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A NECESSARY EVIL?
PROPAGANDA, CENSORSHIP, AND CLASS IN BRITAIN’S MINISTRY OF INFORMATION, 1939-1941

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ABSTRACT

During the early phase of World War II, Britain’s Ministry of Information (MoI) instituted propaganda and censorship regimes that were shaped by British attitudes about class. The effectiveness of these regimes is debatable, especially in light of their continually hypocritical nature. Although the wartime context necessitated a high level of secrecy and guile within Whitehall, certain aspects of the Ministry’s campaigns were morally and politically questionable. A brief consideration of the historiography of British secrecy is followed by an analysis of the actions of the MoI and the Government generally from 1939 to 1941. The MoI failed to uphold the democratic ideals that it purported to represent in opposition to Nazi Germany. This failure manifested most obviously in the Ministry’s propaganda, its treatment of troops rescued from Dunkirk, and in its public addresses to the British public.

KEYWORDS
Ministry of Information; World War II; propaganda; censorship; class

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The author would like to thank Dr. Amy Bell and Dr. Geoff Read for their comments and support in the research, writing, and editing stages of this article.
The British Ministry of Information (MoI) was initially created at the tail end of World War I. Its primary aim was the centralized design, publication, and dissemination of wartime propaganda. Compared with its World War II successor, this early version of the MoI was far less important to its contemporaries, both culturally and politically, and has been treated as such in the historiography. In addition to continuing the practice of propaganda, the MoI of the Second World War was also explicitly charged with the task of press censorship. Governmental anxiety (and, significantly, national anxiety) about these tasks was particularly heightened during the early stages of the war, in large part because the Allies did not turn the tide of battle until 1941. A clear dichotomy in terms of organization and effectiveness can be found between the MoI of 1939 to 1941, and the MoI from that point forward. This essay focuses on the debates and ramifications of the Ministry’s actions prior to the U.S. and Soviet Union throwing their unambiguous support behind the Allied cause in 1941. It is concerned with three central questions: (1) How did the Ministry of Information formulate and enforce both its propaganda and censorship initiatives? (2) In what ways were these initiatives driven by class-based attitudes? (3) Were these initiatives justified, either on moral or political grounds? It will be argued that the Ministry’s propaganda and censorship regimes were, from their inception, inherently linked to British attitudes about class; that the effectiveness of these regimes is debatable, especially in light of their continually hypocritical nature; and that, although the wartime context necessitated a high level of secrecy and guile within Whitehall (the British civil service), certain aspects of the Ministry’s campaigns were morally and politically questionable.

In a recent article, Koen Vermeir argued that the concepts of ‘openness’ and ‘secrecy’ must be historicized, that is, they must be understood as acquiring different meanings in different times and contexts. In 1930s Britain, both political and cultural secrecy had reached a point of maturation. Certain legislative landmarks had fostered a ‘culture of secrecy’ that became evident not only in Whitehall, but also in the factory, at the public house, and within the domestic sphere. For instance, the 1911 Official Secrets Act dealt with penalties for spying and the “wrongful communication of information” deemed in the interest of ‘national security,’ a term that was intentionally ill defined. Amendments to this Act, made in 1920 and 1939, furthered its range while maintaining much of its vagueness. These amendments were concerned foremost with ‘foreign agents,’ who were imagined as working for a rival power, and therefore “prejudicial to the safety or interests of the State.” In each of the alleged offences that might be committed under the Official Secrets Act, the burden of proof was shifted to the defendant.

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It was in this confused and sensitized atmosphere that secrecy became a sort of currency that British citizens, irrespective of class, exchanged on a day-to-day basis. The keeping, telling, and revealing of secrets constituted a performance in which every Briton had a role to play. Whether the currency in question was Cabinet intrigue or neighbourhood whispers, keepers and desirers of secrets engaged in a normally symbiotic relationship. Those persons who resided outside of this performance, or who revealed too much or too little, directly threatened this symbiosis. Outsiders and insiders were typically defined along class lines. Working-class individuals detested intruders, such as Mass-Observation surveyors, while upper-class individuals stressed the need to confine their ‘open secrets’ to their own group. The purpose of delineating this distinct, British culture of secrecy is to demonstrate that the actors within the Ministry of Information did not play their roles within a historical vacuum. Rather, they were informed by this distinct British culture. Moreover, they were in a unique position to formulate and disseminate censorship and propaganda regimes that could manipulate the culture of secrecy they worked within.

British elites were cognizant of the need for propaganda prior to the official recreation of the Ministry of Information in 1939. Nazi Germany and Bolshevik Russia, both of whom the British were wary, had instituted successful propaganda regimes in the lead-up to World War II. A key figure in the field of British propaganda was Sir Stephen Tallents, Head of the Empire Marketing Board. In 1932 Faber and Faber published a book of his entitled *The Projection of England*, which stressed the need for Britain to project not just the state, but also the British people, as democratic and progressive. This projection should be cast upon enemy, ally, and neutral countries alike. In 1935 the British Government began seriously considering the need for an official body that would oversee propaganda in the event of war. Rex Leeper, Head of the Foreign Office News Department, played a key role in developing the British Committee for Relations with Other Countries, which eventually became the British Council. This committee was enlisted to ‘sell’ Britain overseas. It was succeeded in essence by a sub-committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence, which provided the first indication that censorship of the

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8 Holman, “Carefully Concealed Connections,” 199.
news would also be a responsibility of the ministry-in-waiting. Its function, as outlined in the sub-committee’s report of 1936, would be to:

…present the national case to the public at home and abroad in time of war. To achieve this end it is not only necessary to provide for the preparation and issue of National Propaganda, but also for the issue of ‘news’ and for such control of information issued to the public as may be demanded by the needs of security.  

Tallents, who had become Controller of Public Relations at the BBC in the meantime, replaced Leeper as head of the ministry-in-waiting, with the official title of Director-General Designate. However, he was ousted from this role prior to the start of the war.

The history of the MoI from 1939 to 1941 is one of frustration, both within the Ministry itself, and for the British public. When the new Ministry was finally formed in September 1939, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain appointed Lord Macmillan as the inaugural Minister of Information. Macmillan inherited a newborn department that was ill equipped to fulfill its assigned responsibilities. Nevertheless, the fact remains that he failed to capitalize on the opportunity afforded him by the Phoney War: a lack of major military operations in the first phase of World War II provided ample time for the Ministry to address its fundamental deficiencies. Rather than define a general Ministry policy about public morale, Macmillan and his underlings instead wrangled with the press and the public about the perception that the Ministry was overstaffed with employees, especially with those inexperienced in the field of propaganda or public affairs. Macmillan was more concerned with deflecting responsibility than he was with fixing the Ministry’s limitations. He believed that the MoI’s linkage with press control was the source of his headache:

…I feel quite certain that if the Press Bureau…remains part of the Ministry of Information, even for the limited purposes that are in view, the Ministry of Information will never be able to shake the public in their belief that the responsibility for the amount and character of the news issued still rests with the Ministry of Information. I am unwilling to accept any plan which does not secure this. What I urge, therefore, is that the organisation for the Distribution of News to the Press now at the Ministry should be described as a Government “Press Bureau,” and should be withdrawn entirely from the range of responsibilities of the Minister of Information.

Public discontent with the MoI proved so pervasive that Chamberlain considered dismantling the Ministry before eventually deciding to replace Macmillan with Sir John

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11 Ibid., 39.  
12 CAB 67/1/23, 28 September 1939.
Reith. Reith became Minister in January 1940, but he was not afforded the opportunity to demonstrate any aptitude he might have possessed. His tenure as Minister featured constant organizational upheaval, as well as a sustained inability to craft a policy on morale. The Ministry was also hamstrung by an inflexible Whitehall, which neglected the need for the centralization of news censorship. Consequently, the various governmental departments circulated their own news without external debate or commentary. Reith was also handicapped by Whitehall’s decision in 1939 to nullify even the semblance of MoI press control. An independent Press and Censorship Bureau was instead established under the leadership of Sir Walter Monckton. Unfortunately for Reith, soon after he regained nominal control of press censorship, Sir Winston Churchill replaced Chamberlain as Prime Minister. On 12 May 1940, Churchill appointed Duff Cooper as Minister of Information in Reith’s stead.¹³

Of all the Ministers of Information, Cooper proved the least competent. During his tenure, the MoI produced its first widely distributed class-based propaganda, and his censorship initiatives successfully alienated both the press and the public. Originally, the MoI had favoured an understated approach to propaganda. The “Keep It Dark” campaign of late 1939 stressed the need for British citizens to eschew indiscreet talk lest enemy ears catch wind of and further disseminate rumours.¹⁴ In the wake of the Dunkirk evacuation, though, the MoI’s tone changed completely. Under Churchill’s watchful eye, the Ministry introduced a new propaganda initiative that urged Britons to join the “Silent Column.” To a greater degree than Keep It Dark, the Silent Column campaign stressed the existence of a fifth column in Britain. Fifth columnists, who certainly did exist in small though insignificant numbers, were imagined as Nazi infiltrators that blended into British daily life. As such, working-class Britons had to maintain utmost vigilance in reporting their neighbours for any unsavoury activities. The culture of secrecy, then, merged with a culture of suspicion. A normally symbiotic relationship, built on a ritual of give-and-take, had been challenged. Now, citizens were encouraged to reveal no secrets whatsoever, but to take as many notes as possible in the hope of catching a fifth columnist.¹⁵ A Ministry leaflet, published in June 1940, declared the following:

There is a fifth column in Britain. Anyone who thinks that there isn’t, that it “can’t happen here,” has simply fallen into the trap laid by the fifth column itself. For the first job of the fifth column is to make people think that it does not exist. In other countries the most respectable and neighbourly citizens turned out to be fifth columnists when the time came. The fifth column does not only consist of foreigners….

The Government is doing its duty and is dealing vigorously with the fifth column. It has rounded up a great many dangerous and suspect characters and it is keeping a constant look-out. It is not difficult to deal with such people if action is taken in

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¹⁵ Ibid., 942-944.
good time and in good order. But it can’t be done unless you help. It is up to you to do your duty too.\textsuperscript{16}

The unstated implication of the Silent Column campaign was that, unlike the distrust working-class individuals should harbour for each other, they were to trust completely (and therefore not question) their military and political superiors. Yet this implication essentially contradicts much of what historians have established about British fascism. In analyzing the social makeup of the British Fascists (BF)—the first far right group in the United Kingdom to explicitly characterize itself as such—Thomas Linehan noted that “the case for significant worker support for the BF remains weak.”\textsuperscript{17} Linehan’s typology of fascist supporters in the interwar period included “aristocrats and members of the landed elite,” the military officer class, the naval officer class, ‘fervent’ far right Christians, the middle class, and the “newly enfranchised woman.”\textsuperscript{18} The Government effectively shifted its anxiety about internal fascists from the visible to the invisible. A number of aristocrats were known fascists, yet Whitehall was much more concerned with presumably careless working-class whisperers, regardless of those individual workers’ loyalty. That the civil service was willing to overlook the social makeup of fascism within its country, and that it furthermore pursued this practice in film, suggests that upper-class anxiety about the working-class was far-reaching and palpable.

Class-based attitudes were also present in the way the MoI handled press coverage of the Dunkirk evacuation. While homefront morale first suffered with the news of Dunkirk,\textsuperscript{19} a process of myth making soon reversed public opinion. Like the Battle of Britain or the sinking of the \textit{Bismarck}, Nicholas Harman has suggested that Dunkirk became a ‘necessary myth’ for the British people.\textsuperscript{20} Despite it being a sweeping German victory, the rescue of hundreds of thousands of British, French, and Belgian troops was “transformed into a triumph.”\textsuperscript{21} The MoI was at the centre of this transformation, and while it could be argued that their efforts proved important in rallying morale, it is safe to say that an ulterior, class-based motive was also at play. The Ministry’s key objective during the Dunkirk evacuation was establishing and controlling the narrative. This objective was informed not only by a fear of the fifth column, but by a distrust of the lower classes in general.

For Whitehall, the most troubling feature of the evacuation was the uncensored interviews that reporters conducted with the first waves of returning troops. Concerned that the troops’ insights might deviate from the preferred script, two separate departments each made a morally questionable decision. On 1 June Military Intelligence forbade all

\textsuperscript{16} Ministry of Information leaflet, \textit{The Fifth Column}, June 1940.
\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Linehan, \textit{British Fascism, 1918-39: Parties, Ideology and Culture} (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 157.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 154-156.
\textsuperscript{19} Fox, “Careless Talk,” 942.
“officers and men in the Army”—that is, those who had faced the Nazis on the ground—from being interviewed for BBC broadcasts.\textsuperscript{22} The following day, the MoI itself forbade Lieutenant General Noel Mason-MacFarlane, acting Director of Military Intelligence for the British Expeditionary Force, to address the public.\textsuperscript{23} The man who had proven most instrumental in rescuing hundreds of thousands of troops from Nazi advance, then, was silenced. These steps were taken in the belief that a single account of the evacuation, crafted and broadcasted by the state, was the only way of ensuring that the British population did not fall into defeatist panic. The Government had no confidence in its working-class citizens whatsoever, and it is certainly not unreasonable to suggest that it actively distrusted them.

The MoI did find some success in its attempts to formulate a widely accepted narrative of daily war news through its system of Defence Notices (D-notices). This system, first created in 1912, involved the sending of an official letter to press editors outlining why a particular subject should be treated in a certain way, or not commented upon at all, in the next edition of the news. This setup involved “voluntary cooperation,” but it was generally understood that gentlemen would comply with these D-notices, as they represented the (upper-class) national interest.\textsuperscript{24} In spite of this system, dissenting opinions remained common in British newspapers and broadcasts. Some of the most critical and effective dissenters were cartoonists, who created simple and attractive remonstrations viewed by millions of Britons daily. One such cartoonist was David Low, whom the MoI had attempted un成功地 to recruit in the early stages of the war.\textsuperscript{25}

In a cartoon for the \textit{Evening Standard}, originally published 13 August 1940, Low satirized several of the Ministry’s actions to date. Three subheadings in particular targeted, in order, press censorship, class-based anxiety, and fear of the fifth column. Under the subheading ‘Special Edition,’ Low wrote, “British Government is planning the suspension of all English newspapers. They are to be replaced by a single so-called official state newspaper.” Under the subheading ‘Hot Time in the Old Town Tonight,’ Low quipped, “Londoners are becoming more and more panic-stricken… Londoners are drunk every night. They are holding competitions in drinking capacity and alcoholic poisoning has increased by leaps and bounds.” Finally, under the subheading ‘Tally Ho!’ he remarked, “Almost nightly a regular organised chase is made after all foreigners still at large.”\textsuperscript{26} The ubiquitousness of these types of viewpoints, expressed daily in most British newspapers, help to explain why public opinion of the MoI was so negative.

\textsuperscript{24} Robertson, \textit{Public Secrets}, 75.
\textsuperscript{25} Holman, “Carefully Concealed Connections,” 203.
\textsuperscript{26} David Low, cartoon, originally published 13 August 1940 in \textit{Evening Standard}, British Cartoon Archive, University of Kent, viewing record: DL1648,
There was yet another medium of propaganda on which the MoI imprinted its class-based attitudes. Clive Coultass has argued that the British decided to use film as a form of mass communication after observing the Soviets and Germans use it to great effect. During the war, Britons preferred escapist films to those that depicted battle and suffering. Yet the MoI reached a fairly substantial audience with its documentaries and feature films during the period. As the Ministry struggled administratively under Macmillan and Reith, it produced “clumsy and unconvincing” films that often depicted working-class citizens as halfwits who threatened to jeopardize the war effort.\(^27\) In the 1940 short film *Now You’re Talking*, for example, German agents listen surreptitiously to a pair of British factory workers in a pub who carelessly prattle on about their workplace. The Germans quickly conclude that the workers’ place of employment would be the perfect location for planting a bomb.\(^28\) In the climaxes to these sorts of films, middle- or upper-class heroics were commonly required to rescue the nation.

The quality of MoI films improved when some members of the British Documentary Movement were embedded within the Ministry’s film division. These men were typically disciples of the movement’s founder, John Grierson, who was blindsided by his omission from the Ministry at the outbreak of war. Unable to find favour in Britain, he became Canada’s principal wartime propagandist, yet, Grierson maintained close contact with his followers in the MoI. Interestingly, these filmmakers forwarded confidential MoI memoranda and notes to their confidante via transatlantic cables, which would have been subject to German (and others’) interest.\(^29\) Thus, while producing films directed at enforcing secrecy, these MoI employees freely discussed classified information in an especially dangerous fashion. The hypocrisy of this act does not appear to have occurred to, let alone concerned, these individuals.

When Duff Cooper’s ineffectiveness as Minister of Information became evident to Churchill, he moved firstly to establish beyond doubt the Minister’s full function and jurisdiction, and secondly to appoint yet another successor. In a memorandum that was widely circulated, Churchill stated:

The main functions of the Ministry of Information are:—
(a) to ensure that news regarding the progress of the war shall reach the public as fully and as quickly as is consistent with the interests of our national security; and
(b) to publicise and interpret Government policy in relation to the war, to help to sustain public morale and to stimulate the war effort, and to maintain a steady flow

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of facts and opinions calculated to further the policy of the Government in the prosecution of the war.

For the effective discharge of these functions, it is the duty of the Minister of Information to preserve intimate and cordial relations with the newspapers through their proprietors, editors and reporters; and to make the newspapers feel that the Ministry is their friend and the pump and channel by which information is collected by the various Departments…

It will be the duty of all Departmental Ministers…to keep the Minister of Information fully supplied with all the news and information at their disposal. The use and exploitation of this news will be regarded as primarily the responsibility of the Ministry of Information…

All organised propaganda carried out on behalf of one or more Departments through the medium of the Press, films, posters or radio will be conducted through the Ministry of Information…

The Ministry of Information will take full day-to-day editorial control of the BBC service of news and propaganda and will be responsible for both initiative and censorship.  

Churchill proceeded to name his Irish-born protégé Brendan Bracken as the new Minister of Information in July 1941. Armed with the Prime Minister’s full support and clearly defined, extensive powers, Bracken at last was able to stabilize the MoI. Of course, Bracken was helped by the fact that his tenure as Minister essentially coincided with the reversal of Allied fortunes. Nevertheless, his appointment did signal a turning point in both the MoI’s potency and its public perception.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the MoI’s classism did not dissipate in 1941 or thereafter. Sir Walter Monckton, brought back into the MoI as Director-General Designate in 1940 after leading the independent Press Bureau, let some of this class-based anxiety boil over during an address to the British public. In April 1941 Monckton began his speech by talking down to his listeners:

Let us start with first things first. The principle which guides us about news is to tell the truth, and nothing but the truth. The Germans have no such principle, as I shall show you. We should like to tell you not only the truth, but the whole truth, as soon as we can get it. We know that you can take it, and take it much more easily than silence. In the Ministry, we’ve never had any doubt about that. We should like you to regard the giving and receiving of news as a kind of partnership in which there is mutual confidence and cooperation. If we try to get you the news as fully and quickly as we can, we want you, on your part, not to lose confidence, if you have to wait for it, and not to make up for lack of news by a crop of rumours (emphasis added).  

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30 CAB 66/17/15, 26 June 1941.
Not only did Monckton talk to the British public like a teacher might communicate with children, but he completely invented the idea of the MoI and the public as partners sharing “mutual confidence and cooperation.” As has been established, at no point did the MoI, or the Government in general, have confidence in its citizens. For that reason, they had deemed it necessary to implement censorship and propaganda regimes. Yet Monckton specifically identified propaganda as a German aberration that had not surfaced in Britain:

…in giving you the news we try to tell you the truth and nothing but the truth, but we cannot always tell you the whole truth as quickly as we wish. But the Germans, as I said, work on a quite different principle. They tell the truth when it suits them and a lie when it doesn’t. They always said they’d do this: it’s in Hitler’s Bible, Mein Kampf. “Propaganda,” he wrote, “must present only that aspect of the truth which is favourable to its own side.” And he expressed a preference for the big lie. “On the grounds of the broad masses of the nation, more readily fall victims to the big lie than to the small lie.”

Almost poetically, Monckton’s hypocritical speech paralleled the way that the Government itself functioned on a daily basis. Christopher Moran recently argued that Whitehall “resembled a ‘village community’—private, tightly knit, and where inhabitants came from the same narrow social and educational background, namely the public schools and Oxford and Cambridge. In this cloistered world, people progressed in their careers by respecting and adhering to an honourable code of confidentiality.” As elsewhere in Britain, secrecy and suspicion were ubiquitous in the British Government, and the actors in this performance gave and took secrets no less than their lower-class citizens. Perhaps unwittingly, though, the MoI projected Whitehall as above this performance. The Government was imagined as the director, while the citizens were pictured as the actors susceptible to corruptibility. Nothing, though, could have been farther from the truth. A class divide had always been palpable in Britain; this divide in no way affected groups’ love of gossip, especially in wartime.

That the Allies would eventually win the Second World War was not at all obvious from 1939 to 1941. A logical question to ask is whether the MoI’s propaganda and censorship initiatives had any tangible effect on the British war effort. It is apparent that these initiatives were informed by class-based attitudes, and that some questionable decisions were made by members of the MoI in the name of national security. If the initiatives did in fact have a tangible effect on the British war effort, then it might be possible to explain away the classism as a necessary evil. If no tangible effect can be found, then how does one reconcile the MoI’s actions, aside from appreciating that those

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32 Ibid.
34 Vincent, *The Culture of Secrecy*, 142.
actions must be historicized? The first step in answering these questions is considering how British citizens perceived the MoI during the war and, more importantly, how it received the MoI’s initiatives. In the first substantial study of the MoI, Ian McLaine charted Britons’ opinions, over time, on various aspects of the war. Three relevant questions were: How well did they think the Government was conducting the war? How high was public morale? How positively did they view the MoI? The general trend McLaine noticed was that, unsurprisingly, Britons approved of the Government’s conduct much higher after 1941 than they did prior to that year; that their morale correlated with Allied fortune; and that the overwhelmingly negative reaction to the MoI of 1939 to 1941 eventually gave way to, if not outright endorsement, tolerance or disinterest. The question remains, though, of whether this upward trend in public opinion of the MoI constitutes evidence that the Ministry was an integral wartime operation.

Assessing the effects of propaganda is a tricky business in the present, let alone in the past. Jo Fox recently contended that the MoI played an important role in World War II not because it rallied citizens to its classist propaganda, but because its initiatives were so poorly received that people found common cause in opposing the Ministry. This conclusion was drawn in spite of Fox seemingly conducting no interviews with—or consulting the writings of—individuals who received this propaganda. Without documentary evidence, how much confidence should be placed in this conclusion? Admittedly, this article cannot claim to draw on such documentary evidence, but that fact alone does not necessarily preclude a reasonable conclusion. In fact, it seems reasonable to conclude that, since the class-based attitudes that informed the MoI’s initial censorship and propaganda initiatives did not dissipate after 1941, British citizens likely reported less negative opinions of the MoI simply because their country wound up victorious. The last question subject to scrutiny, then, is whether the Ministry’s actions were justified.

The Ministry was unequivocal in its silencing of the troops that returned from Dunkirk. Their objective of crafting a single narrative of the evacuation seems politically justifiable. The soldiers in question could have conceivably revealed an important secret in an uncensored interview, which may have had dire consequences if noted by the Germans. It should not be forgotten, though, that Britain explicitly projected itself as antithetical to Germany before and during the war. Where the Nazis were authoritarian, Britain postured as democratic. Censoring its press and silencing its citizens—citizens who fought for the state, no less—contrasts directly with the ideals the British purported to hold as inviolable. At the same time, it is important to remember that secrecy has long been a cornerstone of the Westminster system of government. It protects the individuals involved in the decision-making process, and it also facilitates the maintenance of security. However, a great responsibility is attached to this secrecy. Citizens rightly

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35 See Note 9. McLaine cleverly depicted some of the graphs he referenced on the inside covers of his monograph.
36 Fox, “Careless Talk,” 965.
expect that the institutions they legitimize act democratically. From 1939 to 1941, the Ministry of Information—and to a certain extent, Whitehall more generally—continually failed to uphold this contract. This failure was a direct result of classist attitudes and anxieties manifested in tense, wartime Britain. A wholly different kind of performance was at play during this period. Faced with the very real prospect of total war, the actors in this performance sought and guarded secrets like never before. Their currency no longer determined just the daily social order, but also the difference between potential victory and defeat.

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