

# Distortions in the Press

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Chesterton veröffentlichte den nachfolgend wiedergegebenen Text in den «London Illustrated News» vor über hundert Jahren, am 6. November 1909. Höchst bemerkenswert erscheint seine Aktualität angesichts der Diskussionen um die Aufgaben der Presse bzw. der Medien und «fake news». Ganz so neu scheint die Sache also nicht zu sein.

The blackest of lies is the lie that is entirely a truth.

*Lord Rosebery, I think, once offered the paradoxical suggestion that newspapers should consist of news. He proposed to exclude all comment, moral, political, and (I hope) financial. It may be doubted whether the journals under his Lordship's review would be disarmed by so simple a reform. Newspapers have been known before now to indulge in methods even more direct than comment. The comment at the worst can only be fallacious; the news they can be false. Or even if it is not false, it may be so selected as to give a totally false picture of the place or topic under dispute. Selection is the fine art of falsity. Tennyson put it very feebly and inadequately when he said that the blackest of lies is the lie that is half a truth. The blackest of lies is the lie that is entirely a truth. Once give me the right to pick out anything and I shall not need*

*to invent anything. If in my History of the World, published some centuries hence, I am allowed to mark the nineteenth century only by the names of Mr. Whitaker Wright and Jack the Ripper, I will promise to add no further comment. If I am free to report this planet to the Man in the Moon as being inhabited by scorpions and South African millionaires, I will undertake to create a false impression solely by the facts. I shall not ask to say what I choose, so long as I can choose what I choose. So long as I am not asked to tell the truth, I will cheerfully undertake not to tell any lies.*

*That, one innocently supposed, was the arrangement we all had accepted. The newspapers do not need to offer any view of the facts; for the facts themselves are as artistic and one-sided as any view of them could be. The most perfect comment would spoil a story that had already been picked out with the perfection of an epigram. «The foreign news» of one of the great go-ahead dailies is itself a comment on the complexity of Europe; and why should we need a comment on a comment? I, for one, had grown quite used to the established modern usage: strictly partisan information unvulgarised by any party rhetoric. But of late I have begun to see a new method developing, a method which is surely worthy of notice if only because it raises again Lord Rosebery's question in a somewhat strange form.*

*The new method of journalism is to offer so many comments or, at least, secondary circumstances that there is actually no room left for the original facts. Lord Rosebery wished to have*

the story without the moral. We seem likely now to have the moral without the story: at any rate, to have the moral effects without the story. A pebble is thrown into the sea, and lost to sight for ever; we only behold the concentric ripples widening for ever through all the waters of the world. The English or American Press will be suddenly seized with a storm of indignation about something; new phases of that indignation will flash forth hour after hour; but the really difficult thing will be to discover the plain outline of the original affair. Most of my readers must, I think, have observed instances of this overwhelming wave of irrelevance. Some brokers at Amsterdam (let us say) throw furniture at an auctioneer. We do not hear of the event, however, even in so plain and meagre form as that. We see a paragraph headed «Anti-Auctioneer Movement in Holland», and then after that, in smaller letters, «Strong Protest in Chicago». Then it becomes a feature of the newspaper for several days under an established title, such as «The Dutch Persecution» or «The Cry of the Auctioneers.» Under this heading are arranged all sorts of things in little separate paragraphs; an attempt to interview the Chinese Ambassador on the subject; Mr Carnegie's strong opinion that furniture thrown at the head will probably hurt; the Pope's pronouncement on the ethics of auctioneering; a letter signed «Indignant Briton» demanding that all brokers (or all Dutchmen) should be turned out of England, a proposal by some energetic idiot to open a subscription for somebody; and, finally, a series of soothing assurances telling us that the affair is not likely seriously to disturb the Bank Rate, the King's health, the North Sea whale-fisheries, or the General Election. Through all this forest of inconsequent facts I wander, trying in vain to find the ultimate and cogent facts upon which to form my opinion. I want to know what the auctioneer did, why they threw furniture at him, what defence they offer for having done so, whether he threw any furniture first, and, in short, all the things I should want to know if I were a jurymen such and were properly trying the case. But these are exactly the facts that I can never find in the newspapers. Anecdotes of

the auctioneer's childhood, parallel instances of the tyranny of brokers in the Dark Ages, passionate pronouncements by novelists and Nonconformist ministers that we must go in and win; but not on the story. This curious method has for some time marked our attitude in the case of those foreign crimes or tyrannies against which we English are so heroically ready to rebel. I remember that the accounts of the second trial of Dreyfus were so encumbered with anecdotes and European opinion and gossip generally that they had no room for any intelligible account of the evidence at all. The report of the trial itself was something that no human being could make head or tail of; questions without any answer, answers not provoked by any question, sudden and violent changes of the subject, prolonged and feverish pursuit of persons who had never been heard of before; abrupt announcements by public men referring to disclosures that had not been disclosed—it was like reading the law reports in a nightmare. The story of the Pannizardi telegram, for instance, was told in such a way as to make no sort of sense at all; it was only long afterwards that I pieced the true facts together, with some remarkable results to myself. We are perpetually in danger of the same mistake in all our English indignations about Russia, about Spain, about the Congo. It is only too probable that there is much wrong; but I want to hear the wrong, not to hear about it. As it is, it is almost always on some utterly extraneous and impertinent point of creed, social type, or historical analogy that our protestors insist. I will give but one example. I did not see the unfortunate Ferrer tried; but I can easily imagine that this trial may have been hasty and unjust. I remember what our own courts-martial were in Africa, in face of a far less formidable rebellion.

Now, if Ferrer was unfairly tried, his judges should be denounced, though he were the filthiest brigand or pickpocket in Spain. But the indignant journalists do not say, «In such and such respects Ferrer was unfairly tried.» They tell me instead that he was a great educationist.

*That is what I mean by introducing irrelevant moralities instead of the story. Why should not a great educationist be shot like anybody else; why should he not deserve shooting like anybody else? I know more than one educationist whom I should like to have a pot at. Great educationists before now have been oppressors and profligates, cruel torturers, or vile corruptors of youth. I do not say that Ferrer was not a just and honourable man; I do not know anything about it, thanks to the newspapers. He is not the first honourable man that has been executed by other just and honourable men in times of armed rebellion. I am only concerned to protest against the intellectual method which transfers the public feeling from the injustice of his sentence to the excellence of his profession or his hobby. Plenty of poor people have been*

*killed in the Spanish riots, and I confess I am not comfortable about this English journalistic habit, which feels the blow of the tyrant not as a blow against humanity, but only as a but only as a blow against education and eminence.*

Selection is the fine art of falsity.

Der Text findet sich auch in der Chesterton-Gesamtausgabe: **Gilbert Keith Chesterton**, Collected Works, Bd. XXVIII, The Illustrated London News 1908–1910, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1987.