

HOW FREE IS THE PRESS

Dorothy L. Sayers

*DOROTHY LEIGH SAYERS (1893- 1957), essayist, playwright, poet and writer of detective fiction, was educated at Somerville College, Oxford. In 1915, Sayers became one of the first women to graduate from Oxford University. Her published works include **Clouds of Witness**, **Unnatural Death**, **Lord Peter Views the Body**, **Nine Tailors**, **Gaudi Night**. She has edited **Great Short Stories of Detection** and published a competent verse translation of **Inferno**. In the essay 'How Free is the Press', she writes with clarity of thought to make a strong case against mis-reporting by the press or against the misuse of the freedom of the press.*



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. Do you read a newspaper daily? Discuss the main story of the day.
2. Did you find any interview of Prime minister/ Chief Minister in any paper today? What was the interview about?
3. Is the socio- political condition of your locality reflected / represented in the newspaper?

HOW FREE IS PRESS

1. That without a free Press there can be no free people is a thing that all free people **take for granted**; we need not discuss it. Nor will we at this moment discuss the **restrictions** placed upon the press in time of war. At such times all liberties have to be restricted; free people must see to it that when peace comes full freedom is restored. In the meantime, it may be **wholesome** to consider what that freedom is, and how far it is truly desirable. It may turn out to be no freedom at all, or even a mere freedom to

tyrannies, for tyranny is, in fact, the uncontrolled freedom of one man, or one gang, to impose its will on the world.

2. When we speak of 'the freedom of the press', we usually mean freedom in a very technical and restricted sense – namely, freedom from direction or **censorship** by the government. In this respect, the British Press is, under ordinary conditions, singularly free. It can attack the policy and political character of ministers, interfere in the delicate machinery of foreign diplomacy, conduct campaigns to **subvert** the constitution, **incite** citizens to **discontent** and rebellion, expose **scandals** and **foment** grievances, and generally **harry** and belabour the servants of the State, with almost perfect liberty. On occasion, it can become a weapon to **coerce** the Government to conform to what it asserts to be the will of the people.
3. So far, this is all to the good. Occasionally, this freedom may produce **disastrous** hesitations and inconsistencies in public policy, or tend to hamper the swift execution of emergency measures; but, generally speaking, it works to secure and sustain that central doctrine of Democracy as we understand it – that the State is not the master but the servant of the people.
4. The Press, as a whole, and in this technical and restricted sense, is thus pretty free in a peaceful Britain. There is no shade of political opinion that does not somehow **contrive** to express itself. But if we go on to imagine that any particular organ of the Press enjoys the larger liberty of being a forum of public opinion', we are gravely mistaken. Every newspaper is **shackled** to its own set of **overlords** and, in its turn, like the Unmerciful Servant, exercises a powerful bondage upon its readers and on the public generally. Indeed, we may say that the heaviest restriction upon the freedom of public opinion is not the official censorship of the Press, but the unofficial censorship by a Press which exists not so much to express opinion as to manufacture it.
5. The editorial policy of a popular daily is controlled by two chief factors. The first is the interest of the advertisers from whom it gets the money which enables it to keep up its large circulation. No widely circulated newspaper dare support a public policy, however much in the national interest, that might conflict with the vested interests of its advertisers. Thus, any proposal to control the marketing of branded goods (as, for example, of margarine in 1939) will be violently opposed, on the loftiest hygienic grounds, by the papers that carry the branded advertising. On the other hand, any product that refuses to pay the high advertising rates of a powerful national organ will be (again on the highest moral and hygienic grounds) **denounced**, **smashed** and **driven off the market**; yet you are not allowed to use any product that dissociates itself from the advertising ring. All this is understandable, since a big circulation spells **bankruptcy** if the paper has to depend on its sales for its **revenue**. Every newspaper lives in a **perpetual**

precarious balance; it must increase its sales to justify its advertising rates, and to increase its sales, it must sell itself far below the cost of production; but if it sells more copies than its advertising will pay for, it faces financial disaster. Consequently, the more widespread and powerful the organ, the more closely it has to subserve vested interests.

6. This means that the cheap daily paper, which goes everywhere and has most influence, is far less free than the more expensive weekly or monthly, which draws a higher proportion of its revenue from sales. Therefore, it is only the comparatively rich who can afford to reward independent expressions of opinion.
7. The second chief source of a newspaper's revenue is the wealth of the man or company that owns it; accordingly, its policy is largely determined by the personal spites and political ambitions of its **proprietor**. The failure, for example, of a great newspaper magnate to secure a government appointment may be the signal for the unleashing of a **virulent** campaign, in every organ which he controls, against the minister or the party which has disappointed his ambitions. The public, knowing nothing of the personal bias behind the attack and little of the vast network of control which ties up whole groups of the London and Provincial Press in the hands of a single man or combine, sees only that great number of (what appear to him to be) independent organs are united in a single, savage, and persistent condemnation. Unless he is exceptionally **shrewd**, exceptionally **cynical**, or of exceptionally **resolute** and independent mind, he can scarcely help being influenced, and having his vote influenced; and it is odds that he will never realise the nature of the pressure brought to bear upon him.

B.1.1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- i. Press is free everywhere.
- ii. There is no internal censorship on the press.
- iii. Proprietors have their personal interests as well.
- iv. Advertisers contribute to the revenue of the newspaper.

B.1. 2. Answer the following questions briefly

- 1) What do free 'people' take for granted?
- 2) Are there restrictions on Press in time of war?
- 3) What do you mean by the term 'free press'?
- 4) Who is the master – the state or the people?
- 5) What does the unofficial censorship seek to do ?
- 6) Name two sources of revenue newspapers usually survive on.

8. But still more serious, because more subtle, than the control applied to individual papers by various kinds of interest is the control and censorship exercised by the Press upon the news and opinions which it **disseminates**. The control rests upon and exploits two basic assumptions about the public: (a) that they have not the wit to distinguish truth from falsehood; (b) that they do not care at all that a statement is false, provided it is **titillating**. Neither assumption is flattering; and indeed, between the language used privately by the late **Lord Northcliffe** about his British readers and the language used publicly by Hitler about his German readers there is very little to choose. Both assume that readers can be made to believe anything. The result is that accurate reporting, which used to be the pride of the old-fashioned independent newspaper, has largely given place to reporting which is at best **slipshod** and at worst **tendentious**.
9. I should like to illustrate, with quite trivial examples drawn from personal experience, the various ways by which both fact and opinion can be distorted, so that a kind of smear of unreality is spread over the whole newspaper page, from reports of public affairs down to the most casual items of daily gossip.
10. 1. Sensational Headlines; False Emphasis; and Suppression of Context. This year (1941), at the Malvern Conference, I read a paper dealing with the theological grounds for the Church's concern with politics and sociology, with the complementary dangers of **pietism** and **Caesarism**, and with the importance of **Incarnation doctrine** in this connection. Out of 8000 words, some 250 dealt with the connection between Caesarism and an undue emphasis placed on sexual, as contrasted with financial, morality. This quite subsidiary paragraph was reported everywhere, under sensational headlines, in such a manner as to convey that this passing **allusion** formed the whole subject matter of my address. Out of the 8000 words about theology, the reporters picked the only one which they presumed their readers capable of understanding – to wit, '**fornication**'. You, the reader, will appreciate the compliment. I will, however, add for you comfort that this report was not made (as you might well suppose) by a Pressman from your favourite paper, specially selected for his understanding of **ecclesiastical** affairs. All the distorted reports emanated from a News Agency; and the individual editors, when remonstrated with, were for the most part content to **disavow** responsibility. This is how you learn what happens at public meetings.
11. 2. **Garbling**. This is the special accomplishment of the Press interviewer. During the production of my latest play, I was asked, "What were my plans for the future?" I replied that I never made plans; that I preferred writing plays to novels, though novels paid better; and that, financial considerations notwithstanding, if the opportunity to write a play were to present itself - for example, another commission for the **Canterbury Festival** - I should undoubtedly write it. This reply duly appeared in

the Press, in the form: 'Miss Sayers said she would write no more plays, except on commission'.

12. **Bland perversions** of this kind, together with the interviewer's playful habit of making statements himself and attributing them to his victim make reported interviews singularly unreliable reading. One must allow for the Pressman's vivid imagination. I remember reading with interest that my eyes 'glittered behind my glasses' when making some remark or other, since that particular interview was given by telephone, I could only conclude that the interviewer's own eyes must have been 'double magnifying glass microscope of extra power'. But the last, best word on Press interviews has been written by 'Q' in 'From a Cornish Window'; those who believe that public characters say everything they are reported as saying should read it and take warning.
13. 3. **Inaccurate Reporting of Facts.** Some time ago a daily paper reported that my flat had been broken into the previous day, and that I had returned from (I think they said) **Oxford**, in time to disturb the thieves. This was true enough, except that every detail was wrong. The date was three days earlier than alleged, I was not at Oxford but at the **King's Garden Party**, and the intruders had been disturbed, not by me, but most likely by the newspaper boy. The interest here lies in the probable reason for the mis-statements. The date had to be changed to conceal the fact that the news was already 'cold'; and I was substituted for the boy, presumably for my greater snob-value. The altered date was a bad blunder – **Buckingham Palace** would have adorned the tale to so much better advantage.
14. 4. **Plain Reversal of the Facts.** On a summons for unshaded lights, a letter of mine was read to the Bench explaining that my servant had carefully drawn the curtains, but that there had proved, unfortunately, to be a defect in the curtains themselves. The local paper duly reported: 'Miss Sayers said that a servant had forgotten to draw the curtains.' (This was calculated to cause pain and distress to my servant – but why should anybody care?)

B.2.1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the unit you have just studied:

- a) Accurate reporting has given place to reporting which is at best slipshod and at worst tendentious because it is assumed that
- b) Sensational headlines, false emphasis and supposition of context are some of the ways to
- c)is the special accomplishment of the Press interviewer.
- d) The date in the newspaper report had to be changed to

B.2. 3. Answer the following questions briefly :

1. What are the two basic assumptions about the public?
2. What is supposition of context?
3. Name two things that make the reports unreliable reading?

15. 5. Random and **Gratuitous Invention**. Without consulting me at all, a small and gossip paper recently informed its readers that two of my favourite hobbies were 'gardening and keeping cats'. I do not see why anybody should want to know my hobbies – but if they do it, it would surely be better to mention the right ones. This choice was peculiarly unfortunate. If there is anything I **detest**, it is gardening; and although my household always includes a necessary cat, which lives in the kitchen and is supposed to catch mice, I have little to do with it, except to remove it and its hairs from the chairs and cushions, and open the door for it from time to time under protest. Shortage of domestic staff has since constrained me to live on more intimate terms with the cat. But if he is a 'hobby', then so are the 'handyman' and the 'daily woman'.



16. 6. Deliberate **Miracle-mongering**. It was recently reported in various local papers that, in a public address, I had delivered some 20,000 words in the space of an hour and a quarter.

This would in any case have been impossible. Actually, the reporter had the full text of my speech in his hands, and could have seen for himself that it consisted of almost exactly 8000 words. The error was thus precisely 150 percent, a useful figure on which to base one's estimate of truth in reporting.

17. Of these six forms of misrepresentation, the first two are the most dangerous. There is no remedy against them. They do not come within the narrow range of the law of **libel**; for to misrepresent a man's attitude and opinions is no offence. Nor could one readily persuade a jury that a lie had been told about one, since a sort of formal veracity in detail is used to convey a totally false impression of the speaker's words as a whole. Consequently, it is next door to impossible to secure either correction or apology. Which brings us to:

18. Flat Suppression: letters of protest may be written. These may be (a) ignored; (b) printed in full or in part, accompanied by an editorial comment to the effect that the words reported were actually said, and that the speaker must not expect to monopolise

the whole of the paper's valuable space; (c) answered privately by the editor – a manoeuvre that does nothing to correct the false impression left in the public mind. Only occasionally, and usually from a provincial paper, does one receive full apology and correction. Let me quote, **honoris causa**, a note written to me from an editor of the older school: 'Thank you for your letter, which we thought it our duty to print ... we try to preserve our reputation for balanced news.' Here are three old-fashioned words, duty, reputation, balanced: do they still represent what the reader demands, or expects, from **Fleet Street**?

19. To get misleading statements corrected entails, in any case, a heavy and exhausting effort of correspondence – for the falsehood may be **syndicated** all over the worlds over-night and appear simultaneously in several hundred papers. In addition, if one makes a fuss, or ventures to accuse the newspapers of lack of veracity, there always lurks in the background the shadow of genteel blackmail. Any public person – writer, speaker, actor, politician – is subtly made to feel that if he offends the Press he will suffer for it.
20. No threat, of course, is openly uttered; but books and plays may be unfavourably noticed or silently ignored – allusions sneering, though not actually libellous, may crop up in the gossip columns – a thousand hints will be quietly conveyed that the Press can make or break reputations. Books which venture to criticise the Press are, therefore, rare; nor is it easy to find a paper honest enough to print an article on the subject.
21. Speeches may be made, of course, but they will not reach the wider public, for they will not be reported in full; only a carefully isolated sentence or so will find its way into the papers under some such headline as: 'Bishop Seeks to Muzzle Press', or 'M.P. Attacks Press Liberty'. Indeed, the slightest effort to hinder the irresponsible dissemination of nonsense is greeted by a **concerted** howl: 'This is a threat to the Freedom of the Press!'
22. No wonder that within three days lately the Archbishop of York and a Minister of the Crown were heard to utter the same despairing cry in face of journalistic misrepresentation and indiscretion: 'We cannot control the Press!'
23. The particular examples I have given are, you will say, of very small importance. True: That is what makes them so **symptomatic** and so disquieting. They do not show any direct wresting of the truth towards a propagandist end – against such attempts the reader may, with a little mental effort, efficiently arm himself. What they do clearly show is an all-pervading carelessness about veracity, penetrating every column, creeping into the most trifling item of news, smudging and blurring the boundary lines between fact and fancy, creating a general atmosphere of cynicism and mistrust.

24. He that is unfaithful in little is unfaithful also in much; if a common court case cannot be correctly reported, how are we to believe the reports of world events? If an interviewer misinterprets the novelist whom we have all seen, what does he do with the foreign statesman whom we have never seen? If the papers can be convicted of False Emphasis, Garbling, Inaccuracy, Reversal of the Fact, Random Invention, Miracle-Mongering, and Flat Suppression in cases where such distortions are of advantage to nobody, what are we to suppose about those cases in which vested interests are closely connected? And, above all, what are we to make of the assumptions on which all this is based – that the reader is too stupid to detect falsehood and too frivolous to even resent it?
25. Decent journalists do not like the present state of affairs. Nor do the more responsible editors. But the number of editors and journalists who can maintain a high standard of ‘duty, balance, and reputation’ in the face of pressure grows less day by day. It is difficult for any paper that presents its news soberly to maintain its circulation; perhaps it is true that every nation gets the Press it deserves.
26. But supposing the reader does care about accuracy, does he resent contempt for his intelligence, does he want the truth what is said and done – what steps is he to take? How is he to get at the facts which are withheld; or **smothered** under these mountains of distortion and absurdity? How is he to make his will felt? Is he to write angry letters, or transfer his daily penny from one organ to another? Will anybody care if he does? They will care if he protests in sufficient numbers. But his penny is a small weapon to oppose against the vested interests and the pooled money of the great combines. His helplessness is a measure of the freedom which the Press enjoys – but is the reader free?
27. The common has a vote in Parliament. He has a Parliamentary representative whom he can **badger** and **heckle** and whose tenure of office rests upon his consent. If he likes to make use of the machinery of a democracy, he can have questions asked in the house; in the last resort, he can destroy one government and make another. But there is no machinery by which he can control the organs which mould opinion. For that, his sole resource is a penny a day and this native wit and will. In time of crisis, the newspapers are first with the cry: ‘Let the people know the facts!’ But perhaps Fact is a deity **invoked** by the people only in the last emergency when the easy gods of peace have failed them.

B.3.1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- i. The author was very fond of gardening and keeping cats.
- ii. The author had delivered 20,000 words in the space of an hour and a quarter.
- iii. To misrepresent a man's attitude and opinion is no offence.
- iv. To get misleading statements corrected is very easy.
- v. Any public person is subtly made to feel that if he offends the press he will suffer for it.
- vi. The press can make or break reputation.

B.3.2. Answer the following questions briefly :

- 1) Why do books rarely criticise the Press?
- 2) How do the newspapers greet the slightest effort to hinder the irresponsible dissemination of nonsense?
- 3) Name the seven charges the author makes against the Press?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

take for granted(phr): assume, accept without questioning

restrictions (n): limitations

wholesome (adj): good, healthy

censorship (n): the policy of suppressing publication of any item

subvert (v): cause the downfall of

incite (v): stir to action

discontent (n): dissatisfaction

scandals (n): rumours, gossips, serious breach of social or moral behaviour

foment (v): provoke, excite

harry (v): harass, bother

coerce (v): force, intimidate

disastrous (adj): causing great loss

contrive (v): arrange, cook up, invent

shackled (v): chained up, fettered

overlords (n): absolute rulers

bankruptcy (n): having no money at all

revenue (n): income

perpetual (adj): constant, everlasting

subserve (v): serve as a means in promoting

precarious (adj): dangerous

proprietor ((n): owner

virulent (adj): venomous, spiteful

shrewd (adj): intelligent, cunning

cynical (adj): sceptical

resolute (adj): determined

disseminates (v): spread

titillating (adj): pleasantly stimulating

Lord Northcliff, Alfred Charles William Harmsworth (1865-1922): British newspaper proprietor who acquired a chain of newspapers and founded the **Daily Mail** (1896) – the first cheap, popular English daily. Through this he influenced public opinion especially during the First World War

slipshod (adj): careless, casual

tendentious (adj): deliberately biased

pietism (n): The stressing of personal feelings rather than the dogma of intellectual truth

Caesarism (n): absolute dictatorship

Incarnation doctrine (n.phr.): the theory of the union of god and man in the person of Christ

allusion (n): indirect reference

fornication (n): voluntary sexual relationship between an unmarried man and unmarried woman

ecclesiastical (adj): religious, related to the Christian church

disavow (v): refuse to accept responsibility of

garbling (gerund): giving a confused version of

Canterbury Festival: a festival of plays held at Canterbury, a city in Kent, England

bland perversions (n.phr): outright and deliberate distortions

'Q': pen name of Sir Arthur Quiller Couch (1863-1944), an English poet and author of repute

Oxford: the main town of Oxfordshire, England, the seat of Oxford University

King's Garden Party: a social gathering at the lawns of Buckingham Palace, with the ruling British Crown as host /hostess where social celebrities are invited

Buckingham Palace: The London home of the British sovereign constructed by Nash (1821-36) and partly designed early in the 20th century

gratuitous (adj): intentional

detest (v): hate, despise

miracle-mongering: intentional spreading of stories outstanding achievement etc.

libel (n): defamation, false or insulting statement

Honoris causa: intended to do honour

Fleet street: a street in Central London where most British newspapers have their offices

syndicated (v): , expressed, collectively circulated

concerted (adj): concentrated, combined

symptomatic (adj): suggestive, indicative

smothered (v): covered completely

badger (v): making unclear

heckle (v): harass

invoked (v): appealed

C. 1. Long Answer Questions

1. The editorial policy of a popular daily is controlled by two chief factors. Which are they? Explain
2. What is garbling? How does Sayers illustrate this form of distortion?
3. Describe in your own words the instances of deliberate miracle-mongering.
4. How are letters of protest treated by the newspapers? Describe in your own words.
5. Have you ever written a letter of protest to any newspaper? What was the fate of this letter?
6. 'He that is unfaithful in little is unfaithful also in much.' How does Dorothy L. Sayers cite trivial personal examples to prove that the newspapers misrepresent in various ways? Do you agree with her?
7. What is the author's attitude to the freedom of Press? Do you agree with her?
8. 'Indeed, we may say that the heaviest restriction upon the freedom of public opinion is not the official censorship of the Press, but the unofficial censorship by a Press which exists not so much to express opinion as to manufacture it.' How does the writer view the relationship between the press and the public opinion? Explain.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

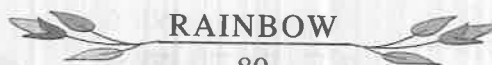
1. Should press enjoy absolute freedom?
2. A free and fair press is the true watchdog of democracy.

C. 3. COMPOSITION

1. Write a letter to the Editor of an English daily highlighting the poor sanitation in your locality.
2. Write the summary of the lesson in about 150 words

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use



RAINBOW

80

Ex. 1. Correct the spelling of the following words:

srewd

proprieter

precarious

restriccion

disastrus

bankrupcy

insite

censorsip

titilating

Ex. 2. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of the following words – the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common

denounced

resolute

precarious

gratuitous

dissemination

cynical

withheld

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following sentences carefully:

a) A common case cannot be **correctly** reported.

b) It must increase its sale to justify its **advertising** rates.

c) When we speak of 'the freedom of the press, we usually mean freedom in a very technical and restricted sense – namely, freedom from direction or **censorship** by the government.

You see that in the first example the adverb '**correctly**' is derived from the adjective '**correct**'. In the second example '**advertising**' which is a present participle, is derived from the verb '**advertise**'. In the last example, '**censorship**' has been derived from the noun 'censor'. In fact, a number of words can be derived from a root word as illustrated below:

accept (v):

accepted (adj),

acceptance (n),

acceptable (adj),

acceptably (adv)

acceptability (n)

Make as many words as possible from the words given below :

resolve

allude

invoke

restrict

renew

D.3. Word-meaning

Ex 1. Find from the lesson words the meanings of which have been given in **Column A**. The last part of each word is given in **Column B**:

Column A

the policy of suppressing publication of any item

causing great loss

the state of being without money

cause the downfall

pleasantly stimulating

stir to action

the proprietor of anything

Column B

.....ship

.....ous

.....ptcy

.....ert

.....ting

.....ite

.....ner

Ex. 2.. Fill in the blanks with suitable options given in the brackets:

- a) We all become very by the news reporting. (excited, exciting)
- b) I do notthe incidents. (recollect, recollects)
- c) You maybetween the two English dailies. (chose, choose)
- d) Unfavourable season crop.(effect, affects)
- e) Press should nct be (monopolised, monopolise)
- f) The report was (distorting, distorted)

D. 4. Phrases

Ex.1. Read the lesson carefully and find out the sentences in which the following phrases have been used. Then use these phrases in sentences of your own:

at such time	so far	on occasion
placed upon	keep up	driven off
to bear upon	creeping into	make of

E. GRAMMAR

Ex.1. Read the following sentences, taken from the lesson, carefully:

If the opportunity to write a play were to present itself – for example, another commission for the Canterbury Festival - I should undoubtedly write it.

The sentence given above sets a condition and so it is called a conditional sentence. Mark that the singular subject '**the opportunity to write a play**' is followed by a plural verb '**were**'. Such structure is used when we have to express an unreal condition. Consider some more examples:

If I were a bird I would fly to you.

If I were young I would do it.

If she were a singer she would sing a song.

Write ten more sentences on this sentences, based on this structure:

If+ (S+ were) + S+ would/should + V₁

F. ACTIVITY

Ex. 1. Consult you teacher or reference books and do a project work on the 'History of Press in Bihar.

