

OPINION AND POWER

This article is concerned with the general relations between power and informed public opinion in a Western democracy. It is based mainly on examples taken from France, where the separation between power and public opinion seems the sharpest, but is more or less applicable to all countries having the same political system. Parallel phenomena can be observed in most of the Western democracies, each of which could provide illustrations as striking as those the author has singled out.

I. BRIEF HISTORY

In order to estimate the present situation and the possibilities for its improvement, a brief historical sketch should first be given.

UNDER THE OLD REGIME

During the feudal or monarchical regime there was scarcely any need to inform the people; the king made the decision and the only condition for the smooth functioning of the system, apart, of course, from the personality of the sovereign, was his knowledge of the problems with which he had to deal. Moreover, such problems were, generally speaking, more political than economic: decisions had to be made in regard to a war, an

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin.

arrest, a marriage. Correct information was certainly necessary in order to evaluate these problems fairly, but it was relatively easy to acquire.

Little by little, economic development, particularly the progress of commerce, led the sovereign to take measures of an economic nature. During the eighteenth century the numerous problems became sufficiently important and complex for the king, who was unable to see and know everything, to delegate to his ministers responsibility for the regulation of public affairs, particularly for the handling of the most serious problem, that of the public budget, which had acquired considerable importance.

At about this time the English were already publishing their financial accounts, or at least the disbursements and income of the state. Necker, the French Minister of Finance, tried to follow this example by publishing the "Royal Accounts" of the 1781 budget. This publication was vigorously opposed by various people, especially the nobility, who did not like the disclosure of their expenses to the public eye. At the same time, a large number of privileges or favors were revealed. Thus exposed, the privileged classes came out against the idea of informing the public. From this time on, it became apparent that informing (or not informing) is a means of governing. The argument used against publication was that the people, or the totality of public opinion, did not need to know the state's finances, this being the king's concern and not that of his subjects.

In order to conceal the true reasons, it was also alleged that these accounts were too complicated for ignorant people to understand their essential elements—the same argument, somewhat renovated, that we meet today.

POLITICAL DEMOCRACY

We find the concept of the sovereign people in political democracy: since the people are or have become sovereign, it is they who make the decisions and who must be informed. This transfer of sovereignty follows with implacable logic; yet, during the two centuries in which it occurred, the question of informing the new sovereign remained in suspense.

At first, the ignorance of the electorate was not a matter of major importance. The "sovereign" was not educated. Political democracy functioned haltingly, but it did function. Many voters cast their ballots according to instructions given them by their employers or by the clergy. The need for extensive information about economic questions was far from being as great as it is today; in keeping with the fundamental principle of the regime, the state intervened as little as possible, permit-

ting natural forces free play and allowing an equilibrium to be established.

After the Congress of Vienna and the 1848 Revolution, freedom of the press became the most solid dogma of bourgeois democracy in Europe; its revolutionary origin allows conservatives to use and abuse it.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

However, before the first World War new signs appeared in various countries. The popular parties were better organized and special interests already tended to be more clearly articulated, to the detriment of the general interest or of poorly protected individual interests.

After the first World War public awareness grew. Simultaneously, the delicate arbitration of interests was instituted. The sovereign people, until now minors, undertook to exercise power themselves under the regency of the upper bourgeoisie. Elections became more honest, selection more spontaneous.

A system in which many economic problems are raised, in which a delicate arbitration often has to be exercised, cannot function properly without correct information. The parliament chosen by the people must be even better informed than the people themselves; theoretically, it should know everything. Government must try to achieve quasi-perfection.

TENSIONS AND SPLITS

In fact, what must be feared is not only the lack of information about the various cogs of the political machinery, but the difference in their degree of information. If the people are very ignorant, the parliament a little more aware, and the government very well informed, the system will not function properly. The government might want to take the measures which the situation requires but whose usefulness parliament does not appreciate. Or parliament may wish to take the necessary measures, but ones which the country does not consider to be in conformity with the demands of the situation. Because of these splits democracy will cease to function well. Or again, the government may override public opinion, which puts a strain on the political system; or it yields, to the detriment of the public welfare and the interests of all.

Of course there are normal, traditional, and, all things considered, tolerable tensions. For example, parliament, though well informed, is traditionally less mindful of the need for a balanced budget than is the govern-

ment. But this is less a question of information than of function. Parliamentarians know that the government is right, and they try above all to absolve themselves of responsibility by proposing increases in spending which they know to be dangerous. This procedure saves face for them in the eyes of the voters, or of certain voters. "We have proposed an improvement of your situation but the government has not agreed."

Yet in more concrete, more economic, and less arithmetical domains than that of the budget, the tensions that occur are greater and especially more serious because they can result in dangerous splits. We will cite a few examples from the experience of France, a country in which the separation between men and events is particularly clear.

BETWEEN THE TWO WARS

The great economic mistakes, even in foreign policy, were not the results of an error of doctrine, of the application of a false doctrine, or of erratic reasoning, but of an inadequate knowledge of facts and basic data. It was not because conservatives, socialists, or radicals happened to be in power that these economic mistakes were made. Ignorance and the poor use of industrial equipment was the essential cause. The men in power, and not only they—parliaments and public opinion—were ignorant of essential facts which were accessible to them but which had not captured their attention.

Three major mistakes were made between the two wars. The first had to do with German reparations, between 1919 and 1925. The myth of "Germany will pay" plus a strictly legal approach brought on the failure of reparations and the fall of the franc with its far-reaching consequences. Even among government officials there was no awareness of public opinion, of the mechanism of international transfers, nor of how France had been able to pay five billion francs in 1871.

The government that committed this grave error was conservative. Its general tendency made it more inclined than the socialists to punish the enemy. But its mistake does not reside in this doctrinaire outlook. In a Western democracy a rather broad basis is necessary, one that includes all possible tendencies. In any case, it is scarcely possible *in abstracto* to condemn a trend. What truly deserves to be condemned is ignorance of the facts. A conservative government, even a nationalist one, could have succeeded in its reparation policy if it had been informed and if it had relied upon an informed public. It was this ignorance which the historian must condemn and which was so harmful to the country. The British

were the most clear-sighted, perhaps because the reduction in commerce opened their eyes. But the United States, as regards the interallied debts, gave evidence of a similar ignorance about international transfers.

The second mistake involved the monetary question and the crisis. In 1934–35 the conservatives of the “gold bloc” did not realize the need to stabilize the franc in the same way that both the dollar and the pound had been stabilized. Underestimating the disparity between the price levels that prevailed in the gold bloc countries and those that obtained in the rest of the world, and ignoring almost completely, although they were obvious, the psychological reactions to the nominal value of the franc, successive governments persisted in their position—an orthodox one, to be sure, but one that was in fact indefensible. The exception was Belgium, the only country that possessed an *Institut de Conjonction*. The situation in France resulted in the eruption of the Popular Front in May–June 1936 and finally in a much greater devaluation than that which the conservatives had attempted to avoid. The mistake was all the more inexcusable because it had been made ten years earlier in England; the return of the pound to the gold standard in 1925–26 had precipitated several years of strikes, and it did not prevent a subsequent devaluation of forty per cent. Besides, it may have contributed to the great world depression.

Here again the conservatives erred out of ignorance. It is readily understandable that for a good many reasons they wanted to protect the value of money, and it is not this with which we reproach them. But they are to blame precisely for not having known, because of their ignorance, how to protect this money. The only clear-sighted man among them, Paul Reynaud, had no followers and he was overwhelmed by the reproaches that defeatism usually utters. Ignorance, in reality, gives rise to a series of sentimental reactions, perhaps inspired by a vaguely unconscious awareness of not being entirely in the right.

The third mistake, that made by the Popular Front government of Léon Blum in 1936–37, is even more striking. In September, 1936, Blum had to resign himself to the devaluation of the franc, although he personally was opposed to it. Following the devaluation, a quick economic recovery took place, comparable to the recovery that had occurred in other countries a little earlier. All the signs tallied: industrial production, exports, etc., improved rapidly while strikes diminished, in part because of seasonal factors. The average working week was more than forty-six hours and partial unemployment diminished rapidly.

Already the economists were figuring that pre-depression production

levels could be attained within a year. An achievement such as this would give the Popular Front an unprecedented victory—they meant, of course, a political victory. What the conservative governments had not known how to accomplish, a socialist government would succeed in doing, while continuing to work for social reforms.

But Léon Blum's government did not realize the magnitude of the recovery since its information came exclusively from rumors. It believed that the news which came from the industries themselves, or from the streets, was more reliable than statistics and general surveys. And, as always, rumor, by its distortions, underscored the poor state of affairs and the dangers. Not only did the government fail to exploit the ultra-favorable trend of which it was the beneficiary, but it decided upon a sudden reduction of working hours—forty hours a week with no exceptions allowed. Furthermore, the coal mines, a crucial section from the standpoint of recovery, were the first to be affected. In this way the government reversed the trend and put an end to a victory in the making. Signs of industrial production, of exportation, building, etc., culminated and declined, one after the other, bringing about the fall of the government.

Truth to tell, the government did not know how long an effective working week in the factories should be. It was doubtless unaware of the existence of established statistics on this question, compiled each month by work inspectors. Vaguely remorseful, Léon Blum in his memoirs categorically confirms his ignorance by citing matters that are entirely beside the point. So curious was this policy, so lacking in common sense, that a malicious humorist might see in it a deliberate attempt to provide an edifying example for future students of political science.

Here again, and this is the essential thing, there is no question of a doctrinal error. Reduction of the working hours is in accordance with the trend of history, and one can readily understand that a socialist government, more than any other, would adhere to it. But the point is that a socialist government, in the interests of its doctrine and its party, as well as for the good of the country, should have known the facts well in order to achieve the best results.

Once again public opinion was poorly informed. The word "unemployment" filled newspaper columns, but no necessary distinction was made between branches of the economy and skills. The employers themselves were not opposed to a measure which, while limiting production, would have reduced the amount of unsold goods. But they were against the increase in hourly wages that accompanied the forty-hour week.

Nothing, however, was done to inform public opinion. From then on the drama turned into tragedy.

During this same period similar illusions were rife in Republican Spain which also culminated in a military collapse. The leaders of Barcelona overestimated the potentialities of production and, in accordance with the trend of history, they took the appropriate measures—measures that were, however, unfortunate at that time and which greatly contributed to the victory of Franco.

In the United States the “New Deal” produced a somewhat analogous situation. From the doctrinary point of view each of us can approve or disapprove of these measures of intervention; but we must recognize that Roosevelt’s methods of intervention were not successful in reabsorbing unemployment and that they resulted in the sorry relapse of 1938. Here again, knowledge of the facts, of economic data, were lacking. The period following the war was a more fortunate one from an economic point of view, under the leadership of both the Democratic and the Republican parties.

THE DOCTRINE AND THE FACTS

Of the three major mistakes which, in France, marked this period between the wars, one was made by a socialist government, the other two by conservative governments. In all three instances the governments had to struggle against facts and were defeated by them.

On the other hand, during two periods—1926–1928 (Poincaré) and 1938–1939 (Daladier-Reynaud)—facts served as guides: in the first instance, against a segment of public opinion; in the second, against the unanimity of public opinion. In both cases the objective was achieved and success outstripped even the most optimistic predictions.

Let us again repeat: all the major political blunders were the result of ignorance and not of error in doctrine. Doctrine can tend either toward liberalism or toward state intervention. These are two different techniques; the realistic observer has no way of knowing how to choose between them. The government that finds itself in a given situation can, in effect, utilize either liberalism or state intervention. The important thing is to make proper use of the chosen implement, and to do so one has to know the route well, in order to achieve the best results.

POST-WAR FOOD RATIONING

During the post-war penury a new separation occurred between facts and

public opinion. In accordance with laws that normally preside over the spread of rumors, the most outrageously optimistic news circulated among the population. These rumors had to do with the abundance of food supplies and the stupidity of officials who persisted in food rationing in order to preserve their jobs.

In certain countries the government foresaw the danger (England and Switzerland) and was careful to give the public truthful information about the exigencies of the moment. In other countries, notably in France, this method was not continued after liberation of the territory. To return to France: were the authorities correctly informed? The answer as regards the government can only be in the affirmative; the food administration informed the ministers concerned and were sufficiently familiar with both food resources and the people's needs. It was only in 1949–1950 that a balance was more or less reestablished between supply and demand. But no government—and governments succeeded one another numerous times—undertook the task of explaining satisfactorily to the public, as had been done in other countries, such things as the need for rationing, the farm situation, and other circumstances that justified these measures, particularly the social and humane nature of this regulation. No effort in this direction was made and illusions triumphed readily over a purely repressive ruling. A whole series of deceptions was the result of this ignorance, as well as a premature removal of controls and a resultant long-term inflation. In countries where public opinion was given correct information the result was altogether different; although they were not enthusiastic about these organized deprivations, the people, as enlightened sovereigns, accepted them, while the French rebelled, as ignorant subjects.

A CERTAIN TYPE OF CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL ANARCHISM

To the extent that it does not go beyond the framework of a bourgeois, anti-statist anarchism, the movement currently observed in France, and which has had some repercussions in Germany and in Italy, is but the indignant expression of a resentment, more or less keenly felt in the heart of every Frenchman, against the state and the bureaucratic machine. This natural resentment is nourished by ignorance.

The most patent, the least contestable facts, are, actually, unknown to the French public. For example, it overestimates the number of civil servants, believing them to be more numerous than in other countries; it readily declares that they represent seventy-five or eighty per cent of the budgetary outlay (the correct figure is between fifteen and twenty per

cent). It also believes that the automobile pays a much higher fuel tax than does the railway system; that the standard of living was higher fifty years ago, during those “good old days”; that France is a “garden” which can produce enough for the country’s needs; that machines and automatic techniques will deprive everyone of employment, etc.

These current myths have finally been the cause, in certain circles, of a decidedly “reasonable” explosion, given the state of public information. Indeed, if all these facts were true one would naturally be extremely dissatisfied and prone to follow the leaders of this movement.

What is the result of this program? Let us rapidly review the political history of the last two centuries. We see that in 1789 the oppressed majority clamored for the convocation of the States-General and effectively obtained a transfer of powers that passed from the sovereign to the people as a whole.

In 1956 a segment of the people called for the convocation of these same States-General—and no one shrugged his shoulders—in order to overthrow the Assembly that emanated from the sovereign people. This proposal, reminiscent of nonsense stories and evoking the psychiatric setting, cannot be explained in terms of man’s stupidity, but rather by the fact that power but not knowledge has been transferred.

Once again we have cited illustrations taken from France, because they are more familiar to us, but these conclusions are valid for all countries.

II. THE POWER TO INFORM

INFORMATION IS AN AGENCY OF THE GOVERNMENT

Information is an agency of the government in the same way that the executive, the legislative, the judiciary, and the schools are agencies of the government, but instead of being placed within a specialized framework, as the laws stipulated, it was entrusted to private initiative.

This solution is mainly the result of a legitimate fear of an official information bureau, heightened today by the disastrous experiments of Hitler and Mussolini. Freedom of the press can be defended directly, it might be said, as the lesser evil. Actually, the system goes further than the classical division of powers, since it divides—fragments—power itself. The combination of majority rule and balances permits the hope that all the facts will, in the long run, be disseminated. There are so many conflicting interests at play that a useful fact will finally be communicated by someone.

The democratic solution of freedom of information, even more than

the solution of free enterprise, is based upon the law of probability and a sufficient fluidity. It is also the solution that scientific progress has adopted. Any historian is free to write that the Moors never penetrated into Spain, and any physicist may declare that the atom cannot be split. A scientist who might utter such a statement would not be prosecuted in a court of justice, but little by little, among the mass of divergent ideas, a narrower, more cohesive area of agreement would take shape; this is called scientific truth.

The intervention of the Stalinist government in the field of biology or astronomy is not calculated to induce us to abandon this erratic, pioneering method in favor of an official scientific truth.

But the problem is to ascertain if the fluidity is sufficient, if majority rule is successful in its curious police work and detecting capacity. In order to do this two conditions must be met: a) a large number of sufficiently powerful sources of information; b) the absence of systematic misrepresentation.

ON LARGE NUMBERS

There is complete equality in the power to inform, the defender of Western democracy will say. The press in particular is free. This means that tomorrow any individual has the right to establish a new newspaper in competition with the *New York Times* or the *Chicago Tribune* and to correct informational errors that these papers might have made.

Because of the magnitude of the necessary means, majority rule either does not materialize at all or tends to do so less and less. In the United States from 1910 to 1952, the number of daily papers was reduced by thirty-two per cent and that of weekly magazines by forty-four per cent. In France from 1914 to 1955, the number of dailies fell from forty-eight to eleven in Paris and from 269 to 123 in the province. In a great number of cities a quasi-monopoly of information subsists.

On the other hand, even an individual who is very anxious to be informed correctly is unable to read all the newspapers. This inability perhaps would not be of decisive importance and we would still be justified in speaking of the law of balances in the gamut if expressed public opinion was distributed more or less according to the classical mathematical laws of dispersion, with a strong central ascendancy. But, in fact, the power of money initially caused the balance to lean in one direction, and equilibrium was reestablished in certain countries only by an extreme counterbalance.

However, two extremes perhaps constitute an algebraic equilibrium, if not a political one.

SYSTEMATIC MISREPRESENTATION

Furthermore, private information admits of systematic distortions in regard to some subjects. Newspapers of divergent doctrines indulge in the same kind of distortions of fact in the hope of satisfying public opinion, or at least of not offending it. This attitude, more or less pronounced depending upon the country in which it manifests itself, ends by compromising the general welfare. Among historical examples we can recall that of food rationing, which we have just mentioned. No newspaper wished to announce to the public the unpleasant truth that food supplies were deficient.

Thus the relationship between information—the press in particular—and the public can be viewed as follows: a) The public has a preconceived opinion about facts, founded upon laws as yet imperfectly understood, but very rigorous. These are the laws of rumor, or oral information. b) The press and the organs of information of various political or doctrinal nuances do not dare to intervene too sharply in order to rectify the facts, for such frankness is always risky. Therefore a demagogy of information exists.

The publisher of a daily paper is subject to the public's control even more than is a member of parliament. His reelection comes up not every four or five years, but every day.

THE LIFE OF NEWS, RUMORS

Some event of special significance, or some particular fact, attracts the attention of observers who transmit the news to others. The transmission of what they have seen or heard is neither instantaneous nor accurate. Only a certain fraction of these facts is communicated and circulated. The others are still-born.

The recipient of transmitted news can in turn either communicate it to others, keep it to himself, or forget it. Some categories of news are destined to a rapid death while others are chosen for a strange fortune. And the choice of one kind of news or another is not made by sheer chance.

The transmission of news can, moreover, be deliberately and consciously distorted, or can even be twisted by an automatic mechanism that escapes not only the transmitter's awareness but also his memory. Further-

more, forgetfulness and non-transmission bring about a distortion of the totality of facts, as if a filter retained a segment of the informing substance.

Distortion and selection of news occur according to determined laws which, at least in certain domains, are beginning to be well known. Although they have a universal characteristic, these laws vary (at least in intensity and in rigor) according to countries and epochs.

In actuality, oral, word-of-mouth news is distorted more easily and speedily than news that is subject to a certain control; but the slanting of the distortion is the same. The attentive and impersonal observer considers the news which is in the process of being selected and distorted by imperfect reporting and he can, after repeated observations, figure out the laws that govern this selection.

To begin with, let us exclude simple and sensational news. For example, Stalin's death, or the declaration of war in 1914, was known almost immediately all over the world. Let us also exclude news that lends itself to drama or to humor and that is quickly exploited by the professionals. An instance of this is the news, in part inaccurate, of Mendès-France's fondness for milk, which was circulated throughout the Western world in less than a week.

Let us concentrate chiefly on the economic and social domain. Certain subjective judgments are pessimistic, others optimistic; in other words, they are distorted in different ways. Therefore this criterion alone cannot serve as a guide for us. But in any case, spontaneous deviations correspond to a common logic and can be summed up in a few major observations:

1. If material interests are involved, and they usually are, then spontaneous deviations take the direction, in economic matters, which best facilitate the protection of these interests.

When public opinion is called upon to assess the rise of prices, the estimation is greater than the actual rise: consumers are more numerous than merchants. The salaried employee has no interest in seeing the cost of living increase, but the cost of living being what it is, it is to his advantage to make the rise seem greater. The taxpayer who declares his income is surprised to find it so high when he receives objective information about it from his employers or his paymasters.

During the war and the accompanying penury, any news about waste or the abundance of food received astonishing credence even among the supposedly clearest-thinking people. Should one person confide to another that a factory transformed butter (French) into grease for tanks (German), the news would spread with amazing rapidity. An observer in

a good position to hear such a rumor would find that it was repeated several times, each time in a more exaggerated form and enlarged with fresh details.

On the other hand, bad news about the harvest did not travel far. Why this difference? There was no advantage for the French in waste, but it was pleasant to learn, after the fact, that there had been waste. Not only did this knowledge give a firm foundation to their dissatisfaction but it also provided some hope for possible improvement. To announce a poor harvest, on the contrary, was to warn consumers of a reduction in their rations. People rebelled and refused to communicate this kind of news or even to take notice of it.

2. When strong feelings are involved, spontaneous distortion that is designed to justify and reinforce these feelings takes place.

The believer sees or hears miracles that escape the notice of the neutral observer. The moralist sees vice everywhere. This reinforces his own feelings. The champion of the quantitative theory of money and his opponent are often so passionately attached to their doctrine that they discover facts that confirm their belief. Even the scientist readily finds experiments that bear out his personal theories if he is vain about their expression.

Whenever feeling is dominant, public opinion is inflected in such a way as to justify that feeling. Thus, in time of war, the news of atrocities committed by the enemy is readily accepted without proof; stories of atrocities committed by allies are not bandied about.

3. As regards facts that pertain to a collective cause, spontaneous distortions generally tend to strengthen the cohesiveness of the group and to justify the battle that it is waging.

During wartime we are given a flattering impression of our armies, of their position, of their successes, and of the rightness of our cause, since this reinforces our confidence and supports us in our constant internal conflict.

In the same way, members of various political parties see (and, all things considered, they *should* see) the facts from different points of view. The image they have in their minds is one that tends to reinforce their convictions, to justify the personal sacrifices that they are called upon to make in the interest of their cause, and to remove the kind of internal uncertainties that are to be dreaded.

4. Sincere, unconscious, involuntary deviations tend in the same direction as those that are effected knowingly and deliberately, in defense of the position adopted by the individual, whether it be a material, intel-

lectual, or affective one. (There are only rare exceptions to this general rule.)

5. When the transmission effected by a person takes place in response to a question asked, the distortion is not as pronounced as when it is spontaneous and quick. If a question is asked with great seriousness and ample time is given for the answer, then the distortion is slight.

Such questions as: "Are you sure of this? Have you been given information that confirms this?" stimulate thinking and may reduce distortion, particularly if they are asked calmly. On the other hand, if the transmitter is speaking to someone whose skepticism he anticipates, he often twists the news by buttressing it with details designed to overcome incredulity. Convinced himself, obviously not for rational reasons, he finds it useful to further the diffusion of "truth" by making it more credible and imposing. The "false Henry" contrived in order to accuse Dreyfus is an extreme example of this kind of behavior.

These diverse rules constitute only a general outline of the problem. They do not enable us to judge with certainty the way news is distorted in every case. Sometimes there are opposing forces at work, especially when interpretation is ambiguous. Each type of case must be examined carefully since the reporter's success depends upon a total absence of partisanship and, if this is possible, of personal motivation.

INFORMATIONAL DEMAGOGY

The term "demagogy" is a rather displeasing one because it has been used so frequently to describe efforts to combat and circumvent the most legitimate social reforms. It is entirely applicable, however, to certain forms of freedom of information and is more dangerous than political demagogy because it is more underhanded.

The reader (particularly if he wallows in a tide of rumors) is naturally inclined to accept certain kinds of information that are flattering to him or that give him a "pleasant" feeling. Of course, the feeling could, it is true, be anxiety, anger, or jealousy just as well as optimism or expectation of progress.

Journalists excel in finding and spreading the kind of information that is apt to nurture this sort of satisfaction—in distributing the drug that has become a necessity. This involves, of course, not an imitation of the truth but, on the contrary, a systematic selection of facts: a task all the easier to perform because usually by the time a myth reaches a certain number of people it also appeals to the informants themselves. Then the unconscious

assumes responsibility for this indispensable selection—a mechanism that leaves no room for remorse, or even for awareness of distortion.

Under such circumstances both the informant and the informed are nourished by their myth; it has to do with noble and edifying ideas (patriotism in wartime, for example), and this reciprocal communication contributes to the collective good. Under different circumstances, the myth puts one in mind of an infected sore which doesn't heal because the bandages applied are always contaminated.

TWO KINDS OF INFORMATION

The sources of information, newspapers in particular, can be divided into two categories:

a. Those whose objective is mainly commercial; large profits constitute their aim.

b. Those whose essential objectives are to defend a doctrine or party and to determine the attitude of the reader (the political vote, for example).

It is not always possible to make a clear distinction between these two categories. In any case, one of their common objectives is to increase the number of readers or listeners. Consequently, the fear of offending certain currents of opinion, of dissipating pleasant or necessary illusions, leads both kinds of newspapers to make more or less extensive "concessions" to the public. Some of these papers try to provide "pleasant" news in order to make a large profit. Others do so with an eye to inserting behind this flowery foreground the information or advice most likely to influence the reader in the desired direction.

Are newspapers full of untruths? Not at all. The contrary is more and more the case. We must now explain this paradoxical development.

THE TRUTH, PRINCIPAL FORM OF THE LIE

It is customary for ignorant people to refer sententiously to "statistics, that third form of untruth" and to think that they are being original when they utter this commonplace. Actually, all modes of expression, beginning with the word, naturally, are forms of untruth; this is so true that in slang the tongue is called "the liar." In reality, it is not instruments that lie or strike a false note but the men who make use of them.

Whenever a new mode of expression is invented, a new way of lying comes into being. Photography, even honest photography that is com-

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pletely devoid of trickery or retouching, can serve as a travesty of the truth; it can give a completely contradictory picture of the whole merely by resorting to the very effective and suggestive process of selection.

During the last few years the art of giving incorrect information has been perfected quite as thoroughly as the science of antibiotics or plastic materials. And there is no reason why persistent and well-paid effort should not achieve such a result.

The essential progress has consisted in avoiding, as far as possible, any positive untruth that might elicit a denial. Partial information, carefully arranged in a fine bouquet, enables the reporter to give his readers or listeners an impression of the whole that is very far removed from the reality. It also enables him to inspire in them precisely the attitude that he wants to see them take.

Thus, truth has become the principal form of the untruth. But into the mass of distortions that underlie apparent information the two objectives we mentioned above insinuate themselves. Accordingly, we have two categories of distortions:

Distortion to please the reader, for the purpose of conferring a benefit upon the informant (sale of the newspapers, for example).

Distortion designed to get the reader to adopt a certain attitude (elections, strikes, resistance to the government's fiscal policy, etc.).

THE POLITICAL AND PROFESSIONAL PRESS

Political objectives are never totally absent from the so-called informational press. The composition of the headlines and the layout in themselves constitute very effective means of pressure upon the reader who has only a limited amount of time and who cannot remain in a constant state of resistance. Reading, for many people, is but a relaxation from occupational or family tensions. With consummate skill the editor-in-chief selects and manipulates certain cleverly arranged texts and titles which are designed to lead the reader by the hand or, rather, by the eye.

A definitely political press addresses itself to a select, already engaged, sympathetic clientele. For such readers it is enough to present the shortcomings of other parties or other social categories in order to foster the desired emotions: solidarity founded upon jealousy, aversion, and sometimes purifying and liberating inspiration. All parties have some kind of liberation in mind.

For the last few years the professional press has become, if not more widespread, at least more violent. In an atmosphere of general dissatisfac-

tion, competition incites people increasingly toward violence, because a neutral attitude runs too great a risk of losing out. Information is carefully selected from a storehouse of interwoven facts in order to demonstrate that a particular class has been profoundly victimized by the social order; such a class is made to feel that in its distress it is lucky to have vigilant protectors.

A more direct propaganda, on a broader scale, was carried on in France during the last few years by an association called "La Libre Entreprise." Under the discreet leadership of large capitalist firms it published small pamphlets that were extremely well put together. They contained the type of truths that contradict the truth: truncated truths selected for the purpose of making the kind of profit that their authors wished to realize. Under the general title of *Voici les Faits* (Here are the Facts), the demands of the state and of social security were contrasted with the plight of their capitalist victims, particularly business enterprises.

Models of misrepresentation thanks to elisions, and widely circulated among businesses and small industries, these pamphlets undoubtedly constituted the principal ferment in the Poujadist explosion. And they were so much more successful than even their perpetrators had anticipated that suddenly they had to be toned down. They now began to discuss the need to protect the general welfare.

An even greater triumph and one that did not run the same risk was registered by the automobile industry. Its propaganda was so powerful, so inflated and clever that it not only succeeded in convincing those who, as victims, stood to gain, an accomplishment that is never very difficult, but in gaining acceptance as dogma among neutral or non-partisan elements. As a result, it was no longer possible to swim against the current. Whoever made an attempt to present the facts truthfully found no answering echo because minds were made up.

THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN MEN AND FACTS

Under such conditions the political struggle takes this form: a) On the one hand, there are the facts, an ensemble of concrete realities which, without imposing a particular solution, condemn a great many others. b) On the other, men on the whole are ignorant of these facts, even when, in their ignorance, they either agree with them or oppose them. This is true of most members of parliament.

Between the facts and public opinion are the statesmen—a dangerous position. The intervening space is so great that they cannot find any satis-

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factory solution. If they follow the people they get discreet warnings from important government officials or other qualified people that indicate the depth of the abyss they have been skirting. If they follow facts they draw away from public opinion and from parliament and risk never achieving anything. As for important government officials or other champions of the general welfare, they are called inhuman technocrats or impractical dreamers by the defenders of private interests. Confronted with these difficulties, statesmen maneuver. With great difficulty and a little dishonesty they compromise. Yet, although they do not satisfy the people, they are unable to avoid financial or other disasters. Recourse to decree-laws, that convenient political expedient, is decidedly anti-democratic; if nonetheless it occurs so often it is because the essential condition of democracy—a well-informed public—has not been achieved. Governments oscillate between anarchy and technocracy.

TO COMMAND NATURE

One does not command nature, the saying goes, except by obeying it—in other words, by following its laws. Anyone who sets out to build a dam over a torrent without knowing something about hydraulic laws will certainly run the risk of seeing the torrent win out. Similarly, one can train horses only by taking into account their particular instincts and nature. Anyone who believes he can train a lion or a tiger in the same way as he would a horse or a dog will endanger his own life.

And yet, it is always in just this confused fashion that men in political life behave in regard to the facts. If they ignore or wish to ignore the most patent facts it is because everywhere they see them manipulated against their interests by their enemies: people of opposing political parties, administration, government, etc. Inevitably therefore the battle between doctrines alone predominates. Facts are forgotten; disillusionment is inescapable.

If, in France, power were to be given for a period of from eighteen months to two years to a well-intentioned man who didn't believe he knew everything, he would be successful even if he were very mediocre, so imposing is the list of counter-measures enforced out of ignorance or because of a desire to benefit a fraction of the people at the expense of all. Apart from the temporary respite, the system would, of course, resume again all the sins of authoritarianism, for the path would no longer be so clearly outlined by the importance of present errors.

III. AN ATTEMPT AT A SOLUTION

One by one, we could take all the French governments of the last fifteen years (and probably the governments of many other countries as well) and examine them analytically in the light of our retrospective judgment. The answer is all too easy to predict: how could I have taken such or such a measure without having been overthrown immediately, to the very real relief of public opinion? This argument, fair enough, gives the answer to everything. And, in the same spirit, the member of parliament can point out that his anxiety to be reelected, for which he is reproached, merely constitutes his sense of loyalty to the people who voted him into office and whom he represents.

All of these governments, in any case, are frequently accused of having done nothing to keep the sovereign people informed, at least in regard to basic problems. Many of them did not even take the trouble or the pains to give a truthful explanation of the reasons for their actions. Fearful of losing support, they preferred to switch the conversation from political matters to other subjects. Many plans for revising the constitution were presented, as if legal texts were endowed with all the virtues. No really significant plan was advanced that included the organization of a service to provide correct information to the public, or at least to those thirty or forty thousand people who play an active political role.

It is true that as soon as one goes beyond the desire for broad communication between the social categories and for closer contacts with the realists, one encounters formidable difficulties. Official information, already replete with serious deficiencies, has, to boot, a recent past that is highly charged. As so often happens under similar circumstances, excess tends to lead to the opposite extreme. Fear of propaganda inhibits the most worthy efforts. And yet a government would not be compromised if it were to attempt to enlighten public opinion directly, suitably, while preserving freedom as a whole.

In France, documents published by the informational services are often well prepared, objective, and concerned with important matters. But they can be objective because they scarcely touch upon the great, crucial problems that divide public opinion. If Frenchmen need to be informed about Brazil, the official information service can do an excellent job; it is in no great danger so long as the French are not split into rabid partisans or enemies of President Kubitschek. But it hesitates today to broach serious problems and, given the state of its organization, it is probably right. In

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England, through the Treasury's information service relayed by the press and other means, the government was in communication with public opinion and was able, thanks to this communication, to solve exceptionally difficult economic problems.

Speeches, press communiqués, or the reporters' gallery are other means of providing information. A government or a minister hands out a communiqué to the newspapers, or reporters may be called in and informed about plans for dealing with a certain problem. This is really an unsatisfactory procedure and one that does not get us very far, because newspapers not only interpret words in different ways, but also distort them.

A DELEGATION OF POWER

Since purely official information runs the risk of rapidly becoming merely a means of carrying on personal propaganda, information of a public nature should be the responsibility of an organ that enjoys a certain autonomy, that remains, to be sure, under the jurisdiction of the public administration, but in an elastic way (higher committees, etc.). There already exist so many such organs for dealing with this kind of situation that it should not be too difficult to find a solution. There can then be some kind of public information service responsible for presenting facts as objectively as possible, in contrast to a private, multiple, and motivated informational service.

The difficulty will be not so much one of setting up the system as of finding competent personnel, because the qualities required seem in contradiction with each other; yet they must be united in the same persons. People who know one subject perfectly, especially economics, are rare. Furthermore, some are personally motivated, while others are so completely technicians that they cannot express themselves in simple and understandable terms.

ATTRACTIVENESS, CLARITY, AND ACCURACY

If the project, for example, is to publish small pamphlets on a particular subject—white books, let us say—such tracts will have no chance of being read, and those that follow will fare likewise, if they fail to meet the following requirements: a) attractiveness: the pamphlet must be readable. A scientific dissertation which no one reads will serve no purpose; b) clarity: Readers of average education must be able to understand it without making a great effort. Clarity is not the same thing as attractiveness—far from

it. Very attractive, enticing pamphlets can still lack clarity; c) accuracy: Facts must not only be free from any distortion; they must be presented as accurately as possible and without any evidence of partisanship.

These three attributes are, in fact, mutually exclusive. The technician will say that equations and accounts are never very attractive to look at but that they can be presented only in their crude state. This objection is not a decisive one; on the contrary, it tends to encourage greater effort to satisfy the three requirements as well as possible.

But we must admit that instruction in composition, as it is given in the schools and universities—still mindful of the vogue long ago enjoyed by eloquence—does not lend itself in any way to the training of appropriate personnel.

AN EXTENDED RIGHT OF REPLY

An extremely efficacious means, almost the direct opposite of censorship, would be a considerable extension of the right of reply. This right, utilized if a person is attacked, would be extended to the representatives of an informational service in order to reestablish some truth that has been badly battered or systematically concealed. An essential obstacle would be overcome: that of reaching the least-informed public.

Newspapers of the extreme right that take advantage of their readers by telling them that there are about four million functionaries would be obliged to publish, at the same time, a factual account of the precise situation in France and in other countries.

Similarly, newspapers of the extreme left that question the actuality of any social progress would be obliged to insert a whole list of incontrovertible facts about the changes that have taken place over the last two generations.

A farm newspaper of corporative sympathies would have to reserve space for a list of the public subsidies that were granted in various forms, as well as the exact cost of the distillation and processing of alcohol.

A "truth column" would represent such a departure that its adoption would meet with considerable resistance. The present-day newspaper owner has great power, the power to inform, which is also the power to deceive. This power, for which at times a high price is paid, would be considerably reduced by a law; the adoption of such a measure would not be achieved without difficulties. But in any case, these are the things that one should work for: the right of reply; hence, positive information.

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Utopia? Perhaps. The essential thing is that it would lead to progress in communication between men—an indispensable prerequisite of democracy.

THE STAKE IS A HIGH ONE

Obviously, an extended effort will have to be made before one can achieve such a result. We must remind ourselves that democracy as a whole is at stake. As long as public opinion is deprived of a sufficient knowledge of the facts, more and more violent disturbances will take place.

A play given at the Grand Guignol before the war stresses (with little exaggeration) the dangers that threaten Western democracies, and perhaps other democracies as well. In this play, which features a combination of truly dramatic circumstances (the postulate of the Guignol) a deaf-mute is depicted alone in an institution for the blind. Everyone in the building is blind, with the exception of the deaf-mute, who has just been brought there by his mother. No communication is possible between the deaf-mute and the blind people. What happens from then on? Hearing an unusual noise, the blind people believe that a thief has entered the room; the deaf-mute watches them as, with groping gestures, they assume hostile attitudes. He tries to protect himself and to escape. In so doing he touches a blind man who screams and calls for help. The play ends amid a general and confused free-for-all in the course of which a blind man, somewhat overexcited, seizes a knife and puts out the deaf-mute's eyes just as the victim's mother returns.

The remarkable thing about this play is that, once you have accepted the postulate, the unfolding of the action is inexorably logical. The spectator has the impression that a struggle to the death is inevitable between these individuals who can find no point of contact.

We need not go to such lengths. However, because men are not well-informed, we witness daily a serious lack of understanding that leads to bloody and costly insurrections. If they were well-informed, there would of course still be a conflict of interests, but this conflict would not assume a violent form. Violence is always an indication of cumulative incomprehension and insufficient information.

THE SLIGHTEST CONSTRAINT

No society can function without some form of constraint. The desire to escape any form of compulsion springs from the delusion of our times.

When a large number of individuals live together, social restraints are the inevitable consequence of their reciprocal relationships. One can envisage many forms of constraint: long ago there was the kind that was imposed by the seigneur: royal absolutism. And afterward, in the nineteenth century, there was the unadulterated constraint of competition: constraint of a new type, and very severe, since it eliminated men and brought death in its wake. Constraint in Communist countries is of still another order: that enforced by an enlightened political party that has all the power in its hands.

The least painful of all constraints, it would appear, is the constraint of truth—an enlightened constraint; in other words, fully enlightened control over public opinion.

Thus, Paul Valéry's definition would be given the lie: "Politics is the art of preventing people from becoming involved in their own affairs."

As long as facts are not divulged, as long as those who possess some of the power can keep their administration secret, there will always be abuses, crises, regardless of whether the system is collectivist or capitalist. What is expressed by purges in a Communist regime is expressed by scandals, insurrections, and profound waste in ours.

If everything were done openly, possible abuses would be eliminated automatically instead of being permitted to fester like abscesses. But even if we cannot immediately achieve this ideal system of government, we ought at least to struggle toward it since it would enable us to realize the more communal life demanded by the evolution of technology, without suffering the rigors of real collectivism. The more afraid we are of the truth, of the light, the more personal constraints we will have to endure.

A true, total, but as yet chimerical democracy obviously can develop only through the application of these principles; without attaining utopia we can, at any rate, take steps in that direction. They would be amazingly fruitful, and for the first time we could really talk about democracy.