



“Here comes John Curtin”: The historical consciousness of a journalists’ hero

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ABSTRACT

This article reveals fresh insights into the central, largely unexplored role of journalists as agents of memory for shaping a sense of historical consciousness among public audiences. Journalism has been anchored in the retelling of dramatic stories about heroic characters representing national values. Rüsen (2004) refers to this technique as exemplary narration, which he defines as a type of historical consciousness. This article draws on Rüsen’s theory to provide new views of journalists’ ongoing work in developing the story of an exemplary national hero. Many studies have focused on a single message dominating collective memories. This study shows how journalists helped to create, then disrupt and later reconstruct memories of Australian World War II Prime Minister John Curtin as an example of hope during a major crisis. They developed diverse narratives that portrayed a heroic leader representing national values within the theme of nation building. Recognising exemplary narratives as an ongoing, changing work helps to illuminate journalists’ efforts to orient public views of history that suggest future possibilities.

KEYWORDS

Collective memory, Historical consciousness, John Curtin, Journalism, World War II.

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Introduction

At the height of the coronavirus crisis, a news commentator reflected it was difficult to recall a time when journalists' references to Australia's wartime Prime Minister, John Curtin, were more prevalent. The commentator, Brian Wightman (2020a, p. 15), added: "But it makes sense. In a crisis, we need a familiar face to reassure us that everything will be ok. To look us in the eye and, with compassion, tell us what we don't want to hear." A former parliamentarian and school principal, Wightman noticed the nostalgic appeal of memories of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) Prime Minister from 1941 to 1945. The story of a popular hero suggested a shift in journalists' representations of Curtin. Journalists had told a different story when they portrayed the fading memories of a forgotten hero during the war's fiftieth anniversary in 1995 (Gerster, 1995; Stephens, 1995a).

This article seeks to answer: What has been the role of journalists in shaping a sense of historical consciousness of Curtin in the news media? This paper argues that journalists have developed a central but overlooked role in shaping the legacy of a heroic leader to inspire hope for the future. First, wartime journalists emphasised a "common man" image to show a sense of an intimate relationship between him and the public. Some metropolitan news groups disrupted the "man of the people" narrative during the fiftieth wartime anniversary. The city-based journalists focused on a forgotten hero in an effort to boost a revival of local popular expressions of patriotism. By the seventy-fifth war anniversary, major news groups increasingly accentuated diverse narratives of a community-oriented saviour to encourage national values of compassion, patriotism, and unity during the global pandemic in 2020.

Despite the immense popularity of historical consciousness research, very few works have explored the role of journalism. According to Seixas (2004), historical consciousness is the intersection in which collective memories merge with the writing of history and other modes of shaping images of the past in the public mind. As the originator of the concept of historical consciousness, Rüsen (1987) has emphasised how this notion informs our orientation and helps us make sense of the world around us. He has shown that journalists often refer to the past by remarking that: "In the newspapers we can always find allusions to historical occurrences, and these allusions follow the logic of exemplary narration" (p. 97). Researchers have often overlooked Rüsen's theory of exemplary narratives in journalism and, indeed, journalists' roles in the broader area of memory studies. As Kitch (2018, p. 181) has noted, "there is a large body of academic literature about journalism and there is a large body of academic literature about memory, and the two rarely meet." Moreover, Zelizer (2008, p. 97) has observed, "memory scholars have not yet given journalism its due." Even so, journalists constantly make historical references and rely on "bits of history" in their stories (Winfield & Hume, 2007, p. 121). Journalists' exemplary narratives can be powerful symbolic resources that show how they promote a sense of historical consciousness to suggest future possibilities (Edy, 1999).

This article draws upon Rüsen's theory of exemplary narration (1987, 2004, 2008) to reveal fresh insights into journalists' roles in developing varied narratives of Curtin. In the words of Parkes (2014), there is a growing turn from "an all-encompassing narrative or model that claims to unproblematically mirror a real world outside our systems of representation" (p. 6). Journalistic narrations can be a nation-building process by representing a shared, national past (Kitch, 2002). Halbwachs (1950, p. 72) compared this memory work to retouching a portrait in which "[n]ew images overlay the old".

The article shows how journalists portrayed Curtin as an exemplary representative of national values as part of their evolving nation-building work. These memories often related to secrets that he had shared with wartime journalists during his extraordinarily close press interactions. A former labour-oriented journalist, he held twice-daily confidential news briefings during his prime ministership. For example, *Herald* journalist Joseph Alexander (1971, transcript n.p.) described himself as a member of the "travelling circus which went everywhere with Curtin, saw him twice a day and shared his confidence to an extent previously unknown in the history of the press in Australia". No other prime minister or Allied leader has given such frequent, secret

interviews which, after the war, some journalists shared publicly. The memoirs of Curtin's press secretary and journalists indicate his use of the media to develop a popular public image (Alexander, 1833-1957, 1971; Commings, 1971; Rodgers, 1971; Whittington, 1977). This study conducts a rare analysis of primary sources including the news briefings. It reveals journalists' deep involvement in creating and rewriting Curtin's legacy to represent heroic national ideals.

Creating popular memories

Rüsen (2008) has found that the exemplary mode of historical consciousness is widespread in popular culture forms. As Shaw (2019, p. 16) writes: "In various forms of representation, history appears at every turn in contemporary society." According to Rüsen (2004), exemplary narratives focus on the moral value of an individual to show shared values of good conduct. Donnelly (2020, p. 115) explains, "exemplary historical consciousness views history as containing lessons to guide the future". Exemplary narratives aid nation building by reinforcing values that assist the public to decide on a course of action and orient themselves to present challenging times. The exemplary narrative contrasts with traditional narratives that emphasise unchanging events in the forms of monuments and speeches. Other types of narratives critique transient values. For Rüsen (1987, 2008), exemplary narratives create a semblance of continuity with the past.

The sense of a continuous memory of a leader is a social construction (Burke, 1998). The act of remembrance is a fluid process that is similar to Rigney's (2005) concept of the working memory and the views of Mead (1932) and Halbwachs (1950) that the past is mutable, made and remade for present use. Zelizer (1992) has shown that journalists have not merely held a mirror to show the stories of past leaders. More scholars have supported Zelizer's view that journalists are memory agents who retell courageous stories of past leaders to privilege national ideals (Edy, 1999; Hume, 2014; Kitch, 2002, 2018).

Exemplary narratives also include analogies that suggest the relevance of a past hero for contemporary communities. As Edy (1999, p. 79) has stated, "historical analogies reported in the media are strongly connected to our perceptions of the present and our expectations for the future". Such stories often become simplified into a central message (Spence, 2005). According to Funkenstein (1989, p. 5), "Nations are meant to remember their heroes 'forever'; to perpetuate the memory of a person means to embed it in the collective memory." Rüsen (1987, 2008) and other scholars have warned that such analogies may discourage critical examination by overestimating the similarities between the past and present (Neustadt & May, 1988; Neiger, Zandberg & Meyers, 2014). Pöttker (2011) has noted that the journalistic analogy does not necessarily mean equation but orients the public to selecting a present action through a comparison with a significant past event. This article reveals journalists' diverse, changing narratives to promote a sense of historical consciousness about a hero representing national ideals.

Very few publications have focused on Curtin's skills in publicising a heroic prime ministership (Coatney, 2016). He privately helped to edit the first biography about his prime ministership. The biographer, Alan Chester (1943), circulated his manuscript within Curtin's administration. Australia's first full-time prime ministerial press secretary, Don Rodgers (1 February 1943, p. 1), confidentially wrote: "Both the P.M. and I have read the biography and I have made a number of factual corrections, but neither the P.M. nor myself in any way sponsor this book." Rodgers hoped for a wide circulation by remarking to an aide: "I think it proper that facilities for airmailing this script to America should be given and I should be glad if you would advise me." The book was a precursor to a genre of positive biographies including Lloyd Ross's depiction of a champion (1977) and Norman E. Lee's admissions of hero-worshipping the "Saviour of Australia" (1983). Day (2000) has noted that a wartime newsreel portrayed a plain man and generated standing ovations from service men. Curtin was Australia personified and he symbolised a comforting image of suburban ordinariness.

The turn of the twenty-first century led to a break in the tradition of elevating Curtin to the status of a hero. Black (1995), Day (2000), and Hirst (2010) have found a shift in the nostalgic eulogies. Critics debated Curtin's appeal for US military aid and his decision to bring back Australian troops from fighting in Burma (Edwards, 2001; Reynolds, 2005). While Hartley, Lucy, and Briggs (2013) praised Curtin's achievements for being outstanding, they suggested how to make his memory relevant for the present times. They found that civic education has been more likely to promote popular culture icon Kylie Minogue. They added (2013, p. 558), "Who is John Curtin? How do we know? As a modern, multicultural, migrant, global community, why should we care?" They concluded the memory of Curtin should be shared more publicly. More recently, historians have led a revival of Curtin's stature. The authors have included Byrne (2020), Edwards (2017), Strangio, t'Hart and Walters (2017), and Wurth (2013) who have helped to resurrect Curtin's role as a valiant leader. They were careful to distinguish between the private individual and the public figure. For example, Edwards (2017) quoted a reminiscence of Curtin's rival and conservative prime ministerial predecessor, Robert Menzies. Edwards wrote (2017, p. 7), "Curtin did not look like a great man, Bob Menzies would one day write, though 'he undoubtedly became one'". This article argues that different generations of journalists were crucial in shaping a changing sense of historical consciousness about Curtin as a hero.

Methods

This study's multi-method approach includes qualitative and quantitative analyses to assess journalists' abilities to shape the portrayal of Curtin in the news. For this purpose, the study investigates the news coverage of Curtin during the war and the fiftieth and seventy-fifth anniversaries of his death on 5 July 1945 and the war's end almost six weeks later. Wartime Australians were avid news subscribers and, by 1995, most adults read the nation's print newspapers. The pandemic in 2020 triggered an upsurge of public interest in general news.

This analysis extended several months before and after each anniversary to identify the way that collective memories "travel" across diverse narratives in major news groups (Erll, 2011). The study included 107 articles from compact wartime tabloids and larger broadsheets. The tabloids were Victor Courtney and John J. Simons' *The Sunday Times* and Ezra Norton's *The Mirror*. The broadsheets were the Fairfax family's *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Sir Keith Murdoch's *The Advertiser* and *The Courier-Mail*, Arthur Shakespeare's *The Canberra Times* and the Syme family's *The Age*. This analysis also includes 57 articles with a focus on the fiftieth anniversary in Fairfax-owned *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, as well as the tabloid, *The Sun-Herald*. The analysis extended to 87 articles during the seventy-fifth anniversary that were more widespread in News Corp newspapers owned by Sir Keith Murdoch's heir, Rupert Murdoch. The sample included the national broadsheet, *The Australian*, the metropolitan tabloids *The Advertiser*, *The Courier-Mail*, *The Herald Sun*, *The West Australian* and regional, digital newspapers, *The Cairns Post* and *The Examiner*. The sample in 2020 also included Nine Entertainment's tabloid *The Age* and *The Canberra Times*, and the national broadcast website, ABC News. This analysis ascertains journalists' efforts in developing nation-building narratives.

For this purpose, the study has identified journalists' selection of recurring themes or turning points in Curtin's prime ministership. These turning points include his appeal to the United States for military assistance in 1941 and his clash with wartime British Prime Minister Winston Churchill when he turned back Australian troops from Burma's battles. An analysis is made of journalists' use of exemplary narratives, values, and anecdotes. The news coverage is contrasted with the reminiscences of Curtin's press secretary, Rodgers (1971), and wartime journalists Joseph Alexander (1833-1957, 1971), John Commings (1971), and Don Whittington (1977). This approach creates a picture of how journalists shape past events for present-day audiences.

Findings and discussion

Screening heroic images

Wartime broadsheet and tabloid journalists extended popular narratives of Curtin as "a man of the people". He became the first prime minister to develop newsreel scenes extensively to suggest a close relationship with audiences. Rodgers recalled helping him to project an onscreen appearance as newsreel reporters filmed his welcome of US General Douglas MacArthur in Australia in March 1942. Rodgers reminisced:

The two of them couldn't have put on a better act, if that's the word, for the cameras on that day ... It just worked like a charm, worked beautifully from start to finish, everybody seemed to say the right things and the right pictures were taken (1971, transcript n.p.).

Curtin befriended camera crews to develop a down-to-earth presentation style for moviegoers (John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, 1942-1945).

Behind the scenes, the nation's alliance building was more contentious. Curtin appealed for a strengthened US alliance in a newspaper column for conservative publisher Sir Keith Murdoch, who did not predict its stirring effect and held it for a couple of weeks before publication. *Herald* journalist Joseph Alexander had requested Curtin write the article (Papers, 28 December 1941). The rival *Sunday Telegraph* editor, Cyril Pearl, reportedly said that Murdoch had missed a major news opportunity because the article was published without commentary or elaboration (Harvey, 2009). Alexander wrote in his diary, "The Sunday Telegraph pinched it [the editorial] and had it today. Other Sunday papers gave it great publicity ... KM [Keith Murdoch] is amazed about it" (Papers, 28, 30 December 1941). The article upset Churchill for supposedly implying a break in the British alliance, a suggestion that Curtin denied (*The Canberra Times*, 1941).

In early 1942, Curtin secretly told journalists he had defied Churchill's orders by bringing back the Sixth and Seventh Australian Divisions travelling to Burma (Alexander, 1971; Whittington, 1977). For the troops' return, they were not provided with the military equipment and defence that Curtin had expected. The next year, Rodgers told journalists that Curtin "couldn't sleep while the boys were still on the water" (1971; Commings, 1971; *The Advertiser*, 1943). The "bringing back the troops" story became well known and Curtin announced that their return saved Australia "in the nick of time" from "going down the drain to the depths of misery and suffering" (Curtin, 1943, pp. 39, 45). His actions were criticised by Murdoch (1943a, 1943b) and US General Stilwell (*The New York Times*, 1942). Even so, Rodgers (1971, transcript n.p.) recalled the media campaign "was a very smart move" that contributed to the Labor Party's greatest election victory at the time.

Tabloid journalists encouraged the public to make use of Curtin's unusually friendly accessibility. News groups circulated a "free gift" of his colour portrait, advising readers to display it at home, while promoting that anyone could telephone him because he enjoyed answering random calls to talk spontaneously with citizens (Batten, 1945; *Sunday Times*, 1942, p. 2; Tremearne, 1943). After his death, people felt they knew him as a friend. Commemorative newspaper issues emphasised the messages of sympathy from ordinary people (*The Age*, 1945; *The Canberra Times*, 1945a). A reporter declared, "These were the real tributes of the common people, amongst whom John Curtin was perhaps at his happiest" (*The Canberra Times*, 1945a, p. 1). A *Canberra Times* journalist (1945b, p. 3) opined: "His service to this country deserves to stand as a model for men." In another tribute, a newsreel showed a scene of Curtin walking past his home's white picket fence. An unnamed narrator explained, it was "just a home like so many others in the towns and cities of Australia" (ScreenSound Australia, 1945). His funeral led to the most extensive media mass mourning in the nation's history at the time as the service was broadcast across the country (Australian Prime Minister's Department, 1945). Journalists' exemplary narratives oriented, in Rüsen's view, a sense of public reciprocity for shared values (2004).

Disrupting a legacy

The popular "man of the people" narrative was ruptured during the fiftieth war anniversary as journalists suggested Curtin was forgotten in public memories. Fairfax broadsheet and tabloid news groups aimed to revive his memory during an upsurge of media patriotism. In a media tribute, then ALP Prime Minister Paul Keating remarked on Curtin's "singular loneliness" and his symbolic embodiment of "what it is to be a good Australian" (Stephens, 1995b). News commentaries portrayed him as a "buried hero" to "nudge and prod the writers of the nation's history" (Millington, 1995, p.2; Stephens, 1995b, p. 6; Uren, 1995, p. 13). *The Sydney Morning Herald* op-ed writer Robin Gerster (1995) commented that he represented an ideal of quiet, constructive service. Gerster (1995) also reported on a growing movement to revive his national stature: "Recently some commentators have bemoaned the lack of credit given Curtin; his standing, they say, has not been broadcast loudly enough" (p. 4). The exemplary narrative of a lonely hero aimed to orient public views to recognise a patriotic national story.

The media scenes of Curtin's funeral became a visual icon to recall a collective memory in Fairfax newspapers, often associated with labour-oriented editorials. Contrasting with the crowded funeral scenes, *The Sydney Morning Herald* journalist Tony Stephens portrayed a quest to find a lonely figure by travelling to Curtin's grave in his electorate of Fremantle, Western Australia. Stephens reported he was "IN SEARCH of John Curtin ... Looking for the man who, many Australians say, was the nation's greatest Prime Minister. Looking for the man behind the myth. Looking for the great man's grave" (1995a, p. 6). Stephens undermined the early popular narrative by sharing an office assistant's response when he asked for directions to Curtin's gravesite:

"Certainly, sir," says a helpful woman in the cemetery office, tapping the keys of a computer. "How do you spell the name?"

C-U-R-T-I-N.

"Of course." Tap, tap. "Here it is ..." (p. 6).

Along with this anecdote, the article's headline emphasised a sense of enigma by purporting to introduce: "The Man We Never Knew" (p. 6). Stephens's article indicated a disruption in the heroic tradition of remembrance.

The Sun-Herald columnist, Peter Robinson (1995), compared this apparent indifference with the wartime funeral tributes to Curtin. Robinson repeated an anecdote that he had heard from Curtin's rival prime ministerial predecessor, Arthur Fadden, who had been a pallbearer at the funeral with Robert Menzies, who became the nation's longest-serving prime minister. Robinson (1995) recalled in a colloquial style in *The Sun-Herald*:

Artie Fadden later told how Menzies ... had said: "I don't want all this fuss when I go, Artie."

"Don't worry," replied Fadden. "You won't get it" (p. 30).

Robinson likened the fading memories of Curtin to the erosion of civility. He wrote that Australia is "increasingly losing a grasp on the essential dignity which a proud and intelligent nation should intrinsically possess—a dignity which was possessed by the Australia of a John Curtin (Australia's wartime leader)" (1995, p. 30). The anecdote suggested Rüsen's (2004) view of promoting a sense of historical consciousness that aids in comprehending past actuality to grasp present actuality.

Other news narratives emphasised a leader's compassion in everyday wartime life. Stephens (1995c) recreated the "bringing back the troops" story to show empathy for Curtin. Stephens (1995c) recalled Curtin's rebuke to critics at the time by saying, "It's all right for you fellows but I haven't slept for a week and there are 10,000 of our troops on the water without any protection" (p. 27). In a brash style, television journalist Bill Peach (1995, p. 36) commented in *The Sun-Herald* that "Australia never stood on its own feet" until Curtin's defiance of Churchill. Another television

journalist, Peter Luck (1995), colloquially opined in *The Sun-Herald* that Curtin's alliance building "saved our bacon" (p. 5). Local sports anecdotes appeared in *The Age*, based in Melbourne, Victoria, where Curtin had been a young football player. *The Age's* Martin Blake (1995) recounted that Curtin asked football coach Jack Dyer (aka "Captain Blood") to help his nephew Claude, also a footballer. Curtin reportedly advised Dyer: "Keep entertaining the people and we'll support you" (Blake, 1995, p. 1). *The Age* columnist Bob Millington (1995) referred to the footballers' chant: "Here comes John Curtin, who is saving Australia. Win this one for him, boys!" (p. 2). The popular expressions of local compassion aimed to orient a growing historical consciousness of heroic nationhood.

Recreating a heroic ideal

The exemplary tradition was reconstructed when national and regional news outlets reported on the conservative Australian Liberal Party Prime Minister Scott Morrison's invocation of Curtin's name as representing nationhood ideals (Lang, 2020; Osborne, 2020). Morrison (2020) indicated that the memory of Curtin transcended political rivalries during the seventy-fifth anniversary of the war. Recalling a mood of self-sacrifice, Morrison declared:

Wartime prime minister John Curtin said, 'No one else can do your share.' It was a call Australians embraced. It was clear what was at stake. The story of World War II is the story of a generation standing up and giving all (p. 14).

Morrison likened the wartime experience to the pandemic by saying: "In our time, with our own struggles, we will draw strength from their example" (p. 14). Journalists strengthened this narrative by valorising exemplary Australian values, particularly in News Corp, often associated with conservative editorials at the time (Herald Sun, 2020; Walker, 2020). *The Australian* (2020, p. 19) accentuated a leading sentence: "Stoicism and a healthy nationalism saw us through the war." The writer asserted, "There is much to learn from the generation who celebrated VP [Victory in the Pacific] Day" (p. 19). Despite the historical anachronism, the exemplary narratives were more widespread across the news organisations.

Journalists also focused on a heroic story of Curtin's strengthened alliance with the US. *The Australian* journalists framed the event as a victory of diplomacy as he "unabashedly" and "unashamedly" looked to America (*The Australian*, 2020, p. 19; Walker, 2020, p. 14). *The West Australian's* Malcolm Quekett (2020) portrayed a memorable speech by recalling: "Prime minister John Curtin ... delivered his famous address to the nation: 'I make it quite clear that Australia looks to America, free of any pangs as to our traditional links or kinship with the United Kingdom'" (p. 42). In fact, he had written these words for Sir Keith Murdoch's *Herald*, which had concerned Churchill. Journalists magnified a heroic Australian conquest, glossing over previous debates.

News Corp journalists showed Curtin's exceptionalism by retelling the story of how he valiantly "crossed" Churchill to help Australian troops (Conversations, 2020; Kieza, 2020; Moonah, 2020; Prismall, 2020; The Herald Sun, 2020; Walker, 2020, p. 14). The narratives evoked a shared national identity across the generations and, in the words of David Lowenthal (1985), a unifying web of retrospection. Journalists drew a parallel between Curtin's challenge and an extraordinary contemporary crisis to recommend that readers adopt a similarly determined spirit. As Loia (2019, p. 502) comments, there must be something "exceptional" within an anecdote to make it "exemplary". *The Courier-Mail's* Grantlee Kieza (2020) led a column with dramatic flair by writing: "As a nation we have faced times of Armageddon before and survived and while the days ahead may be dark we shall do so again" (p. 56). The invocation of a past hero encouraged present-day readers to succeed. Kieza (2020) recounted:

Curtin rallied troops on the ground and reached out to touch the hearts of all Australians, telling them not to panic but to be resilient ... He knew tough times and Australians believed him when he said this nation could get through its many

hardships ... just as we saw off our enemies in the past, Australia will conquer this one as well (p. 56).

The Herald Sun (2020) provided an unnamed editorial that emphasised a heroic story to predict happier times: "During those years of horror and heroism, Australia faced a crisis which demanded steely resolve and relied on unity and sacrifice to survive" (p. 28). Contemporary journalists emphasised a wartime success story rather than a controversial political struggle. As Kitch (2018, p. 180) has remarked, "forgetting is more of a choice, a refusal or reluctance to 'see' certain disturbing occurrences". Reporters reconstructed a story of decisive action to reaffirm national values.

Celebrating public life

These exemplary news narratives did not only focus on battle victories and great moments. In the search for the exemplary, ABC and Nine Entertainment journalists also used anecdotes to signify the comforting appeal of Curtin's leadership (Stephens, 2020; Wareham, 2020). As Loia (2019) has remarked: "Without some normal traits the anecdote would be fully exception and it would interest us as a curiosity and not as an example" (p. 502). *The Age's* Andrew Stephens (2020) focused on Curtin's compassion for nurses who were killed during an enemy attack on the Australian hospital ship *Centaur* in 1943. Stephens (2020, p. 4) assured readers: "Curtin promised to avenge the deaths". The article provided a rare glimpse into wartime publicity by referring to the government posters with the slogan, "WORK SAVE FIGHT and so AVENGE THE NURSES!" Stephens portrayed an "impassioned" Curtin upholding an honourable code (p. 4). Other journalists focused on his public appeal for civic duty by using the darning needle as a weapon of war to mend old clothes; and to "dig for victory" by cultivating vegetable gardens (Johnson & Nobel, 2020; McKernan, 2020). The homespun narratives included a headline praising the virtues of "Rations, darning, not complaining" (McKernan, 2020, para. 1). Contemporary reporters reconstructed community-oriented rhetoric of collective compassion, self-sufficiency and backyard patriotism.

News Corp narratives also relied on historians and leadership reminiscences as sources. Writing for *The Australian*, historian Geoffrey Blainey (2020) referred to Curtin's willingness to continue wartime football matches. He added, "In no other nation has spectator sport been so influential for so long" (p. 24). *The Examiner* provided a headline that poetically referred to Curtin's leadership in both politics and football: "O captain, my captain: Why we need leaders to show us the way" (Wightman, 2020b, para. 1). The newspaper commentator, Brian Wightman, opined (2020b, para. 15): "Australia's most celebrated wartime leader, Prime Minister John Curtin said: 'Captaining the government of a nation is a bit more exacting than captain of a football team. I know for I have done both'". *The Australian* journalist and author, Troy Bramston (2020, para. 15), portrayed a friendship between Curtin and rival Menzies with the use of a reminiscence: "They often met for a cup of tea. They wrote letters in glowing terms about the support they gave each other." The narratives presented everyday experiences that encouraged readers to identify with a unifying national character.

Conclusion

This article reveals journalists' deep involvement in creating and reconstructing public memories of a national leader. To return to Halbwachs (1950), journalists' rewriting of the memory of Curtin resembled the work of retouching a portrait, in which "[n]ew images overlay the old" (p. 72). Wartime journalists helped to craft popular representations that promoted a plain-speaking common man. By the time of his funeral, journalists glossed over the controversies during his prime ministership to portray an exceptional leader. During the fiftieth war anniversary, Fairfax broadsheet and tabloid journalists disrupted the popular memories by focusing on an abandoned hero as part of a labour-oriented movement to revive patriotic remembrances of a prime minister

representing exemplary Australian ideals. Turning from the "forgotten hero" narrative, contemporary journalists smoothed over the wartime political rivalries to evoke Curtin's name as an ideal model of the times. News Corp accounts privileged memories of an exemplary individual's uniquely national story as part of a patriotic agenda to motivate the current generation during a crisis. ABC and Fairfax groups reconstructed popular wartime tabloid narratives of a man of the people to encourage communities to draw upon his example for everyday living.

Signifying historical authenticity, the journalists contributed to shaping and sustaining an Australian story of an undaunted hero by promoting this as a practical exemplar for the present times. Some narratives also served to indicate Rüsen's (1987, 2008) cautioning against overestimating a sense of continuity that would discourage critical examination of the past. Mostly, journalists' reporting signified their role in orienting the public for the future task of nation-building, suggesting Pöttker's (2011) view of an increasingly important function of journalism. They used the exemplar of Curtin to popularise a sense of shared destiny to achieve a victory over adversity. Their ongoing, changing work revealed their efforts to promote a renewed historical consciousness of a leader that would encourage national aspirations for a hopeful future.

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