

## Unmasking codes of power: expanding the relatively new media to escalate war, 1941-45©

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**Abstract:** As wartime leaders, Australian Prime Minister John Curtin and US President Franklin D. Roosevelt expanded film communication technologies and practices to develop codes of language signifying their personal relationships with target audiences to win endorsement for escalating the Pacific conflict. Despite the gaps in the literature of the Curtin and Roosevelt newsreels, an investigation of their visual and oral performances reveals they used the relatively new media disingenuously to appear that they were involving citizens in their Pacific decisions. This paper conducts a new semiotic comparison of rarely viewed samples of unscreened and public newsreels to show how the two leaders created rehearsed images of their close friendships with mass audiences. Although they appeared to inform and engage citizens, they selectively used film propaganda and censorship to influence public perceptions of their nations' military roles in the Pacific battles from 1941 to 1945. Through the cinematic depictions, news film teams accomplished what Michel Foucault later described as masking power, divisive struggles and governmental tensions. The expanding wartime media provided opportunities for Curtin and Roosevelt to restructure social cinema spaces, increasingly encouraging audiences to view the national leader in an equal relationship with citizens. Few broadcast journalists challenged the two leaders' image manipulations and they cooperated to replicate homespun messages of Curtin and Roosevelt as interacting with "the people" that resonated with wartime listeners, cinema audiences and radio magazine readers. Although the use of communication technologies has developed unevenly with successive Australian and US governments, more democratic leaders have used the relatively new media to interact with citizens by appearing more ordinary than extraordinary, showing their rapport with voters. This historical analysis indicates a continuing need for journalists to delve beyond the relatively new forms of political leaders' communications and create substantive discussions for an informed, engaged citizenry.<sup>1</sup>

Both the Australian prime minister and US president used the often overlooked theatre of newsreels to influence a positive news portrayal of their leaderships in the Pacific conflict during World War II. John Curtin and Franklin D. Roosevelt used emotional rhetoric, symbolism and film camera techniques to portray the appearance, although not actually the substance, of their close interactions with public audiences about war. They expanded the relatively new and highly popular medium of newsreels to accentuate their preferred positive versions of their leaderships, masking tensions and concerns about the direction of the war (Alexander, Papers, 1941-45; British Movietone News 1943; British Pathé<sup>2</sup> 1941, 1942a, 1942b, 1942c, 1943; Castle Films 1941; Cinesound Review & Movietone News 1941-45;

Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum 1944; Movietone 1942, 1943, 1944; National Film and Sound Archive 1944; Paramount News 1944; Roosevelt 1941a, 1941b, 1942a, 1942b, 1942c, 1942d, 1944; Universal Studios 1941). The newsreel images accomplished what philosopher Michel Foucault (1975) has described as masking power struggles.

The wartime journalism was often a performative discourse that used form and style to legitimate the leaderships of Curtin and Roosevelt as an era of great unity and Allied harmony (Broersma 2010). The two leaders benefited from censorship, but the journalists supported and amplified their call-to-arms rhetoric that praised citizen self-sacrifice to help crucial allies (Alexander, Papers, 1941-45; Curtin 1942a; Prime Minister Curtin's address 1942; Roosevelt 1941b; Rodgers 1971; Sweeney 2001). Examining this media symbolism and emotional codes contributes to understanding how political leaders have used the relatively new media as justifications for sending troops to battle.

Both leaders enjoyed positive press relations with reporters. Curtin held twice-daily news interviews and also released confidential war information to them with the aid of Australia's first full-time prime ministerial press secretary, Don Rodgers (Coatney 2011). Roosevelt would invite reporters to share hot dogs with him at his home in Hyde Park, New York (Smith 2009). Curtin and Roosevelt developed their film techniques to signify close, authentic communications with mass newsreel audiences (Craig 2000; National Film and Sound Archive 2008).

Yet Curtin, at first, had been uncomfortable with the need to perform in front of the cameras when he had been a labour-oriented newspaper editor. He tried to polish his thundering speaking style that he had developed in town halls lacking microphones (Day 1999; National Film and Sound Archive 1944). His street corner speaker reputation suited his parliamentary oratory, such as when he spoke of the Battle of the Coral Sea in 1942 that an ABC reporter described as "one of the most memorable moments in my life" (Commins 1971; Curtin 1942b; Street corner speaker...1941). He relied on the reporters to portray this battle, actually a stalemate, as a victory to local audiences and accentuate his rhetoric of a "menace" in the Coral Sea off the Australian coast (Australians' big part...1942; Invasion is hourly menace...1942; "Invasion is menace"...1942). Reporters cooperated with Curtin's attempts to portray himself as an ordinary wartime Australian to elicit citizens' support for his leadership (Batten 1945; Curtin up 1943; Tremearne 1943). Likewise, an Australian

newsreel signified that his leadership style resonated with mass public audiences. In the fade-in, he was shown at his bungalow in Cottesloe, Western Australia, which was “just a home like so many others in the towns and cities of Australia”, the unnamed narrator said (National Film and Sound Archive 1945). Film audiences watched a scene of him opening his front door and walking past his garden to his white picket fence, then striding along the footpath; this image received spontaneous standing ovations from servicemen (Day 2000; National Film and Sound Archive 1945). Rodgers (1971) recalled that he would manage the filmed commentaries to make sure the narrators would “say the right thing and the right pictures were taken”.

Roosevelt, in contrast, tried to develop a film appearance to offset his aristocratic New York upbringing and show his affinity with movie audiences (Craig 2000). Roosevelt’s speechwriters, including the first US full-time presidential press secretary Stephen T. Early, copiously revised drafts for the filmed “fireside chats” from the poorly ventilated White House basement (Bradenburg & Braden 1958). Roosevelt used such techniques as rolling up his shirt sleeves and removing his glasses during close-up shots, talking directly to the camera to signify his rapport with film audiences (British Pathé 1942b, 1943). Curtin, however, tried to create an honest appearance while masking his eye defect; Rodgers (1971) took “great trouble” to develop images of the prime minister’s “straight-on appearance”.

Instead, Curtin used the close-up, direct-to-camera talks to emphasise his main message on the need to fight in the Pacific war. He rarely referred to the Allies’ battle priorities to Beat Hitler First, which sometimes ran contrary to his emphasis of the South-West Pacific war. Newsreel reporters showed he shared the same aspirations and concerns as the mass audiences (Cinesound Productions 1941a; Cinesound Review & Movietone News 1941-45; National Film and Sound Archive 1944). For example, he closely worked with Hollywood film director Frank Capra in 1943 to re-enact his Pacific war declaration some two years after he had announced Australia’s role in the battles. The American film team focused on Curtin restaging his war declaration in the federal parliament when it was practically empty; however, the parliamentary speaker donned the wig and gown for the film shoot (Film...1943; National Film and Sound Archive 1945). Curtin’s newsreel talks were often followed by battle scenes to signify he was close to the action, masking his health problems (Cinesound Productions & Cinesound Review 1941-45; Coatney 2011). Journalists did not challenge his slight altering of history; reporters also magnified his frequent references to the Anzac spirit as showing a need for citizen self-sacrifice in war (Austerity plan 1942;

Australian campaign opened 1942; Harder living 1942; National Film and Sound Archive 1944).

At the White House, the journalists' first questions after the Pearl Harbor bombing had focused on the Australian views of the region's instability in 1941 (Roosevelt 1941c, 1941d, 1941e). Roosevelt led the media conversations back to the Nazi battles, stressing this was a "common war effort" (1942e). The White House's internal surveys indicated many Americans were more interested in retaliating against Japan's military government over the Pearl Harbor bombings (Steele 1974). Therefore Roosevelt (1941a) used his newsreels to show that he shared "the determination of our people" to strike back at the Pacific aggressors. He used a punchy rhetorical style, repeating language of action, intending his film statements to be succinct and arresting during the Allied losses in early 1942. For example, he assured moviegoers that Americans were fighting "to hit our enemy and hit him again", and "hitting hard in the far waters of the Pacific" (British Pathé 1942a, 1942b). Roosevelt tried to link the Pacific effort to fighting Hitler and show the relevance of the battles near Australia to American audiences. To convey a strong Pacific war leadership, he attempted to hide his wheelchair from film cameras and a table or desk often covered his legs that were paralysed from polio (British Pathé 1941, 1942a, 1942b; Movietone 1944; Paramount News 1944). Other film techniques conveyed he was close to the fighting action: a narrator talked of Roosevelt's "15-day trip to the Pacific battle zone", not mentioning his health problems (British Movietone News 1942-45; Paramount News 1944). Journalists promoted military initiatives that Roosevelt emphasised in his film and radio talks that "inflicted heavy losses" on the enemy (1942d, 1944; British Movietone News 1943; British Pathé 1943; Movietone 1943, 1944; Paramount News 1944; Sweeney 2001). The direct media messages of Curtin and Roosevelt signified to public audiences that they embodied national ideals to bring about a Pacific victory.

Curtin also carefully practised his hand gestures, words and camera angles about a "proud and happy" alliance before he and Rodgers arrived in the US for a news conference in San Francisco on 19 April 1944 (National Film and Sound Archive 1944). Curtin pointedly fidgeted with his Australian Journalists' Association badge, which he had pinned on his coat, during his newsreel interviews in America. The newsreel journalists immediately noticed Curtin's gesture. In turn, they enthusiastically showed him their journalism union cards and described their "kinship" with him to news audiences (Curtin's brief tour... 1944; Mr. Curtin in U.S. 1944; Pressmen claim kinship 1944, p. 2). This symbolism contributed to portraying

Curtin's leadership as appealing to American audiences. The Australian newsreels were popular in America, provoking some New York audiences to applaud and cheer when they noticed an Australian soldier seated in a cinema (Australians popular...1942; R.A.A.F. man...1942; "Shabby" A.I.F. in New York 1944).

Likewise, Roosevelt attempted to convey the illusion of a close, direct relationship between his Pacific war leadership and Americans at home. In his newsreels, he would use his pointing stick and visual images to chart the Pacific offensive and indicate his public recognition of Australia as a separate nation (British Pathé 1942b; Movietone 1944; Universal Studios 1941). Roosevelt's public newsreel rhetoric indicated a shift in emphasis from his private language to reporters at an interview, when he explained that he used the term, London, to refer to all "British empire people" including Australia (1942f). The White House correspondents secured their access to Roosevelt's news conferences by volunteering to self-censor the news of the slow progress and Allied tensions within the South-West Pacific war zone (Coatney 2015; Sweeney 2001).

Reporters contributed to the filmed personable images of Curtin and Roosevelt. For example, Australian radio magazine readers were encouraged to display in their homes a lift-out colour poster of Curtin looking at an angle to disguise his eye defect (A colour portrait ... 1942). The poster was featured in the *ABC Weekly* (1942), accompanied by a caption stating that he had introduced the Advance Australia Fair anthem to open Canberra radio news bulletins. Also journalists contributed to the illusion that any wartime Australian could converse with him by looking up his name in the telephone book (Batten 1945; Tremearne 1943). Both Curtin and Roosevelt used newsreels to interact informally with servicemen and servicewomen. Curtin, for instance, stopped a British movie crew who were trying to film him with a London cricket official at Lord's in 1944. He beckoned to British servicemen and a servicewoman to talk with him during the film scene (British Movietone News 1942-45; Mr. Curtin 1944). Roosevelt tried to appear as if he were interacting closely with injured military personnel to convey his humanity in some of his Pacific newsreels (British Pathé 1942a; Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum 1944). These moving images seemed to reduce the divide between the leader and media audiences. Moviegoers often identified with the military personnel as they tried to recognise a close relative in the film scenes (Dexter 1943). Both Curtin and Roosevelt died in office before the end of the Pacific war, shocking citizens who had felt they had personally known them (Coatney 2011). These

media images contributed to public perceptions that people were involved in their governance.

In conclusion, journalists had contributed to creating legends of the war leaderships of Curtin and Roosevelt as a time of national unity and noble sacrifice to help allies. Yet these legends belied the staged settings, practised rehearsals and heavily scripted emotional rhetoric that masked the tensions over the Allies' battle priorities in the Pacific zone. Journalists cooperated to self-censor and often dramatised the leaders' messages to signify to citizens they must help to fight the Pacific war. This news portrayal disguised the conflict, power and violence that escalated during their leaderships. Since then, the political use of communications technology has developed unevenly. But political leaders are still using relatively new media to show they are interacting with citizens by appearing more ordinary than extraordinary. A closer examination of the Curtin and Roosevelt media legacies indicates a need for journalists to generate substantive discussions for a truly informed, engaged citizenry.

## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> The same newsreel images were shown in US theatres.

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