The Information War and the Future of France: Censorship and Propaganda under the Vichy Regime

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Censorship and propaganda, while fundamentally different, are also intimately related. Both are about control of information, but censorship is about the suppression of undesirable information whereas propaganda is the promotion of desirable information. Because of this, censorship and propaganda have a complementary relationship: censorship creates an information vacuum which propaganda can fill. Censorship without propaganda allows the vacuum to be filled by rumours. Conversely, propaganda without censorship runs the risk of being drowned out among the myriad other voices proclaiming their messages. The duality of censorship and propaganda lies at the heart of the story of information control in Vichy France during World War II. Further complicating the story, there was not only one France; there was also the France of the German occupation and the free France in London and the resistance. The Vichy government had a vision for the future of France, yet struggled to retain control of that future. The information war between Vichy and the Allies was a fundamental part of the struggle for this vision. In the end, the Vichy regime lost the information war. Their failure to gain control over public opinion derived from the blunt uniformity of Vichy censorship and propaganda, especially when alternative sources of information, especially British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio programs, revealed the lies for what they were.

Setting Up the Vichy Propaganda Machine

The early days of information control in the Vichy regime were hopelessly disorganized. The fledgling regime was struggling to find its footing, and there were more important issues at hand than censorship. The Vichy head of state, Marshal Philippe Pétain, did not simply want to preserve a piece of the Third Republic, which he in fact blamed for France's humiliating defeat by the Germans. Rather, Pétain and his supporters sought to rebuild a more traditional France. Pétain's national revolution vilified Jews, freemasons and communists as the cancer that had corroded the Republic, and glorified traditional images such as the mother, the hardworking peasant, and the devout Catholic. Reflecting these new values, the motto of the Republic, "Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité," [Liberty, Equality, Fraternity] was replaced by "Travail, Famille, Patrie." [Work, Family, Country.]¹ However, there was a competing current of thought within the government which was more radically collaborationist and which wanted to turn Vichy France into a National Socialist state in the image of the Third Reich. Both sides maneuvered for positioning within the government and for control of censorship and propaganda in the first few months of the Vichy regime. The ultra-collaborationists lost out in the short term, and many relocated to occupied Paris where they worked closely together with the Nazis.²

The division of censorship and propaganda also contributed to the confusion. On the one hand, the Ministry of Information was directly commanded by Pierre Laval and his cronies, whose objective was to control negotiations with Germany over the future of France.³ From July 1940 to February 1941, newspapers received fully 300 directives dictating acceptable and unacceptable content, reflecting the lack of a unified strategy for the control of information.⁴ On the other hand, Pétain and his cabinet controlled independent propaganda agencies such as the *Amicale de France* in order to promote the ideology of the national revolution. Laval's dismissal from his posts on December 13, 1940, was prompted by fears over his monopoly on communication with the Germans and his desire to extend his control over information.⁵

While the creation of a General Secretariat for Information on October 28, 1940 marked a first step towards the centralization of censorship and propaganda, it was only with the arrival of Paul Marion in February 1941 that a coherent state propaganda machine was created. The German ambassador Otto Abetz, who wanted more ultra-collaborationists in the Vichy government, strongly approved of Marion's promotion.⁶ Marion understood that propaganda was a crucial element of modern statecraft in an authoritarian regime: "La propagande était le levier décisif dans un siècle, dominé par l'irruption des masses; il revenait à des minorités agissantes d'éclairer voire de manipuler le peuple incapable de se faire par lui-même une opinion." [Propaganda was the decisive force in a century dominated by the eruption of the masses; it fell to the vocal minorities to enlighten and even to manipulate a people incapable of forming an opinion on its own.]⁷ His strategy, essentially, was to envelop the French people in an ideological cocoon and guide them towards a new France, one which mobilized nationwide in support of the German war effort.⁸

The Vichy propaganda machine under Marion had four departments: the press, propaganda, radio, and cinema. Control of the press was at the core of Marion's strategy, and he used every tactic available to achieve such control. Censorship directives and the *notes d'orientation*, which explained the purpose of government policies, formed the basis of pre-publication information control. Post-publication, Marion used a carrot and stick approach based on his control of paper supplies and subsidies. Newspapers which disobeyed directives ran the risk of losing crucial government subsidies, seeing their access to paper reduced, or even being shut down altogether.⁹

However, the press mostly complied with the directives issued by Marion. In fact, they even ignored measures taken by the Prime Minister, François Darlan, which allowed newspapers to discreetly critique domestic policy. As Lévy and Veillon remark: "le conformisme ... se dégageait de ces journaux." [Conformism ... emanated from these newspapers.]¹⁰ Readers could not fail to notice the uniformity of news, especially given that even the way in which it was presented was strictly controlled. Censorship directives dictated the size of headlines or the presentation of photographs, and even the content of the articles from different newspapers told essentially the same story.¹¹

The general conformity of newspapers with censorship directives disguises a subtler resistance to the Vichy regime by a few newspapers, especially as the public wearied of its abuses. Left-wing newspapers such as *le Progrès de Lyon* and *la Montagne* led this effort, often through small gestures of disobedience. For example, they dropped the provocative sub-heading "Anglais et communistes d'accord pour assassiner la France," from the edition of June 3, 1942. Even small acts such as this one could have important consequences, and both newspapers were immediately suspended – though an outcry on the part of the press federation led to a temporary suspension.¹² The Christian newspaper *La Croix* chose another path of resistance. While it followed the directives issued by the Ministry of Information, the paper clearly indicated that the information had been provided by the government by prefacing the articles with the phrase "On nous communique." [We are informed] As for the *notes d'orientations*, the newspaper signed them with the initials NC, for 'note communiquée'.¹³

The blatant uniformity of news content along with the small acts of resistance of some newspapers meant that the French public was not fooled. The availability of alternative news sources only affirmed the belief that much of the news they read was in fact state propaganda. Neutral Swiss newspapers with a reputation for objectivity circulated widely in France, and there was a stunning 150,000 copies being sold per day in April 1941. Even once these foreign newspapers were censored at the border later in 1941, other sources of information continued to challenge the official version of events – especially the BBC and Free French radio broadcasts from London, which could not so easily be stopped at

the border.¹⁴

The First Years of Radio Propaganda

The emergence of radio as a means of communication radically altered the nature of propaganda in World War II. Nazi Germany had pioneered the use of radio as a tool for propaganda, with Joseph Goebbels, the Nazi Minister of Propaganda, leading the way. German radio broadcasts into France in 1939-1940 had three strategies: “le mensonge, la seduction et l’intimidation.” [lies, seduction, and intimidation.]¹⁵ The spread of the radio in France lagged behind other countries, but there were still five million households with radios in the nation. The Vichy regime had inherited an apparatus to control radio from its predecessor, but struggled to turn it into an effective tool for propaganda. When Germany occupied the north of France in 1940, it reserved the most powerful radio antennas for its own use. The Vichy government was left with a patchwork network of smaller antennas. State radio broadcasts in late 1940 were rather dry, and consisted mostly of news bulletins, ministerial periodicals, and the like. In 1941, the regime instituted new artistic and cultural programs to support its national revolution. Experienced broadcasters such as Jean Nohain were asked to put on variety shows promoting the values of family, work, and effort. While the large number of artistic studios ensured a wealth of content, their geographic dispersal hampered efforts by the government to create a unified propaganda on the air-waves.¹⁶

By contrast to the dryness of Vichy radio propaganda, radio broadcasts by the BBC and the Free French were highly energetic. They had to be, since radio formed the sole tenuous contact between French expatriates in London and the French people after Britain’s expulsion from Dunkirk in June 1940. The first order of business was to attract an audience and no one was sure whether the demoralized French population would listen. The BBC and its team persisted, however, by using songs, skits, sketches and the like to catch the attention of the French public. One slogan, for example, was: “Radio Paris ment, Radio Paris ment, Radio Paris est allemand.” [Radio Paris lies, Radio Paris lies, Radio Paris is German.]¹⁷ Nor did the Free French shy away from bad news and difficulties: when the London Blitz was at its height, the BBC parodied a song called *Boum* by Charles Trenet.¹⁸

In the context of a propaganda war, reporting the difficulties that the Allies faced in the first few years of the war may seem counterproductive. But it was a crucial part of the BBC strategy, which built its credibility by telling the truth. In part, the strategy of truth was dictated by the need to maintain democratic principles despite the pressures of total war. However, as Colonel Maurice Buckmaster, the head of the French section of the Special Operations Executive, later wrote: “Nous avons besoin d’instaurer une confiance totale dans la BBC ... afin que, le moment venu, les patriotes français acceptent, sans questions ni murmures, toute directives qui serait lancée sur les longueurs d’ondes.” [We needed to inspire total confidence in the BBC ... so that, when the time had come, French patriots would unquestioningly accept any orders transmitted over the radio.]¹⁹ As early as the spring of 1941, the BBC campaign to spread ‘V’ for ‘Victory’ in France had already achieved some success.²⁰ The Vichy regime tried to ban listening to the BBC in public as early as October 1940, and in private by October 1941. The bans were utter failures since Vichy France lacked the capability to effectively jam radio waves, and even German jamming efforts seem to have been ineffective. It is estimated that by 1944, 70% of French households with access to radio were regularly listening to the BBC.²¹

Censorship and Propaganda under Total Occupation

The Vichy regime had been slow to realize and use the potential of radio as a means of propaganda. Its early efforts at radio broadcasting produced tedious programs, and attempts to enliven the

French national radio with artistic programs had met with limited success. The leaders of the Vichy government and its Ministry of Information were men of the old school for whom the primary objective of censorship and propaganda was control of the press rather than of the airwaves. The return of Pierre Laval to power in April 1942 marked yet another turning point in the direction of Vichy propaganda, though his propaganda strategy continued to focus on the press. Laval abandoned Marion's policy of enveloping the French people in a propaganda cocoon; instead, as he had done before, he sought to control the press in order to shape public opinion in support of his foreign policy, which tried to preserve the independence of Vichy France by collaborating with Germany.²²

While the objective of the Ministry of Information changed, the system put in place by Marion essentially did not. Laval inherited a much more effective system of censorship and propaganda than the one he had left behind in December 1940. He began to place his allies in key posts within the state apparatus. Paul Creyssel, for example, was made minister of Propaganda in January 1942 at the expense of Paul Marion, who was gradually marginalized within Laval's government. More important to Laval's strategy was René Bonnefoy, the Minister of Information, since he exercised control over the press. Bonnefoy's powers were greatly expanded by his control of the Office Français d'Information, which was in charge of news dispatches. This enabled him to select only the dispatches favourable to the Vichy government and send them to the newspapers.²³

The year 1942 witnessed great changes come over Vichy France. Laval's return to power in April was one of them, but even more crucial were the Allied invasion of North Africa and the German occupation of Vichy France in November. The Allied invasion sparked new hope among the French population, and effective censorship and propaganda became critical for the Vichy government. There was zero tolerance for even the small acts of resistance by newspapers such as *le Progrès de Lyon*. On the November 11, 1942, the censors at the Ministry of Information sent *le Progrès* an ultimatum along with the usual directives: follow instructions to the letter, or be shut down. The next day, *le Progrès* appeared in newsstands without the required article, a piece whose subject was the supposed threat of annexation by the Americans. In its place was a farewell address to the readers of the paper. *Le Progrès de Lyon* was not alone in its choice: *le Figaro* and *le Temps* both voluntarily shut down in November 1942 in protest of excessive censorship. Another newspaper, *Paris-Soir*, also chose to shut down its operations, but the government threatened to send the entire team to work in Germany if they didn't resume publication. With no other choice, the paper continued to publish, but deliberately relegated all pro-German news to small print.²⁴

Not all newspapers tried to shut down after the German occupation of Vichy France. *La Croix* continued publication, believing that the Germans could not cripple the French press any more than the Vichy collaborationists already had. Furthermore, shutting down would leave only the collaborationist newspapers in charge of news. The editor-in-chief of *La Croix*, Pierre Limagne, remarked: "Mieux vaut tenir le secteur." [It's better to hold course.]²⁵ Anti-German but pro-Vichy newspapers such as *l'Action française* also continued to publish in the hopes of creating public support for Marshal Pétain, who they saw as the defender of a free France against Germany.²⁶

Nonetheless, the swell of opposition that the Vichy state faced from newspapers in late 1942 revealed a growing problem with the state censorship apparatus. Newspapers were flooded with censorship directives and *notes d'orientations* to the point where the content and presentation of the entire newspaper was uniform, rather than just a few articles. In January 1943, René Bonnefoy, the Minister of Information, took steps to reduce the quantity of directives. He proposed a contract between the government and the newspapers which allowed the latter much greater freedom over the presentation and

layout they could use, and a small degree of flexibility in their interpretations of the news sent by the Office Français d'Information. In exchange, however, the government would essentially gain control of the editorials in order to explain and promote government policy. Only a few newspapers rejected Bonnefoy's contract. Those that had most strongly resisted Vichy censorship had already shut down with only a few exceptions, and the lure of steady access to paper supplies helped reticent publications overcome their reservations. One notable exception to this submission was *Paris-Soir*, which proceeded to shut itself down for good in May 1943. *L'Action française* also refused, on the grounds that it perceived the new measures as harmful to the interests of Marshal Pétain, but the majority of the press gladly signed the contract with Bonnefoy.²⁷

Censorship directives ceased, but the *notes d'orientations* continued to hammer out the position newspapers should take.²⁸ Under the cover of easing censorship, Bonnefoy's contract with the newspapers actually increased the power of the state propaganda machine. Flexible coverage and presentation of news was intended to give the illusion of a free press while the editorials now expounded Laval's policy towards Germany – which was exactly what Laval had always wanted from them. The illusion of a free press was a feeble one, and the Ministry of Information did not hesitate to interfere more directly with the press when the issue at hand was vital, such as the Service de Travail Obligatoire (STO). The STO was a program announced in February 1943 that sent French workers between 21 and 23 years old to work in Germany. Despite their newfound 'freedom', the press all reported the creation of the STO in the same terms, implying that strict censorship directives had been issued on this occasion. Even without state interference, newspapers generally satisfied themselves with parroting the information and position provided in the *notes d'orientations*, undermining their effectiveness as a tool of propaganda.²⁹

The Escalation of Vichy Radio Propaganda

Despite Laval's disinterest in the radio – he aborted a project to combine all regional radios into a nationwide state radio network – his return to power coincided with marked improvements in Vichy radio propaganda.³⁰ Responsibility for the radio news broadcast was transferred to the Ministry of Information. During its difficult beginning, Vichy radio broadcasts suffered from a lack of truly charismatic orators. In 1942, two radio presenters in particular began to distinguish themselves: Paul Creyssel and Philippe Henriot. Their styles were worlds apart: where Henriot used invective, sarcasm and passion to stir up popular feeling, Creyssel spoke with reasonable arguments, addressed opposing views and warned against the dangers of blind sentimentality.³¹

The revived radio propaganda apparatus of the Vichy state was still essentially secondary to the press in Laval's scheme of information control, and largely focussed on the same issues. The STO and its predecessor, the Relève (a voluntary work exchange program), were an important focus of radio propaganda. When the Relève was in progress during the summer and fall of 1942, the Ministry of Information hoped to increase citizen participation in the program by portraying it in a positive light. The programme *Radio Nationale* presented reports which described the departures from train stations, and interviewed workers who had returned.³² These reports were undoubtedly fabricated, because the immense unpopularity of the Relève eventually forced the Vichy government, at the instigation of the Germans, to institute the mandatory STO.³³

Despite a better use of radio as a tool of propaganda, its potential continued to be limited by competition from cultural and artistic radio programs. In 1943, cultural programs represented fully 55% of airtime, whereas propaganda represented only 25% of airtime. The Vichy state believed that state radio also had an important cultural purpose. Nonetheless, even primarily cultural shows could be serve

political objectives as well, with the possible exception of music. For example, Vichy state radio dedicated several shows to French history and heritage, such as “Connais ton pays” [Know your country] or “Les vieilles pierres de France” [The old stones of France].³⁴ These shows promoted a nostalgic view of the past that served the values of the national revolution, including those of hardworking peasants and attachment to the soil of France.

Finally, it was only when Philippe Henriot became head of the Ministry of Information in January 1944 that radio came to the fore of the Vichy propaganda strategy. As mentioned before, Henriot was a vehement and outspoken orator, and when given the chance to dictate his own propaganda strategy, he did not hesitate to declare a radio war:

Il s'agit à force de sincérité et d'impitoyable rigueur, d'arracher son masque d'hypocrisie et de duplicité en rendant coup sur coup à l'invisible ennemi. Et en réveillant dans les esprits et les cœurs ce que l'autre y avait endormi pour en faire des robots prêts à tous les crimes, de faire rendre gorge au mensonge et à la haine. Et de gagner à défaut de l'autre, la guerre des ondes qui, elle aussi, nous fait tant de mal.

[It's a matter of tearing away the unseen foe's mask of duplicity and hypocrisy by force of sincerity and merciless rigour and by trading blow for blow. And by rousing in the minds and hearts that which the other had numbed in order to turn them into robots willing to commit any crime, to make them spew lies and hatred. And by the other's failure, to win the war of the waves, which also causes us so much pain.]³⁵

This small sample of his rhetoric illustrates the energy and the passion that animated Henriot, illustrating why he was Vichy France's most successful and memorable propagandist.

When Henriot came to power in early 1944, the military situation was looking more and more unfavourable for the Germans and their allies. As a result, German pressure on the Vichy state intensified greatly, and the regime came under the control of ultra-collaborationists. Vichy France became a police state in the last months of its existence, with the Milice sowing terror in its fight against the resistance. Henriot was in charge of the propaganda war against the Free French at the BBC in London, where French public opinion was the prize at stake.³⁶

Henriot's policy derived from his admission that many French homes were listening to the BBC. Rather than try to implement ineffective and unenforceable bans as the regime had done earlier, Henriot believed that countering the broadcasts of the Free French directly would more effectively undermine their influence than just ignoring them. One of the most popular arguments he used was that the Free French had lost any legitimacy they might have possessed by abandoning France in its hour of need, to which they replied that it was better to fight for freedom from abroad than to collaborate with the enemy at home.³⁷

The radio exchanges between Henriot and the BBC were sometimes direct responses to a broadcast by the other side, and at other times were part of indirect exchanges which addressed broadcasts without responding to them directly. There were also exchanges which simultaneously addressed important themes of propaganda and the war, such as the resistance. Current events often formed the basis for these exchanges, as in the case of the battle between the resistance and the Milice on the Glières plateau in Haute-Savoie in March 1944. A few hundred resistance fighters had endured a siege by two thousand Miliciens for several weeks, and it finally took thousands of German troops to break the siege. Henriot virulently attacked the image of the resistance, labelling them cowards and communists, and blatantly falsified the role of the Milice in the victory. The BBC countered as best it could without reliable information in the immediate aftermath of the battle. When the actual details of the battle became

known in April, however, the BBC launched a four day campaign to reveal Henriot's manipulations and his lies. The duel over Glières was a resounding victory for the Free French and the BBC.³⁸

A veritable duel was being fought on the airwaves, and the excitement of following this blow-by-blow campaign accounted for the surge in popularity of Henriot's propaganda. The contest finally ended when Henriot was assassinated by the resistance on June 28, 1944. Despite his relatively short tenure as head of the Vichy propaganda apparatus, Henriot was the most memorable of his peers. As Chadwick remarks in her conclusion:

That Henriot was listened to as widely as he was in 1944, despite the appeal of the Free French and despite widespread negative public opinion on Vichy, is testimony to his impact as one of the most powerful personalities in World War II France.³⁹

Conclusion

In the end, the Vichy propaganda machine failed in its mission to control public opinion. It began rather inauspiciously with the chaos surrounding the power struggle between Laval and Marshal Pétain's cabinet in 1940, and it wasn't until 1941 that Paul Marion created a cohesive system of censorship and propaganda. Though on the surface it was effective in keeping locally and nationally produced information under its control and in promoting a unified message, these same features actually masked a deeper failure of the propaganda system which persisted throughout the war. The uniformity of the Vichy press betrayed government control of information. As the war progressed the French public became more and more skeptical of French news and radio. Instead, they turned to widely available foreign sources of information, such as the neutral Swiss press and especially the Free French broadcasts of the BBC. The Ministry of Information had failed to make use of the duality of censorship and propaganda; clumsy and ineffective censorship meant that Vichy propaganda did not exist in an information vacuum, but instead had to compete with alternative sources of information.

Radio was a transformative element in the information war, as it could freely pass borders and even enter directly into the homesteads of the French population. The Vichy regime lagged behind its foes in terms of radio propaganda, and when it finally found a worthy orator in the form of Philippe Henriot, it was already too late. Public opinion have long since turned against the Vichy regime, especially following the German occupation of all of France in November 1942 and the creation of the hugely unpopular STO in spring 1943. By 1944, the tide of war had turned, giving the Allies the decisive advantage. Allied military successes only reinforced the failure of the Vichy propaganda system, which had already long since lost the information war when they failed to suppress or even effectively counter BBC Free French broadcasts.

Notes

1 Denis Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944* (Brussels: Éditions Complexe, 1997), 20-22.

2 *Ibid.*, 40-41.

3 Due to the successive changes of government of the Vichy state, the exact hierarchy of ministries changed several times during the war. For reasons of simplicity, I have chosen to use 'ministry' and 'minister' of Information to describe the government department in charge of censorship and propaganda and its leader.

- 4 Claude Lévy et Dominique Veillon, "La Presse," in *La Propagande sous Vichy, 1940-1944*, ed. Laurent Gervereau and Denis Peschanski (Paris: Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, 1990), 165; Jean-Pierre Azéma, "La Stratégie en Matière de Propagande Déployée par l'État Vichyssois," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 108, no. 1 (1996): 60.
- 5 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 42-43.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 45.
- 7 The comma after "dans un siècle" seems to be a typographical error in the original text. Azéma, "La Stratégie en Matière de Propagande," 60.
- 8 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 46.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 10 Lévy and Veillon, "La Presse," 166.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 *Ibid.*
- 13 Marie-Geneviève Massiani, "La Croix et la Censure de Vichy (Juillet 1940 – Décembre 1942)," *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 184 (1996): 115-116.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 166.
- 15 Jean-Louis Crémieux-Brilhac, "La France Libre et la Radio," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome. Italie et Méditerranée* 108, no. 1 (1996): 73.
- 16 Hélène Eck, "La Radio," in *La Propagande sous Vichy, 1940-1944*, ed. Laurent Gervereau and Denis Peschanski (Paris: Bibliothèque de Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, 1990), 191.
- 17 Crémieux-Brilhac, "La France Libre et la Radio," 75.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Ibid.*, 77.
- 21 Kay Chadwick, "Across the Waves: Philippe Henriot's Radio War with the Free French at the BBC," *French Historical Studies* 34, no. 2 (2011): 328; Eck, "La Radio," 189; Crémieux-Brilhac, "La France Libre et la Radio," 73.
- 22 Azéma, "La Stratégie en Matière de Propagande," 61.
- 23 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 49-51.
- 24 Lévy and Veillon, "La Presse," 168.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*
- 27 *Ibid.*, 168-170.
- 28 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 51-52.
- 29 Lévy and Veillon, "La Presse," 170.
- 30 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 50.
- 31 Eck, "La Radio," 191.
- 32 *Ibid.*, 191-192.
- 33 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 33.
- 34 Eck, "La Radio," 192.
- 35 Peschanski, *Vichy 1940-1944*, 55.
- 36 *Ibid.*, 54-55.
- 37 Chadwick, "Across the Waves," 328, 349.
- 38 *Ibid.*, 343-344.
- 39 *Ibid.*, 355.