mistakes in announcing, which are frequent, and mistakes in hearing, which are even more common, the radio has far less authority than a reputable newspaper” (Australian Prime Minister’s Office 20 March 1942, np). Although Curtin frequently briefed newspaper journalists on his initiatives, they were forced to relinquish their information monopoly and compete with the new Federal radio reporters.

Packer made his strong stand on press integrity a week after Curtin’s novel radio broadcast to an international audience encompassing North America, South America, the British Isles and Europe on 14 March 1942 (Curtin 1942a, *The Canberra Times* 16 March 1942). Curtin was able to release an immediate message to international listeners and appeal for their cooperation in a stronger war alliance because he had installed a powerful new shortwave transmitting station that connected Australian radio networks to the nation (*The Canberra Times* 31 October 1941). Newspaper journalists enthusiastically reported that more than 700 US radio stations had broadcast his talk during the peak listening hour between 7pm and 8pm on Friday. As *The West Australian* journalist noted, “[t]he stirring speech” was broadcast to the “widest network available” and “the largest potential audience ever hooked up for an Australian” (16 March 1942, 5). His words were reported positively in the next day’s issues of five metropolitan dailies throughout Australia.⁴ The favourable coverage extended to London and the US (*The Age* and *The West Australian* 16 March 1942).

Along with his leadership in expanding radio broadcasts, press statements and interviews, Curtin sponsored a modern, first-class Australian film industry. During the first month of his Prime Ministership, he encouraged private filmmakers to produce “Australian shorts” for international cinemas. Furthermore, his administration created a national films laboratory to process footage, along with transferring the Australian National Publicity Association to New York to maximise promotional opportunities (*The Canberra Times* 31 October 1941). Through his support of eye-witness war newsreels, an Australian film team won the country’s first Academy Award for a documentary. The award was given to the 1942 film “*Kokoda Front Line!*” that portrayed Australian soldiers fighting in the Kokoda Track in New Guinea (Fallows 2005). Although Curtin’s predecessors, Menzies and Fadden, had supported the Department of Information, established in 1939 to produce morale-boosting films, archival research revealed little newsreel footage of them as Prime Ministers during this era. In contrast, Curtin appeared in a “vast” record of moving images and research suggested they were screened in other Allied countries (Fallows 2005, National Film & Sound Archive 2008 a, b, c, np).

In the lead-up to the 1943 Federal election, Curtin became the first party leader to deliver a campaign policy speech through a radio hook-up from Canberra (Black 1995). The radio talk consolidated his reputation as the nation’s leader and it was favourably reported in *The Age*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The West Australian* (27 July 1943). ALP campaign posters and radio jingle advertisements focused on his popularity in an unprecedented way (Oliver 2003). Although two other press owners, Packer and Murdoch, had initially endorsed Curtin’s appointment as Prime Minister to resolve the previous

political instability, they remained resolutely anti-Labor (Alexander 21 August 1943, Whittington 1977). While Curtin enjoyed close professional associations with the Press Gallery, his relationships with some newspapers proprietors resembled those of the British and US leaders. In an undated letter, Roosevelt wrote to Churchill that their news coverage was generally “not so bad” but they were “menaced” by “a handful or two of gentlemen who cannot get politics out of their heads in the worst crisis” (Churchill 1950, p.200). Yet on 21 August, Australian voters elected the Curtin Government by a remarkable landslide. Two days later, Don Whittington of *The Daily Telegraph*, one of Packer’s Sydney newspapers, reported: “The Government’s sweeping victory at the polls was a vote of confidence in John Curtin” (Prime Minister’s Office 23 August 1943, np). Through his use of radio, Curtin marshalled his electoral popularity as a means to achieve a mandate to influence the media, a mandate that newspaper proprietors were obliged to respect. The election campaign also indicated national radio broadcasts were beginning to eclipse the power of some press owners.

Due to the ALP’s significant Parliamentary majority, Curtin was more easily able to influence media agendas around the world. In 1944 he made his first international trip as Prime Minister to meet Allied leaders and journalists in London, Canada and the US (Campbell 2008). Travelling by ship, he and his wife, Elsie Curtin, arrived in San Francisco on 19 April, where he was interviewed by sixty one journalists and filmed by five newsreel operators. The British Consul General in San Francisco, Godfrey Fisher, wrote that “Mr. Curtin made an excellent impression” in a confidential telegram to the British Minister of Foreign Affairs to the US, N.M. Butler. “[T]he press showed very great interest in his coming and his press conference was described to me as the biggest and best ever held in San Francisco”, Fisher noted (Great Britain Foreign Office 1944, pp.2-3). Elsie Curtin conducted

press conferences, where she encouraged women to enter professional careers and attracted headlines in *The New York Times* (26 April 1944) and *The Washington Post* (12 May 1944). In London, newspaper journalists praised Curtin's ability to establish "excellent personal relations" with Churchill; his "incisive presentation of the facts"; and his "fresh mind and language" during his radio broadcast to Britons on 8 May (Australian Prime Minister's Office, 12 May and 25 May 1944, np, *The Canberra Times* 9 May 1944, p.2). The next month in Canada, Mackenzie King privately noted in his diary that Curtin "seemed to attach great importance in the morning to the press interview [in Ottawa]. He came with material prepared for distribution, welcomed questions, etc." Continuing in his diary, King wrote Curtin focused "almost exclusively" on Australia's war effort and the need for a world organisation to maintain stability in peacetime (1 June 1944, np). After the interview, reporters remarked it was "one of the most useful conferences ever held in the Ottawa [Press] Gallery" (Australian Department of External Affairs 1944, np). Through his extensive journalism contacts, Curtin succeeded in promoting the urgencies of the Pacific war to other Allied audiences fixated on the European battles.

Immediately after his untimely death on 5 July 1945, Curtin's funeral became an exceptional media event. It was the first time that journalists, photographers and camera crews travelled from the eastern States to report on a funeral in WA. This was the largest funeral gathering in the State's history at the time. Indeed, Curtin was the first Prime Minister to be buried in WA. Until this eulogy, Australian radio listeners had never heard a funeral service broadcast across the nation (Australian Prime Minister's Department 1945). Tributes appeared on newspaper front pages around the world.⁵ "[H]e stepped at a single stride into the first rank of Imperial statesman," reported *The Times* correspondent in London. *The New York Times* leader writer declared "he was an outspoken advocate for world organisation" and his death was "a loss to

this country [the US] and to the world as well as to his own land” (*The Sydney Morning Herald* 6 July 1945, pp.3, 4). The preceding findings indicate his skills in generating positive wartime news coverage by encouraging investigative journalism and foreign correspondents, as well as developing Australia’s film and radio industries to communicate to global audiences.

Press, radio and film perspectives

It has been established that Curtin used his professional journalism skills to initiate creative mass media strategies to achieve news correspondents’ consensus for Australia’s wartime role. His innovations included frequent, top-secret war briefings to senior political reporters, as well as expanding Prime Ministerial radio and film broadcasts to communicate to Allied audiences across the globe. To discover how Curtin applied his journalism strategies, this paper will now investigate his confidential Canberra Press Gallery conferences. For example, he secured correspondents’ assurances that they would protect national security and withhold publication of his defiance of Churchill when he succeeded in bringing back the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions from the Middle East to defend their homeland (Burgoyne 1942, Curtin 1942b). In their private cables during February 1942, the two Prime Ministers had clashed over the allocation of military forces because Churchill planned to divert the same Australian troops to fight in Rangoon, Burma (Australian Prime Minister’s Department 1942). At a news conference, Curtin showed “the great pile of cables” to the Press Gallery, who supported his decision to turn back the troops to Australia (Alexander 1971, np).

The crisis escalated with the Japanese bombing of Darwin on 19 February 1942; the next day *The Age* headline announced: “War Comes Home To Australia” (p.2). Joseph Alexander of *The Herald* recounted, “although we were staggered at the idea of Curtin opposing the will of

a man like Churchill at a time like this, we all felt, I think, proud of him, because he was determined to put Australia first” (1971, np). During the troops’ return, an ABC radio reporter was told of Curtin’s words: “I’m not able to sleep while the boys are on the water” (Commins 1971, np). Other journalists learned of his personal struggles and night-time Canberra walks. *The Sun News-Pictorial* correspondent, Harold Cox, remembered that one summer evening, he saw Curtin, who paused and exclaimed: “Harold! What would you do if you knew the troops’ [defence] equipment was on another [ship] convoy two days behind them?” The next evening Cox met Curtin by coincidence again. The journalist remarked to Curtin that he looked “a lot better”. Curtin replied: “Yes, I feel a lot better, too. They’re coming home” (Cox 1973, np). While biographer, John Edwards, wrote of Curtin’s “Sleepless Vigil” (2005, p.1), no researcher has published an analysis of his conversations with journalists during this period. In their oral histories, former Press Gallery members cited the episode as an example of Curtin’s “intensity and his devotion” to his country (Commins 1971, np). As a result of his close, private and substantive communications, he established Prime Ministerial-press relationships on a new foundation of trust.

An analysis of Curtin’s first US radio broadcast indicated his rhetoric was similar to Roosevelt’s popular radio “fireside chats”, often described by scholars as setting the “gold standard for American political oratory” (Lim 2003, p.438). Curtin was inspired to give the talk to counter “vicious rumours” spread by Ankara and Vichy French radio announcers that he would reach a separate armistice with Japan (*The West Australian* 16 March 1942, 5). On Friday evening, 14 March 1942, he chose inclusive words about “the people”, “we” and “us” as well as addressing: “Men and women of the United States” (Curtin 1942a). This language resembled the approach taken by Roosevelt in his fireside chats, which always began with some variant of a greeting to “My Friends” (Lim 2003, p.453). Furthermore, Curtin’s

keywords appealed to nationhood—the people united against a common foe—as well as ideals such as freedom, hope and a triumphant future. During the broadcast, he spoke about one hundred and fifty words a minute, somewhat faster than the prescribed standard but still accessible (1942a). Roosevelt’s fireside chats were calculated to be an average of one hundred and seventeen words per minute (Lim 2003).

As he broadcast his innovative talk to international radio listeners, Curtin used other rhetorical devices to appeal to mass Allied audiences. Consistent with official US policy, he avoided verbal assaults on Japan’s revered Emperor Hirohito, but spoke impersonally about “the enemy”, “the aggressor” and “the assassin” (1942a, Brands 2005, p.434). Moreover he warned that: “Australia is the last bastion between the West Coast of America and the Japanese” (1942a, np). An evaluation was made of the accessibility of the speech, based on the Flesch readability score. This formula spanned a hundred-point scale. A higher score indicated the speech included simple language. A lower score implied the document was more complex. The standard recommended writing score was sixty to seventy (Lim 2003). Curtin’s radio talk registered a Flesch readability score of 69.4, well within the recommended standard for public audiences (1942a). All of Roosevelt’s twenty-seven fireside chats were calculated to be an average of 57.5 on the Flesch readability scale (Lim 2003, pp.445-6). Also Curtin’s broadcast was suitable for a seventh-grade audience based on another formula, the Flesch-Kincaid Grade (1942a). Many middle-brow newspapers were close to an eighth-grade reading level (T. Day 2008). Curtin’s speech attracted positive international news coverage because of his inspiring messages, simple language and lively rhetorical pace.

Along with his skilful use of radio to appeal to working people, Curtin deliberately portrayed himself as an ordinary Australian in films that transcended social and class barriers,

contrasting with the Axis dictators' notions of superiority. For example an official newsreel, screened in an outdoor cinema near Darwin, showed an unpretentious Curtin strolling in his modest Cottesloe garden, an image which received spontaneous standing ovations from servicemen. This was evidence that he was "Australia personified" for many citizens (D. Day 2000, p.65). Filmmakers quickly recognised how the war had unified Australians, overturning class prejudices, and they cleverly conveyed the phenomenon of everyday people accomplishing heroic feats in the battlefields and the homeland (for example, *South-west Pacific* 1943, *The Rats of Tobruk* 1944). Curtin achieved a forceful image by meticulously rehearsing speeches as well as practising facial expressions and gestures. Unused footage showed his film rehearsals as he tried different hand gestures, sometimes raising a finger in the air to emphasise his messages; adjusted memorised phrases; looked from side to side as if he were addressing a news conference; and leaned forward over a table. During these practice shots, extending to "take four", he patiently waited for the director's clapperboard and the call for "action!" (*Parliament In Session* 1944).

Cinema audiences watched carefully constructed shots that appeared as dynamic, immediate news reports, creating a sense of urgency, directness and honesty (*Parliament In Session* 1944). In a 1943 newsreel, for example, the narrator said: "The position is tense and the Prime Minister minces no words". Then the director cut to Curtin, who appeared to be talking to a group of journalists, unseen in the camera frame. As he leaned forward in his chair and looked at an invisible audience, he declared: "Gentlemen, the truth is if we do not strip ourselves to save for our country, the enemy will do it for us with ruthless efficiency, imposing upon us a maximum of misery" (*Two Years ... Dec. 7 1941-1943* 1943). In fact, the unedited version showed the director tried medium and close-up shots while Curtin adopted a variety of speaking postures during "take three" of this scene (*Parliament In Session* 1944).

Although these moving images were finally screened as medium shots to convey a personal relationship with the assumed audience of reporters, the filmmakers often portrayed eye-level close-ups to indicate intimacy with moviegoers (for example, *Empire Premiers Assemble* 1944, *Mrs Roosevelt's Visit To Canberra* 1943, *War In Pacific!* 1941). Available newsreels conveyed his efforts to appear as a candid communicator to cinema audiences.

Conclusion: media visionary paved the way for current political communications

During his first days as Prime Minister, Curtin was determined to elevate the Press Gallery from the political margins and senior journalists soon became crucial allies in his fight to secure international support for defending Australia against Axis attacks. From the beginning of his leadership, Canberra reporters reacted positively to the collegial tone of his news conferences; they were familiar with his background as the former State press union president who organised Australia's first university classes for professional journalists. During the anxious days leading to the Pacific war, Curtin was given the opportunity to implement fully his media initiatives. The strategies succeeded as he and Don Rodgers, the new full-time Prime Ministerial press secretary, frequently briefed journalists about the grave developments signalling the imminent Japanese attacks. After broadcasting Australia's first independent declaration of war, he used the fledgling radio services to communicate frequently to national and massive overseas audiences, unprecedented in their size and global locations.

Along with instigating more Australian radio programs and foreign correspondent positions, he helped develop an internationally renowned film industry. For example, the Australian National Publicity Association opened in New York in 1941. Then the Government-sponsored team of the 1942 film "*Kokoda Front Line!*" won the nation's first Academy Award for a documentary. In 1943 the ALP achieved an unprecedented electorate landslide

because of Curtin's novel radio campaign policy speech, his personal popularity and appealing advertisements focusing on his leadership. While the Murdoch and Packer news groups endorsed non-Labor candidates, Curtin's campaign speech was positively portrayed in *The Age*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The West Australian*. As a result of the remarkably interactive, overseas interviews held by John and Elsie Curtin, Australians secured more worldwide support for their role in the Pacific war in 1944. After global headlines announced his death on 5 July 1945, his WA funeral service became the first event to attract media crews from the eastern States and to have been broadcast across Australia. These findings indicated the success of a Prime Minister who made significant investments in the latest media technology, direct, public communications and respectful journalism relationships.

To discover how he implemented his media strategies, the preceding discussion focused on three examples: his news conferences in early 1942; his international radio broadcast on 14 March 1942; and his cinematic image. An investigation of wartime journalists' diary notes, letters and oral histories revealed Curtin's persuasive abilities to gain their support for his controversial decision to bring home the 6th and 7th Australian Divisions. Even though the troops' movements were subject to wartime censorship, reporters appreciated his extraordinary confidences, understood his reasoned arguments and quickly backed his independent stance. Curtin's global radio speech attracted favourable Allied press coverage because of his use of clear, simple and egalitarian rhetoric that was similar to Roosevelt's celebrated fireside chats. In his newsreels, he projected an image of being both a forceful, democratic leader and a common man of the people. Nonetheless, the apparent effortless and spontaneous motion pictures were the result of meticulous rehearsals. After Curtin practised different gestures, postures and words, the film teams edited series of eye-level close-ups and

medium shots to convey an intimate, personal relationship between the Prime Minister and cinema audiences. By applying new press, radio and film strategies, Curtin inspired a nation to help win the Pacific war and provided a valuable model in Prime Ministerial-journalism relations.

Photo captions

Image One:

After Curtin's landslide election, *The Sun's* Stuart Peterson published his cartoon in the Sydney newspaper on 24 August 1943. In *Scrapbooks compiled by the Prime Minister's office*. John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Bentley. Reference number JCPML00297/3. Courtesy of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library.

Image Two:

Australian Prime Minister John Curtin (seated) and his press secretary Don Rodgers (far right, behind Curtin) shared top-secret military news with Joseph Alexander of *The Herald* (right, with glasses and folded arms) and other reporters in Canberra, circa 1945. Records of the Curtin Family. Reference number JCPML00376/2. Courtesy of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library.

Image Three:

Curtin developed a close rapport with media producers and users, including during his British radio address in 1944. Records of the J S Battye Library of West Australian History.

Reference number BA499/22, 53436P. Courtesy State Library of Western Australia, The Battye Library.

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² Supportive press editorials were published to announce the new Prime Minister in the following: *The Advertiser*, *The Age*, *The Argus*, *The Brisbane Telegraph*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Herald*, *The Mercury*, *The Sun*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The West Australian* (Australian Prime Minister's Office 4-9 October 1941).

³ Curtin's editorial generated positive news coverage in *The Age*, *The Argus*, *The Brisbane Telegraph*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Herald*, *The Mirror* and *The Sun* (Australian Prime Minister's Office 27 December 1941 – 1 January 1942).

⁴ This study found Curtin's US broadcast received positive coverage in *The Age*, *The Canberra Times*, *The Mercury*, *The Sydney Morning Herald* and *The West Australian* (Australian Prime Minister's Office 16 March 1942).

⁵ For example, Curtin's death was announced on the front pages of *The Age*, *The Canberra Times* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* on 6 July 1945. *The West Australian* led with classified advertisements, consistent with its normal layouts, and the announcement was published on 5 July 1945, page seven. Front-page tributes also appeared in *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on 5 July 1945.