

What improvements in the daily press do you think desirable or possible?

(See 1946.002 for an introduction to FB's Balliol essays.)

Essay written by Francis Bennion in November 1946 as an undergraduate at Balliol College Oxford when reading Politics, Philosophy and Economics (Modern Greats).

The qualities displayed by the daily press of a nation are usually a reflection of the educational and intellectual levels attained by that nation. To adapt the well-known saying of Joseph de Maistre: 'Every country has the press it deserves'. The reason for this is the simple one of supply and demand. Most newspapers are run for the purpose of making a profit for the proprietors, and the way in which the greatest profit can be made is obviously to supply news in the form most appreciated by the public. That the general taste in this matter is lamentably low will be admitted even by the most enthusiastic demagogue. The fact that for every person reading that independent, sober and wholly admirable newspaper the *Observer* there are twenty who read the slipshod, crude and vaguely lascivious *News of the World* is sufficient indication of this. Yet news, prompt and accurate, is what most people would say they demand from the daily press. As George Crabbe observed:

'a master passion is the love of news'.

As it is the foremost reason for the existence of a daily press we must consider to what extent this 'master passion' is gratified in Britain today before going on to suggest improvements. It is probably true to say that there is little deliberate suppression or accidental omission of news in our daily press. It is also true that most newspapers distort the news with the object of catering for the views of their proprietors, or, occasionally, of their readers. The first fact is very satisfactory; the second is usually indefensible, and has consequences quite impossible to assess. The lords of the press, one suspects, have inflated ideas of themselves as swayers, even controllers of public thought and action. Recent events have shown that people are coming to discount the political bias shown in many national newspapers, and, when crudely applied, that bias has sometimes acted in the opposite way to what was intended. (A good example of this is the clumsy campaign conducted by the *Daily Express* in the recent general election, which is acknowledged to have been so distasteful to many of its readers as to decide them in favour of the opposing cause.) Nevertheless the more subtle methods of distortion probably go unperceived by most people who are only in the habit of reading one daily newspaper, and so they may be considered harmful to the cause of truth and public enlightenment.

A less venial offence than political bias is the ugly pandering to that taste for things morbid and obscene which exists in many people but which would for the most part slumber quietly if not aroused and fed. That four million families are exposed every Sunday to this contamination, (as spread by the proprietors of the *News of the World*) is a grave blemish on the integrity of our national press, and may incidentally be one of the causes of crime among young people.

The conclusions we have reached therefore in this part of our enquiry are that the news-gathering function of the daily press is adequately performed, but that the presentation of news to the reader has faults, the importance of which it is difficult to assess, but which we suspect to be great.

Although the first duty of the daily press is to keep the public informed of world events, there are subsidiary functions which should be considered. One of these is *comment* on the news,

which may be called an attempt to explain its significance to the reader. Obviously the function of comment offers most opportunity for the exercise of political, racial or other bias, but this is not so dangerous as bias applied in the *presenting* of news, because the reader is aware that he is being given only one man's opinion of the significance of events, and makes due allowance for personal predispositions and the intrusion of proprietorial authority. Another subsidiary function of the press is coverage of the social, literary and artistic spheres, which are usually quite apart from the 'realistic' side of life, as exemplified in news of strikes, riots, conferences and other grim aspects of the world as it is. Another 'unrealistic' sphere which is reported in the daily press is sport, to which the reader often turns with relief after hastily scanning a calamitous front page. The last of these subsidiary functions is that of pure entertainment of the reader. All the newspapers have an eye to this, from *The Times* with its highly respected crossword puzzle, right down to the *Daily Mirror* with its avidly read comic strips. In considering the subsidiary functions of the daily press we are able to find very little fault. Every taste and cultural level is catered for, and although (in the so-called 'yellow press') we may find some of the comments biased and childish and some of the amusements unamusing and altogether regrettable it is necessary to remember the first point we made, namely that 'every country has the press it deserves'.

We have arrived at the point where we may consider improvements to the press: firstly those that are desirable, secondly those that are possible. It is no doubt desirable that all corruption, all distortion, all undue emphasis and all pandering to moronic taste should be banished from our national press. It is also desirable that mankind should be without blemish. Towards both those ends it is probable we are imperceptibly moving; we shall hardly reach the one before we reach the other.

Coming to the improvements which may be considered possible at the present time, we may think it desirable to remove the control of a large section of the daily press from the hands of the 'press-barons' to those of independent committees, like the bodies which have been entrusted with the running of two of our greatest newspapers; namely *The Times* and the *Observer*. Yet, while this step would largely remove the danger of bias, it would take away much of the colour and vitality from journalism. The only distinction between one paper and another, apart from such things as layout and general appearance, would lie in the type of reader catered for. The stimulation of thought and enterprise which springs from controversy would be largely vitiated, and the political parties would have much less opportunity for voicing their various points of view. Perhaps most important of all, it would require legislative action for such a change to be put into effect. The government of the day would have to assist the foundation of the newspaper trusts and supervise them to ensure that no bias crept in. In effect the result would be control of the press by the party in power – an unparalleled disaster to the liberty of the individual.

Again it would be possible to raise the moral tone of the press by forbidding the detailed reporting of morbid news items, but again government control would be exercised, with a probable outcry from all sections of the public, justly anxious for the safety of free speech.

We are forced to the conclusion that improvement to the press must come from the newspaper proprietors themselves, spurred on by the impulse of advancing public opinion. We have newspapers representing each political party, and we have the great independent newspapers, safeguarded by the honourable men chosen to be their trustees. The choice between them must rest with the individual, who will never forget, and will never let his rulers forget, the principle expressed in these words of Junius:

'The liberty of the press is the Palladium of all the civil, political,
and religious rights of an Englishman.'