Skirting the Minefield: 
Press Censorship, Politics 
and French Canada, 1940

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In a democracy with a strong tradition of freedom of the press, the imposition of censorship as a wartime necessity is rarely accomplished without considerable difficulty in its execution and in the definition of its limits.

In Canada during the Second World War, the difficulty of controlling the flow of news in the interests of the war effort was compounded because the French-Canadians were in general unenthusiastic about their country's participation in a war which many regarded as none of Canada's business. The imposition of censorship had to take into account not only the general curtailment of freedom of expression, but also the sensitivities of that part of the population which had previously shown its reluctance to accept coercive or restrictive measures during the First World War.¹

Although press censorship remained a controversial issue in Canada for the duration of the war, the most intense opposition to it was manifested in 1940, not merely because the precipitating cause was controversial in itself, but because it highlighted the most divisive domestic issue in the country, the different perception of national goals and purposes maintained by Canada's two 'founding peoples.' It was over an issue arising from the imposition of press censorship that this major cleavage revealed itself for the first, but not the last time in Canada.

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Censorship was accepted as an unpleasant, but unavoidable necessity by most of Canada's newspapers when war broke out in 1939. As Canada's leading daily newspaper, the Toronto Globe and Mail stated, 'Freedom of speech must be curtailed when the nation is at war. What use of fighting an enemy without if the enemies within are given a free hand?'² If the censorship imposed on the press was
accepted initially with little opposition from newsmen, it was due at least in part to the fact that the censors were themselves drawn from the ranks of journalism, and were presumed to understand the temperament of journalists and the demands of their profession. This is not to say that censorship was imposed on the press without friction, or that all newspapers managed to avoid clashes with the censors. Several newspapers were fined for violation of censorship regulations during the war, but none became popular martyrs to the cause of freedom of the press. Criticism of the censors was muted not only by the newspapers' agreement on the necessity of censorship, but also by their realization that ill-judged actions by the censors were due more to ignorance in the face of novel circumstances than any malicious desire to stifle the press.

The problem of imposing censorship on the press in the event of war had occupied pre-war governments in desultory fashion for almost a decade before the outbreak of the conflict. Despite the pleas of military authorities for greater government initiative in planning for war, secretary to the Chiefs of Staff Committee during the years 1934-37, apart from some work we did in National Defence on censorship, the governmental machine, in this respect, appeared stolidly to stand at dead centre. In 1936, Dr. E.H. Coleman, the under-secretary of State, was asked to discuss the question of future censorship with representatives of the newspapers, and the Canadian Press wire service was asked to recommend personnel to staff the offices of the official censorship in time of war. A list of suitable names was provided to the government less than two weeks before hostilities began. A growing sense of urgency on the part of the government, however, may be seen in the formation of an interdepartmental committee to deal with the subject of wartime censorship, in March, 1938.

When war broke out in Europe, the press of Canada was subject to censorship under two different sets of regulations. The censorship regulations brought into force on 1 September 1939 had been drawn up by Colonel Pope at National Defence Headquarters and were based on regulations drafted by the Committee of Imperial Defence for use in the United Kingdom and the Empire. Complaints of the severity of these regulations by editors and reporters led to their revocation the following January. The permanent foundations of press censorship for the remainder of the war were the Defence of Canada Regulations established by order in council 3 September 1939, under the legislative authority of the War Measures Act. The pertinent sections of the DOCR, while outlining the limitations on the material to be published by the press, did not specify the procedures to be used in carrying out the business of censorship. It was not until 13 August 1942 that the chief censor of publications had a clear
definition of his powers — which were limited to declaring that publication of a certain piece of information was not a violation of the DOCR. The censor had no power to punish errant publications: decision on whether or not a newspaper or magazine had violated the regulations was to be left to the courts.

For the first year of the war, the mechanism of censorship was an administrative mare's nest. Walter Thompson, publicity director for the Canadian National Railways, was named chief censor for Canada, and a Censorship Co-ordination Committee was set up with Thompson as its head. Separate press censors were appointed to examine English and French-language publications. Headquarters were in Ottawa, with a branch office in Montreal dealing mainly with French-language publications, and regional offices were established in Halifax, Toronto and Vancouver. A proposal that a censor should be placed directly in the press gallery on Parliament Hill was quickly rejected. All overseas publications entering Canada, except for newspapers, were examined by the chief postal censor. For Canadian publications in languages other than English or French, a special publications examination branch was established.

From the outset, it was decided that the censors should be experienced newsmen, acceptable to the press in their respective regions. At the local level, the system worked satisfactorily: at the centre, however, there was considerable confusion over the authority and responsibilities of the censors. The Censorship Co-ordination Committee designated as the overall authority for the entire range of censorship activities met only once in that first year of war, and then only to consider a report made by Colonel Pope to the pre-war interdepartmental committee on censorship. When Walter Thompson left for the Directorate of Public Information in December, 1939, Colonel Pope became de facto (and absentee) head of censorship until May, 1942, when Colonel Oliver Mowat Biggar took over the post and brought some system of order into the administrative tangle of censorship. Biggar remained in office until January, 1944, when ill-health forced him to hand over his responsibilities to Wilfred Eggleston, who had been chief press censor for English-language publications since early 1940.

The Defence of Canada Regulations provided an initial, and very broad, outline of censorship requirements and duties. During the six years of war, the censors explained and expanded on the Regulations by means of some 200 directives issued to editors and publishers. Depending on the urgency of the case, directives were sent by mail, or by telegram followed by an explanatory letter. Because such directives often became obsolete through the changing circumstances of the war, there were usually no more than 25 or 30 in effect at any given time. To keep editors abreast of the Regulations and their interpretations, the censors issued nine
successive editions of the revised directives during the war.

Only one of the more than 100 daily newspapers published in Canada was suspended from publication: the Toronto Clarion, a communist newspaper, was forced to cease publication in November, 1939. Eleven weekly and monthly foreign language publications were banned, mainly because they published communist propaganda, or opposed Canada's war effort. These usually reappeared under different names and were left undisturbed after the Soviet Union's entry in the war. Several newspapers were taken to court and fined for violations of the censorship regulations, but the penalties were light. The Vancouver Sun was fined $300 in 1942 for printing articles on West Coast defences after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Le Droit of Ottawa was fined $300 for an article critical of an Allied bombing raid on Paris, and Le Soleil of the Quebec City was fined $60 for premature disclosure of the sinking of an American steamer in December, 1944.

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One of the major problems faced by the Canadian censors during the first two years of the war lay in the fact that the United States was still neutral and the outpourings of its news media were not subject to wartime restrictions. As the first chief censor pointed out, trying to insulate Canada from propaganda sources in the United States was like trying to heat a Canadian house in winter if it had only three walls. There was nothing to prevent Axis information agencies reaching Canadian ears through American radio stations, even if it were possible to ban American publications from Canada outright, or place severe restrictions on cross-border travel by Canadians. To try to censor all incoming US publications would have been self-defeating: such action would have generated a publicity momentum of its own. There were, on occasion, objections to material in popular American magazines which might be construed as harmful to the Canadian war effort, or to national unity. Public demands for the banning of these publications were resisted by the censors, as occurred when the American economist, Eliot Janeway remarked in an article in Life magazine that the Canadian government was being 'blackmailed by the crudely pro-Axis French-Canadian minority (an ideal Nazi fifth-column).'

The chief censor for English-language publications commented:

Suppose this paragraph, or the page containing it, had been excised from all issues of Life magazine entering Canada. Would that have kept it out? No, because the very act of excision would have made the paragraph a juicy news item for the American press. The Associated Press,
the United Press, and the International News Service would have sent out an item to the effect that the Canadian censors had held up all shipments of *Life* long enough to delete a paragraph by Eliot Janeway, and it is safe to assume that all three services would have quoted the offending paragraph verbatim, by way of illustration. Canadian newspapers would have reported the holding up of the issues but, to be consistent, would have refrained from reproducing the offending paragraph. But would this self-denial have prevented Canadians from reading the paragraph? Far from it. The United States news and radio stations would have supplied the paragraph to the *New York Times*, the *Herald-Tribune*, the *Mirror*, and the *News*, the Detroit, Buffalo and Seattle papers, and to all those radio stations to which Canadians regularly listen...we should find for every original paragraph we had scissored out, ten or fifty new ones had sprung up in its place.26

Censorship over foreign news was made easier by the Canadian Press wire service’s near-monopoly on news from overseas. CP had been involved in the pre-war discussions of the government’s interdepartmental committee on censorship27 and had already shown its ability to shield Canadians from overseas news during the abdication crisis in 1936: Canada’s wire service sent out no despatches on the story to its subscribing newspapers, right up to the day of the king’s radio broadcast announcing his abdication — nor did it send out any of the American Associated Press cables to which it was entitled by reciprocal agreement with AP.28

The Canadian Press took pains throughout the war to ensure that incoming news copy from foreign sources complied with the censorship regulations.29 Sensitive material was transmitted over the CP wire with the “slug” *Hold for Censor Approval*. If approved by the censor, a message would be sent on the wire, authorizing member newspapers to run the story. If it was not approved, a “kill-note” was sent out to the teletypes. The wire services of the United States cooperated with the self-censorship of CP. Most of CP’s foreign news came through the despatches of Associated Press correspondents and these, of course, were examined by CP before they went on the wire. However, many Canadian newspapers subscribed independently to other wire services, such as the International News Service, and the *Chicago Daily News* and the *New York Times* wire services. Their reports were fed directly to Canadian newspapers without scrutiny by an intermediate agency such as CP. These services, apprized of the Canadian censorship regulations, would slug doubtful stories *Not for Publication in Canada.*30
It was inevitable, given the natural distaste of newsmen for restrictions on their work, that there would be loud complaints about the operations of the censors, even if censorship itself were recognized as necessary in a society at war with a ruthless and implacable enemy. In the confusion of the first year of the war, almost any action on the part of the censor could be criticized as heavy-handed and there were incidents in which the censor’s decisions were, to put it charitably, inept. It is not easy for a democracy’s press suddenly to deny its basic function and practice the arts of concealment at the command of government. There were occasions when the men at the top had little regard for the censorship which they claimed was indispensable to the winning of the war, and censorship rulings often flew in the face of military or bureaucratic inflexibility. Editors frequently complained of the ban on reporting troop movements, and the complaints came to a head when not even the Canadian government could maintain secrecy about the arrival of the Canadian First Division in Britain on 17 December 1939. The government had agreed to hold up announcement of the division’s arrival for two days at the request of the Admiralty, and had notified the press accordingly. Both newsmen and cabinet ministers were taken aback when Winston Churchill broadcast the news on the day of the arrival.31

The major cause célèbre of Canadian press censorship in the war was the arrest and internment of Montreal’s ebullient mayor, Camillien Houde, for counselling resistance to national registration. The arrest of the mayor led to the most serious criticism of the censors during the war, and served painfully to define their role as watchdogs of the press.

On 21 June 1940, parliament passed the National Resources Mobilization Act. Although it gave the government extensive authority to direct manpower as it saw fit, the Act contained the reservation that such authority could not be used ‘for the purpose of requiring persons to serve in the military, naval or air forces outside of Canada and the territorial waters thereof.’32 In Quebec, however, many were unconvinced by this reassurance and saw the NRMA as the first crack in the federal government’s solid pledge to avoid the imposition of conscription for overseas service. Among the doubters was Camillien Houde, who objected strongly to the use of Montreal municipal office buildings as centres for the registration of citizens under the NRMA. On 2 August, Mayor Houde made a public declaration of his opposition to national registration:

I declare myself peremptorily against national registration. It is unequivocally a measure of conscription, and the government recently elected last
March, declared through the mouths of all its political chieftains, from Prime Minister Mackenzie King to Premier Adelard Godbout of Quebec...that there would be no conscription under any form whatsoever... Parliament, according to my belief, has no mandate to vote conscription. I do not myself believe that I am held to conform to the said law, and I have no intention of so doing, and I ask the population not to conform, knowing full well what I am doing presently and to what I expose myself. If the government wants a mandate for conscription, let it come before the people, without this time fooling them.33

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The events of the following week showed clearly both the anomalous position of the censors in a society accustomed to a free press, and the extreme caution with which the Liberal Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, had to pursue war policies which could never command the united support of the nation. While many Quebeckers volunteered for war service, the prevailing sentiment in the province remained much more isolationist than that in the English-speaking provinces. The conviction that Quebec had little or no vital interest in a European war had many articulate spokesmen, of whom Mayor Houde was one of the most prominent.

On the night of 5 August, Houde was arrested on a warrant signed by Ernest Lapointe, the federal minister of justice, and was sent to an internment camp, where he remained until August, 1944. In prime minister King’s words the cabinet were virtually agreed that action be taken against Houde, and that immediately. The advisers in the Justice Department suggested Provincial Government taking action. Cardin rightly said ‘Why should we place the burden on the Provincial Government? Why not the Federal Government?’ I asked him, in what manner, and he said by the R.C.M.P. He said action should be taken at once. Council then discussed whether Houde should be interned, or dealt with by the courts. It was agreed that, if brought before court, he would be given the opportunity he wanted, namely, speechify, making a display, etc. It was felt if he were interned at once, that would deprive him of this opportunity and would be most helpful in the end. It was agreed that the Mounted Police should take this action forthwith.
It was thought it had better be at night, as there would be no opportunity for photograph displays, etc. I can see, in the whole business, possibility of riots and serious difficulties throughout the Province of Quebec. However, I see no other course. The federal Government cannot afford to have its laws defied by one of Mayor Houde’s prominence.

Meanwhile, Houde’s defiance of the government had created vast confusion in the offices of the censors. Shortly after Houde issued copies of his statement to the press, the chief censor issued a ruling that publishing the Mayor’s remarks ‘will probably constitute an offence under the Defence of Canada Regulations.’ The ruling came too late for the statement to be withdrawn from the 3 August first editions of the Montreal Globe and Mail, both of which ran stories on Mayor Houde and his statement on their front pages. From that moment both the newspapers and the censor found that their actions were public issues. Official wrath fell mainly on the Globe, whose publisher, John Bassett, made a direct appeal to the appropriate cabinet ministers to permit him to publish the statement after it was withdrawn from later editions of his newspaper.

The first word received by the Globe on the censor’s policy in the matter came shortly after 9 p.m. on Friday, 2 August, as the presses were rolling with the first edition of next day’s newspaper. The censor’s office telephoned the Globe to say that exception had been taken to Mayor Houde’s statement, and advised the newspaper not to run any stories on the Mayor’s action. The Globe agreed to remove the offending material from later editions. Bassett then called the minister of national defence, who referred him to the secretary of state, the minister with authority over the censor. The policy of suppressing Houde’s statement was upheld. No written statement of the censor’s policy was received until after midnight, by which time the Canadian Press had sent out the story of the censor’s ban on the Houde statement to its subscribers’ teletypes.

The following morning, Bassett called R. B. Hanson, the Leader of the Official Opposition, and read Houde’s statement to him over the telephone. In the House that morning, Hanson repeated the statement, made reference to the censor’s action, and asked the Prime Minister ‘Is there any longer a free press in Canada?’ A government member’s attempt to prevent publication of Hanson’s remarks was unsuccessful: King was, in any case, not prepared to complicate the issue by interfering with House records. The censor then sent a telegram to the newspapers: ‘Our restriction Houde incident does not include House of Commons debate which may be
freely quoted by ASK editors confine themselves to such statements in the House.42

Hanson’s raising of the issue in the House took place too late for it to appear in most Canadian newspapers, which ran the story on the following Monday. The wire services, however, quickly flashed the story across the North American continent, and to Great Britain, where it was front-page news.43 As any journalist could have foretold, once a news story becomes public property, even for a moment, there is no stopping its further publication wherever newsmen detect sensation or scandal.

When parliament met on Monday, the Prime Minister scolded Hanson for repeating Houde’s statement and criticized the press for giving the publicity the Mayor wanted: ‘I think that when it was made any newspaper office that had seen it ought to have prevented its publication. Certainly, I think it was quite correct that the censor should ask that the statement be censored.’44

With editorial reaction against the Censor rapidly mounting, the 61st censorship directive of the war was sent out to clarify the official position. A paraphrase of it was sent out over the CP wires: ‘Confidential - Not for Publication. Re. Houde: Editors may safely report factual development and carry editorial and outside comment provided offensive material is neither reproduced nor defended. Editors asked to refrain from material likely to aggravate harmful controversy between groups in Canada.’45

The overriding consideration in the minds of both government and censor was the avoidance of anything which might turn French-Canadian opinion against the war effort, and in particular against the National Resources Mobilization Act. It was one of the Prime Minister’s distracting fears that Houde’s arrest might give rise to serious civil disturbance in Quebec, and was the major consideration in arresting the Mayor in as secretive a manner as possible. In addition, King felt that the airing of the issue in the House of Commons was ‘calculated to make trouble between the Government and the press, also to stir up trouble in Quebec.’46

The arrest of Houde did not immediately make him a martyr for Quebec’s opposition to conscription, although it would not be long before he was considered so. French-language newspapers on the whole were quick to condemn his defiance of the federal government.47 L’Illustration Nouvelle went so far as to call him a political hoodlum and even the strongly nationaliste newspaper, Le Devoir, which was certainly no friend of the government or of the war effort, considered Houde to have overstepped the mark and to have deserved his fate.48 English-language newspapers were unanimous in their condemnation of the Mayor. With equal unanimity, they rounded on the censors with a chorus of abuse, piling the scorn with admirable impartiality on the chiefs of the English and French
censorship alike. The most stinging criticism came from the Ottawa Citizen in an editorial implying that the censors were traitors to their former profession:

Montreal's supreme demagogue, Mayor Houde, has received far more free publicity by the action of the press censors in Ottawa than would have been likely without press censorship...

...in recent months the Canadian newspapers have been taking instructions from Messrs. Eggleston and Charpentier. Known to fame as former members of the press gallery on Parliament Hill, they have been trying to carry out the will of Prime Minister Mackenzie King - including guidance to the Canadian press on editorial policy.49

The Globe and Mail pointed out that inflammatory statements by prominent French-Canadians had not exactly been unknown during the First World War, and had not been subject to a censor's ban:

Such statements as that of the Mayor of Montreal were published throughout Canada during the Great War without interference by the press censors and it would be interesting to learn whether suppression of Mayor Houde's statement was ordered for political or military reasons. Since His Worship's outburst cannot be of the slightest assistance to the enemy, one is forced to the conclusion that the censor's decision was dictated by a foolish desire to protect the party in power. If a censor can thus muzzle the press, why cannot he go into the House of Commons and gag the Leader of the Opposition?50

The Montreal Gazette, which had borne the greater burden of censorial disapproval, hit back at the censor on 5 August:

The Gazette was right in this instance and the censor hopelessly wrong....Moreover the censor has succeeded only in defeating his own purpose. The news which he sought to suppress could not be and has not been suppressed. The public demand for it has been whetted, and the whole matter has become the subject of Parliamentary debate.

What we have had is a striking illustration of wrong and blundering action on the part of an official imbued with the concept of a totalitarian arbiter.51

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On the following day, the Gazette furnished its readers with a comprehensive account of the events at the newspaper on the night of 2 August. In reply to the Prime Minister's claim that 'Any newspaper office that had seen it (the Houde statement) ought to have prevented its publication,' the Gazette protested:

This statement is strikingly illustrative of the handicaps newspapers are facing under the present censorship administration. At the present moment the Gazette has never received, from any one at any time, positive orders not to print the Houde story or comment thereupon. As for the Prime Minister's belief 'any newspaper office' should have suppressed the story on its own initiative, suffice it to say that this opinion was not shared by either the Gazette or the Globe and Mail, the only Canadian newspaper offices affected on Friday evening. The Gazette believed on Friday night, and it continues to believe, that publication of the story was in the public interest, and that no valid reason existed for its suppression.52

For the first few days of the second week in August, editorial writers continued to make life miserable for the censors, accusing them of toady to the government in a situation where truth and journalistic integrity were at stake.53 On 7 August, the chief censor explained his actions in a letter to the Canadian Press. The censor's duty, he pointed out, was to prevent the dissemination of statements and opinions which would exacerbate tensions between French- and English-Canadians. In the case of Camillien Houde, he said, 'I am satisfied we were right in attempting to prevent general circulation of Houde's appeal against registration until such time as the Government had been able to act. There is no doubt in my mind that if we had taken no steps about it, it would have been used in certain parts of Quebec to work up resistance to registration, and a great deal of harm might have been done....'54

Clearly, the censor's critics in the press had forgotten that he was no longer a newsman, but a civil servant charged with carrying out public policy, not criticizing it. As the Prime Minister noted in his diary, Mayor Houde's defiance of the federal government caused him 'more concern than anything which has happened thus far.'55 With the spectre of Canada's conscription crisis of 1917 before him, Mackenzie King had to describe a very wary path through the minefield of French-Canadian sensibilities. In particular, the drafting of the National Resources Mobilization Bill in the summer
of 1940 had involved him in an extensive campaign of sounding out French-Canadian opinion and employing his cabinet colleagues from Quebec to persuade their people that the measure posed no threat of conscription for overseas service.\textsuperscript{56}

It was in pursuit of this policy of maintaining French-Canadian support for the war that the censor had earlier that summer warned newspapers against printing material which might cause friction between English- and French-Canadians when the Royal Navy attacked French warships in their North African bases.\textsuperscript{57} Shortly after Houde's arrest, the censor barred re-publication of material which had already been widely circulated eighteen months earlier: this was a speech made by the Mayor to a YMCA group in February 1939. In the course of his speech, Houde said:

\begin{quote}
You appear to be surprised when I say the sympathies of the French-Canadian would be with Italy in the event of a war between that country and England. I would ask you to remember that the great majority of French-Canadians are Roman Catholic and the Pope is in Rome.

The French-Canadians don't want to go to war...if war happens — and the possibility it may seems more probable every day — and Italy is in on one side and England on the other, the sympathy of the French-Canadians in Quebec will be on the side of Italy. We French-Canadians are not Latins, but Normans, but we have become Latinized over a long period of years. The Canadians are Fascists by blood, but not by name.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}

Both government and censor had over-estimated the potential effect of Houde's statement against registration. Like most Canadians, Quebeckers had been jolted by the military success of the Nazis in the early summer of 1940. Public opinion, as the prominent Quebec nationaliste André Laurendeau later remarked 'était prêté à subir n'importe quoi.'\textsuperscript{59} The victory of the Quebec Liberal party in the provincial election of October 1939, and the Liberals' federal victory in March 1940 had strengthened King's hand in Quebec. Almost two months before Houde's defiance of the federal government, a motion condemning the federal Mobilization bill was defeated in the Quebec Assembly by a vote of 56 to 13.\textsuperscript{60} The Roman Catholic hierarchy in Quebec supported the federal government's policy of registration, and the press was muted by censorship. It was small wonder that popular opposition had little chance to find its voice. In the summer of 1940, the feelings of many Quebeckers were those of ambivalence, rather than outright opposition to the government's war policy. Many, like Laurendeau, believed that they were betraying themselves by registering, but they went ahead anyway: the powers of the state were too great to be resisted by individuals, however morally justified
they may have felt. Besides, the morrow of France’s collapse was no fit time to resist registration.61

The government miscalculated the effect of Houde’s statement on the population of Quebec: the miscalculation was reflected in the censor’s action on the night of 2 August and in the subsequent backtracking. As civil servants, the men who staffed the offices of the censorship had to support their political masters. Unlike most civil servants, however, the censors were in the direct line of fire from the newspapers. The criticism which would normally have been diverted at the cabinet minister responsible was diverted in large part to the inviting target presented by the censors. The criticism was made more acerbic by the censors’ erstwhile status as journalists committed to the free dissemination of fact and opinion. Putting it baldly, the censors’ burned their fingers on the Houde issue. On the night of 2 August, they went beyond the limit of the small portion of authority they possessed. They were fumbling in the dark for a consistent policy of censorship in the face of the strongly-entrenched free press tradition of Canadian journalism at a time when, paradoxically, the newspapers were themselves placing limits on that tradition ‘for the duration.’

By ruling on the Houde statement before the newspapers submitted their stories on it, the censors ensured that they would incur the editorial wrath of the newspapers, whether or not the statement was actually subversive. They saw the issue in the same terms as their political superiors perceived it, and they tried to forestall its eruption as a cause célèbre in French Canada by first advising the suppression of news about Houde, then by warning the newspapers of the possible legal consequences of publishing such news. In the end, the news received more publicity than would have been the case had the censors not acted so precipitately. The censors initially failed to make the distinction between reporting the news and exploiting it, then backed away when the issue had received a parliamentary airing. As ex-journalists they should have known that once a news story receives a public airing, no power available to a democratic government can stop its spread. In the case of the Canadian press censorship, the Houde issue served as a salutary lesson in the limitations of censorship even in a society subject to the War Measures Act and the Defence of Canada Regulations.

The position of the censor — forced to make quick judgement in the midst of fast-changing circumstances — was scarcely calculated to satisfy all interested parties, no matter how wise his decisions may have been. In a letter to the acting head of the Censorship Coordination Committee, the chief censor for English-language publications outlined his conception of the censor’s role:
Are the Press Censors ‘in the middle’, i.e., between the interests of security and the interests of morale? Perhaps ‘in the middle’ is an awkward phrasing of it, because it may suggest that we have only a detached academic interest in security which is certainly not the case. Would it not perhaps be more accurate to say that it is our duty to interpret certain phrases of the Defence of Canada regulations, such as ‘information of value to the enemy’?...The Press Censor has to ‘draw the line’. That is really what I mean by being ‘in the middle’. But ‘drawing the line’ involves weighing considerations. Practically everything printed has some small theoretical value to the enemy. This value must be weighed against the value to Canada and to the war effort of allowing it to be published. In other words, the Press Censors in making any ruling must attempt to weigh security against other intangibles.62

It was not until two years after the Houde incident that the censor received a clear definition of his powers under the DOCR, in Regulation 63A.63 In addition to the new regulation, the censor secured an agreement from the department of justice that no newspaper would be prosecuted for reporting in good faith a subversive statement made in public, provided the statement was neither supported nor exploited.64

If the censor’s action in the Houde case aroused the newspapers to a realization of the DOCR’s potential power over them, such a realization was rarely expressed with any vigour in their pages. There was no sustained press campaign against censorship or against the loss of civil liberties generally.65 Certainly, there were outbursts of editorial indignation against the censor as the war continued, but these outbursts were occasioned by specific incidents, not by moral or philosophical reservations about censorship in itself.66 The role of constant critic of the the DOCR and censorship remained with the small-circulation ‘intellectual’ periodicals, and even their criticism was often less than wholehearted.67

Like the correspondents in the war zones, editors and reporters in Canada generally shared in the war aims of the Allied Powers and were willing to make accommodation with the exigencies of wartime conditions, even when such exigencies included limitations of freedom of expression.68 The press in Canada reported on, and reflected the world around it. If the public was willing to put up with restrictions on civil liberties during time of war, the press was little inclined to get ahead of its readers.
FOOTNOTES

* The author wishes to express his thanks to Professor Gordon O. Rothney of the University of Manitoba for his helpful criticisms of an earlier draft of this article.


2. Toronto Globe and Mail, September 23, 1939.

3. There was no repetition of the sustained furore in the press which accompanied provincial attempts to restrict freedom of the press in the previous decade, with the Alberta Press Act and the Quebec 'Padlock Law.' See W.H. Kesterton, A History of Journalism in Canada (Toronto, 1967), 226-238.


7. Order in council P.C. 531, 14 March 1938.

8. Order in council P.C. 2481, 1 Sept. 1939.


In the area of censorship, as in almost every aspect of its conduct of the war, the Canadian government was anxious to avoid any semblance of dependence on the United Kingdom government. When the chief censor in 1939 wanted to exchange information on procedure and methods with British censorship authorities, Canada's department of External Affairs vetoed the idea. See the Memorandum for the under secretary of state for External Affairs' Channel of Communication between director of censorship and United Kingdom censorship authorities,' Public Archives of Canada (PAC), Department of External Affairs Records, R.G. 25, vol. 1915, file 724A, Part I.


The regulations with particular application to the press were 15 and 39A, as follows:

15(1) The Secretary of State of Canada may make provision by Order for preventing or restricting the publication in Canada of matters as to which he is satisfied that the publication, or, as the case may be the unrestricted publication, thereof would or might be prejudicial to the safety of the State or the efficient prosecution of the war, and an order under this paragraph may contain such incidental and supplementary provisions as may appear to the Secretary of State to be necessary or expedient for the purposes of the order, including provisions for securing that documents, pictorial representations photographs or cinematograph films shall, before publication, be submitted or exhibited to such authority or person as may be specified in such order.
(2) Where any person is convicted on indictment of an offence against this Regulation by reason of his having published a newspaper, the court may by order direct that, during such period as may be specified in the order, that person shall not publish any newspaper in Canada.

39A No person shall print, circulate or distribute any book, newspaper, periodical, pamphlet, picture, paper, circular, card, letter, writing, print, publication, or document of any kind containing material, report, or statement, false or otherwise

(a) intended or likely to cause disaffection to His Majesty or to interfere with the success of His Majesty's forces or of the forces of any allied or associated Power, or to prejudice His Majesty's relations with foreign Powers, or

(b) intended or likely to prejudice the recruiting, training, discipline, or administration of any of His Majesty's forces, or

(c) which would or might be prejudicial to the safety of the state or the efficient prosecution of the war.

18. Pope, 143-144. Responsibility for various aspects of censorship was dispersed in several government departments (with the secretary of state responsible for press censorship). In May, 1943, all censorship functions were consolidated under the minister of national war services. See Stacey, 124.
19. Pope, 141-144, Eggleston, chapter 15 passim. Eggleston, a veteran Ottawa journalist, was no stranger to government, having served on the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations before the war.
20. Purcell, 35, 37.
22. Purcell, 20.
24. Eggleston, 263.
26. Ibid., 320.
27. C. NeNaught, Canada Gets the News (Toronto, 1940), 172.
28. Ibid., 152-155.
29. Ibid., 172.
30. Purcell, 36.
One of the most ludicrous examples of official inflexibility is recounted in C.A. Bowman, *Ottawa Editor* (Sidney, B.C., 1966), 217-218. Early in the war, the Ottawa *Citizen* used the word *asdic* in a lead editorial. The censor, on instructions from the Royal Canadian Navy, ordered the editorial deleted, because the echo-sounding device was considered secret. The editorial writer showed the censor the source of his information: the *Christian Science Monitor*. The censor’s ban remained.

Quoted in Stacey, 33.

33. Quoted by R.B. Hanson in Canada, H.C. Deb., 3 (3 Aug. 1940), 2402.
34. Pickersgill, 104.
35. Quoted in Montreal *Gazette*, 6 Aug. 1940.
38. Montreal *Gazette*, 6 Aug. 1940; See also Purcell, 54.
39. Purcell, 55.
40. Canada, H.C. Deb., 3 (3 Aug. 1940), 2402.
   It was not, however, impossible to rewrite *Hansard*. On 15 Nov. 1940, Hanson revealed naval secrets in the House, whereupon the Prime Minister ordered the remarks expunged from *Hansard*, and also ordered Eggleston to make sure that Hanson’s revelations did not reach the pages of the newspapers. See Pickersgill, 168.
42. Quoted in Montreal *Gazette*, 6 Aug. 1940.
43. Purcell, 59.
44. Canada, H.C. Deb., 3 (5 Aug. 1940), 2451.
45. Purcell, 61.
46. Pickersgill, 104.
53. The ‘straight’ news coverage of Houde’s arrest was blatantly biased in many newspapers. As an example, the Montreal *Star* wrote on 6 Aug. 1940:

   The sensational but not unexpected move against the mayor of Canada’s largest city was accomplished with neatness and despatch... (The Police) found a large part of Houde’s library to consist of books about Napoleon.

   They had seen a similar library only a few weeks ago when they arrested and interned Adrien Arcand, leader of the Canadian Fascists. Another prominent student of Napoleonic lore is Adolf Hitler.

   Admittedly the *Star* was a long-time foe of Houde, but it was not the only newspaper to make particular mention of the Mayor’s taste in literature.
Quoted in Purcell, 72-73.

55. Pickersgill, 104.


57. Purcell, 70.

58. Quoted in Ibid., 71.

59. A. Laurendeau, La Crise de la conscription (Montreal, 1962), 56.

60. Pickersgill, 97.


63. Order in council P.C. 6331, 13 Aug. 1942. Regulation 63A reads:

(1) No person charged with an offence under these Regulations by reason of his having published any matter in any broadcast, in any newspaper, periodical or book in any moving picture film shall be convicted under the said Regulation if it appears that the matter complained of has been passed for publication by any of the Chief Censors of Publications or any person having authority to act on their behalf.

(2) In any proceeding under these Regulations a certificate purporting to be signed by one of the Chief Censors of Publications that any matter therein set out or described was or was not passed for publication by them or by any person authorized to act on their behalf shall without proof of the signature be prima facie evidence of the facts therein stated.

64. Purcell, 66.


66. The major incidents involving censorship were: suppression (temporarily) of reports of a speech by Opposition Leader Hanson in October, 1940, in which he allegedly gave away secret details of the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan (the details had been published without fuss in the Financial Post more than two weeks previously); Col. George Drew's criticism of the royal commission of enquiry into the disaster which befell the Canadian Expeditionary Force to Hong Kong; and the desertion of large numbers of conscripted troops before their embarkation for Europe in December 1944.

67. See Cook, passim for the most authoritative treatment of the role of Saturday Night, Canadian Forum and other 'intellectual' publications in criticizing the DOCR. Occasionally, such publications sympathized with the Censors, and even found occasion to praise them:

There is an inclination to attribute to the official censorship some of the shortcomings of the press. For this there is little justification. A perusal of the 'Directives' of the Censors discloses an attitude of sweet reasonableness, and one strikingly free of irritatingly useless restrictions. They confine themselves to their proper scope: that of preventing the leakage of information useful to the enemy. True, there have here and there been some stupid applications of the regulations,
but these have been exceptions to the rule. (G. Gregory, 'Canada Mollycoddled by Press, Radio,' *Saturday Night*, 20 Sept. 1941.)