

Habsburg H-Net Discussion Network
Prince Metternich, Of the Necessity of a Censorship of the Press, 1808

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Prince Richard Metternich, ed. MEMOIRS OF PRINCE METTERNICH, 1830-1835.
Volume V. Translated by Gerard W. Smith. Classified and arranged by M.A. de
Klinkowstrom. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1880-82.

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OF THE NECESSITY OF A CENSORSHIP OF THE
PRESS.

(Note 20, Vol. I.)

110. Metternich to Stadion, Paris June 23, 1808.

110. I have confused the idea of having one day drawn your Excellency's attention to the editors of the Frankfurt and Augsburg Gazettes.

There is a most urgent necessity to exercise some influence over newspapers in general, and particularly over these two, which never cease spreading lies, often of the most ridiculous nature, about us. It is from these that most of the articles are extracted which are found in the French journals. Why should not correct news be communicated to the different newspapers? Why do they not control their correspondents at Vienna, and why should they not refute these lies in the places where they are published?

A great fault which all the Governments, and particularly our own have committed since the commencement of the French Revolution, is that they have regarded as useless, as beneath their dignity and that of the good cause, and indeed even as dangerous, to speak truth to the public, and to speak it incessantly. This fact is never more incontestable than when the French are concerned. They have the game to themselves; they have only occupied an empty place by seizing the desks of the journalists, and no one can reproach

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them with silence; they have taken up the weapon we have disdained to make use of, and they are now employing it against ourselves.

The use of a thing is confounded everywhere with its abuse; the condition of a pamphleteer with that of a political writer; the man who reasons, with the one who simply relates correct facts! Public opinion is the most powerful of all means; like religion, it penetrates the most hidden recesses, where administrative measures have no influence. To despise public opinion is as dangerous as to despise moral principles; and if the latter will rise up even when they have been almost stifled, it is not so with opinion; it requires

peculiar cultivation, a continued and sustained perseverance. Posterity will hardly believe that we have regarded silence as an efficacious weapon to oppose to the clamours of our opponents, and in a century of words!

Who can blame us if we will not allow the public to be supplied with lies about us?

There is not one of the above-mentioned papers which does not say under the heading of Vienna that we are in full negotiation on important points, or which does not publish lies about facts and individuals. The public cannot distinguish if news is true or false. False news has the air of being true if no one can be found to contradict it, and I place the Emperor Napoleon at the head of the credulous public. There is a great difference between what he conceives and what is insinuated to him; it would be found very difficult to change what he wishes, but his credulity may be imposed upon.

I beg your excellency to pay particular attention to this subject. Nothing is more easy than to avoid the official style in these publications, which have no merit if

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they bear that impression. I speak to you from a place where, more than anywhere else, I can appreciate the success of the efforts of the Government to influence the public. The newspapers are worth to Napoleon an army of three hundred thousand men, for such a force would not overlook the interior better, or frighten foreign Powers more, than half a dozen of his paid pamphleteers.

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Contact James Niessen for questions about the Habsburg website:
niessen@mail.h-net.msu.edu