

## **Jawaharlal Nehru and the Press**

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*Among other things, Jawaharlal Nehru is also very well known as a journalist. Before independence, Nehru contributed to various newspapers as a journalist and advocated for the freedom of the nation and the press. In his opinion, the press is the voice of the public and therefore, the freedom of the press is necessary to protect public interest. As a freedom fighter, he recognized the importance of the press in the freedom struggle. As a statesman, he acknowledged the key role of the press in interacting with the masses. He also established a newspaper named 'National Herald' and therefore had a wide exposure of the newspaper industry and the profession of journalism. After getting elected as the first Prime Minister of India, Nehru wanted to develop India as the country of his dreams with the cooperation of the press. However, later his views changed about freedom of the press when a section of the press criticized his foreign policies and views on several issues in the debates of the parliament. He enforced restrictions on the press. He, therefore, has been criticized for being the first Prime Minister of India, curtailing the autonomy of the press to enforce his vision on his opponents and critics of his policies.*

**[Keywords :** Freedom of the press, Role of journalists' organization, Monopolistic tendencies in the press, Role of the press]

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## 1. Nehru as a Journalist

One of the most notable aspects of Nehru's multidimensional personality was that he himself was a journalist. Before independence, he contributed to many newspapers as a journalist. While interacting with the press, he submitted that I ought to have been a journalist instead of what I am. He said, "I think that if I had no other job in life I should have turned to journalism" (*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 1972 : 439). In the present endeavor, Nehru's views on the press will be examined in two historical phases - phase one, when he worked as a journalist, and phase two, when he became the Prime Minister of India. While as a journalist, he strongly advocated for the freedom of the press, later as Prime Minister, he expressed his distress with the working of the press in the development of India as the country of his dreams. In his 'An Autobiography' (1980) he has discussed in great length, the press of his time.

Nehru started his journalism with his contributions in the newspaper named 'The Independent'. This newspaper was established by his father Pandit Motilal Nehru in 1910. This was the period of freedom struggle of India and Nehru participated in it, on the ground as well as through his writings. In his writings, he strongly advocated the civil liberties and freedom for the press. Civil liberties are fundamental rights of the people. In his views, "People should be allowed to express their opinion by speech or writing. If civil liberties are suppressed, a nation loses all vitality and becomes impotent for anything substantial" (*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 1972 : 414). In his vision, the right of civil liberty is the right to criticize or oppose the government. Later, in 1938, Nehru started his own newspaper named 'The National Herald'. The paper was banned by the British Raj during the 'Quit India Movement'.

Nehru was very much aware of the importance of the press in interacting with the public. He started writing in the newspapers for freedom of the press and India. N. Ram, talking about Nehru as a leader of the masses, submits, "As a leader imbued with a rich sense of history, Jawaharlal, more than any mainstream Congress leaders, recognized in the press question the anti-imperialist, freedom loving content and spirit that made it take wing and become a competent part of democratic India" (Ram, 1988 : 172).

During the freedom struggle, journalism was a mission for freedom struggle, and it was not practiced for earning a livelihood only (Sharma, 1990). Journalists propagated the freedom of the country and expressed the views of the masses. The tone of the press was violent, and journalists were motivated by the high ideal of national independence. The Indian press unitedly acted to support the freedom struggle. The British Government, realizing the influence of the press, promulgated several repressive measures to curtail the freedom of the press viz., Vernacular Press Act 1878, Press Emergency Powers Act 1931, Special Powers Ordinance 1932. Nehru was not in favor of the Press and Emergency Powers Act. Nehru, in his writings, strongly opposed these repressive measures and he argued, "I am against suppression of news as it would deprive the public of the only means of forming a correct judgement on world events" (*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 1972 : 428). In his views, the press helps in the formation of public opinion.

Before independence, most of the press was in the hands of journalist owners with scarce finances and very low budget. Newspaper printing was not a lucrative business. Rather it was perceived as a weapon to achieve the independence of India. Nehru strongly stood by the side of the press against repressive measures of British Government. In his opinion the fight for the freedom of the press is a part and parcel of freedom struggle. He, therefore appealed to the masses, "The question of freedom of the press is a vital question and inevitably the brunt of the light must fall upon the journalists, but the general public must also take their fair share in it" (*Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, 1972: 441). He appealed to the public for support to build pressure on the British Raj in favor of the freedom of expression.

Expressing his views in the inaugural session of Civil Liberties Union, Madras, Nehru said, "Remember this also, that apart from the positive acts of suspension of civil liberty, far more dangerous is the atmosphere of fear that is created, which prevents people from saying or writing in accordance with their wishes....I do not know how an editor can function at all in this atmosphere. Where there is fear, there can be no development of the human spirit" (Rau, 1964 : 1249).

M. Chalapathi Rau (1964), the editor of *The National Herald*, who had an opportunity to work with Nehru, submitted, "Jawaharlal Nehru had a high conception of the place of the press in national life both during the freedom struggle and after freedom". For Nehru,

journalism was a part of political and social action. Nehru advocated for high professional standards to be maintained in the daily working of the press. Describing Nehru's vision for press freedom in the working of *The National Herald*, Rau writes that, his "concern for editors' freedom extended beyond freedom of expression to relations with directors and managers. Nobody was to interfere with the editor's functioning; he might be right or wrong; but if his integrity was unquestioned, he was to function freely once he was appointed" (Rau, 1964 : 1249).

Nehru was in favour of giving complete freedom of work to the journalists employed in the newspaper. Nehru wanted that the press should maintain the high standards of the profession in the newspapers if they want freedom of expression. "Nehru had immense respect for the 'freedom of the press'; and this was the reason why, after quitting the editorship of the *National Herald*, he never intervened in the functioning of the paper" (Saxena, 2020 : 1).

He wanted to mobilize women to participate in the national struggle more actively and in increased numbers. Therefore, he advocated for their increased role as journalists too. Throughout the freedom struggle, he continued to write on issues related to the freedom of the press and the country. He was a strong supporter of the freedom of expression of the journalists (Chand, 2017).

## **2. Prime Minister Nehru and the Press**

India got freedom in 1947 and Jawahar Lal Nehru became the first Prime Minister. He expressed his wish to work with the press in developing India as a democratic, socialist nation. In his views, the role of the press has increased multifold after independence. He clarified his intention of collaborating with the press for making India a modern nation and for the eradication of social evils of casteism and communalism. Speaking in the Parliament, he submitted, "The press is not an external force. It is a powerful force, but it is an internal force. Previously, it had to influence an alien government and the alien government could suppress it or injure it but today it is much more powerful for a variety of reasons. Though it is not of the Government, it is a part of Parliament, if I may say so" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 507).

In view of the above statement, it may be concluded that Nehru visualized a major role of the press in parliamentary democracy. He conveyed his message to the press, that the Government was eager to

work with the press to rebuild India. The press is the fourth pillar of democracy after the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The free press is the watchdog of democracy. Elaborating the role of the press, he said, "it plays a very important part in our lives; it molds people's mind and thoughts and thus effects the policies of the Government; if not always directly. Therefore, when we have to deal with any major problem, it is important that the press should - if I may say so with all humility give the right lead" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 441).

### **3. Monopolistic Tendencies in the Press : Whose freedom is it, Proprietor, or the Journalists?**

After independence the newspaper publication started developing as an industry for earning profit. High investment was required to establish the infrastructure required to establish a newspaper. Nehru was not in favour of newspaper chains. "Jawaharlal Nehru did not like chains; he did not like press barons or any other barons; he did not like editors who served only baronial interests" (Rau, 1964 : 1249).

Nehru condemned monopolistic tendencies in the press, i.e., the press in the hands of financial barons. He was against any restrictions on journalists by the owners of the press. Editors and journalists must be allowed to function with complete freedom and to the best of their abilities and professional integrity. Although Nehru knew it very well that to reach the masses the circulation of newspapers needs to be increased. However, in his opinion, this should not be achieved at the cost of the public interest. Newspapers should not be used to propagate any agenda or personal ideology. Nehru advised tolerance to the proprietors and management of the newspapers, in dealing with the employee journalists. He stood for the high standards and values in the profession of journalism. Nehru condemned the degradation of editorial staff in the newspapers by proprietors. He spoke to the journalists' organizations about the need to maintain high standards of the profession, and maintain self-regulation in the profession. Newspapers' editorial board should focus on the quality of the news, instead of thinking about the ways of increasing the circulation of the paper.

Freedom of the professionals employed in an organization has always been a debatable issue. Autonomy of the self-employed professionals is always greater than the autonomy of the employed

professionals. Doctors and lawyers are examples of predominantly free professions. In India, majority of the journalists are employed, and freelancing is not much encouraged. Nehru alarmed against the hidden dangers of the monopolistic press. He asked the journalists, "When gigantic newspaper chains spring and undermine the freedom of the independent newspaper, when the press in India is controlled by three or four groups of individuals, what kind of press is that?" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 508). "Does the freedom of the press ultimately mean freedom of the rich man to do what he likes with his money through the press?" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 564).

Proprietors of the newspaper may control the professional autonomy for achieving their own financial and other motives, even sacrificing the public and national interest. Employer has the right to employ anyone and fire those who do not fall in the lines of their editorial policies. It is important to know who frames the editorial policies in a newspaper. Through editorial policies, the proprietors can influence the news content for their personal vested interests. Nehru further elaborated his viewpoint and maintained that "So it may be that the freedom of the press means not so much freedom of the writer to write what he will but rather the owner of a newspaper to see that the writer writes something that he wants him to write." "Therefore, the freedom of the press may come to mean the freedom of the persons who have a knack of making money and that, is not such a noble thing" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 564).

Since most of the journalists are employed in the press and freelance journalism constitutes a small section, the issue of freedom of journalists as an employee of the newspaper is of great relevance. It is debatable if professionals can work with full freedom in the organization. Who frames the editorial policies of the newspapers? Journalists or the owners of the newspaper.

#### **4. Role of the Press in Independent India**

Nehru had tremendous faith in the important role of the press in a democratic nation. In his opinion, the press would play a very constructive role in the development of the newly independent country India. As Prime Minister, Nehru appealed to the press to fight against the social evil of communalism. After the partition of India and Pakistan, communal forces in the country were on their rampage of destruction and violence. Through press, it was possible to interact

with the masses and to appeal them to observe restraint in the interest of the society. Nehru appealed the press, "The press can do a great deal more. Until fear is overcome, this problem will not be solved... So, we have to instill confidence in the minorities. We have to make the majority feel that it is not only for their good name and credit that they have to try and expel fear from the hearts of the minorities but also from the point of view of the narrowest opportunism. If they fail everybody will suffer... As I said, a major change in the atmosphere is necessary. I do not wish to suppress facts, I do not wish to distract facts; but nevertheless, you can always put the matter in a way so as not to inflame the public mind. Every single factor that frightens the minority community should be analyzed as far as possible and fear removed" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 450).

He had high expectations from the press. This is evident from his speech delivered at the All India Newspaper Editors' Conference in 1950, "There is a certain lack of social conscience in this country in spite of our high ideals... This weakens us physically but, what is worse, it weakens us psychologically too. In this matter also, I think, the press can help tremendously, not only by building up a better and higher social conscience but also a code of social behavior in the little things of life" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983: 458).

While addressing the All India Newspaper Editors Conference (AINEC), Nehru identified several tasks for the press. Firstly, the press should put before the public our great achievements in India and people should know what is happening outside their limited surroundings. Secondly, the press should help in developing an emotional and social unity among the people of India by fighting against the barriers of casteism, communalism, provincialism, and fundamentalism. This can be achieved, if the press stands on the right side of the debate by condemning these social evils. Communalism is the very opposite of the Indian cultural traditions of tolerance.

Nehru wanted to mobilize the press to curtail the communal violence and maintain social harmony. He knew that the press could influence the public opinion against communal violence. The press can help in creating social harmony by instilling confidence in the minority and motivating the masses for restoring the Indian culture of tolerance.

The role of the press as described by Nehru is relevant in the Indian society of 2021 also. The press must play a significant role in

fighting against the social evil of communalism, which remains a burning issue in India, in the context of Indo-Pakistan relations and treatment of religious groups by political parties as vote banks in the electoral democracy. The press, however, is not always responsible in its behavior, and one can find examples of sensational reporting of communal issues to increase the circulation of the paper.

## **5. Freedom of the Press : What is the basis of the Freedom of the Press?**

Nehru expressing his views on freedom of the press, while addressing the AINEC on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1950, said, "To my mind, the freedom of the press is not just a slogan from the larger point of view, but it is an essential attribute of the democratic process. I have no doubt that even if the Government dislikes the liberties taken by the press and considers them dangerous, it is wrong to interfere with the freedom of the press. By imposing restrictions, you do not change anything; you merely suppress the public manifestation of certain things, thereby causing the idea and thought underlying them to spread further. Therefore, I would rather have a completely free press with all the danger involved in the wrong use of that freedom than a suppressed or regulated press" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 456).

From the above views it may be submitted, that Nehru was in favor of full freedom of the press in a democracy. He was aware of the misuse of the press freedom by a section of the press, but instead of curtailing the press freedom, he explained the solution of this problem by advocating self-regulation in the press. Nehru, therefore, cautioned the press to behave responsibly and with a sense of public and national interest. No freedom is absolute, and the freedom of the press is no exception to it. With freedom, responsibilities increase too. Nehru submitted, "We can be quite sure that we have the completest freedom of the press. But freedom like everything else indeed, more than everything else, carries certain responsibilities and obligations and a certain discipline with it. If a sense of responsibility, obligation and discipline is lacking, then it is not freedom but the absence of freedom" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 456).

It is human psychology that human beings want more and more freedom with less and less concern about the responsibilities and obligations which are part and parcel of the freedom. Journalists are



no exception to it. Nehru submitted that the vernacular press in particular needs to be more sincere and responsible in their reporting of the issues of social concern. He maintained that “Newspapers are, of course, of all kinds and in India there are thousands of them. There are responsible newspapers; there are newspapers which are more irresponsible; and there are some sheets which seem to excel only in flights of imagination and other acts of irresponsibility” (*Jawaharlal Nehru’s Speeches*, 1983 : 456).

Despite knowing the fact that newspapers have occasionally misused their freedom, he was not in favor of curtailing the freedom of the press. He believed that suppression of the evil is not its cure. In the opinion of Nehru, the solution of this problem, lies in the self-regulation of the press. Instead of any outside agency, let journalists control the press themselves and maintain high standards of the profession. However, self-regulation in Indian press, remains a questionable issue despite the efforts made by the Press Council of India (Sharma, 2021).

## **6. Role of Journalists’ Organizations : What effective steps Journalists’ Organizations have taken to raise the Professional Standards?**

Nehru wanted that Journalists’ organizations should work for self-regulation in the profession. In 1950, while addressing the ‘All India Newspapers Editors’ Conference’, he said “Obviously, the right way is for an organization like yours to interest itself in it directly, not, of course, in the sense of punishing people, but of forming such a strong body of opinion among those who are responsible for the newspapers that any back-slider can be pulled up; or at any rate, it can be made known to the public that the person concerned is a back-slider and is not acting rightly” (*Jawaharlal Nehru’s Speeches*, 1983 : 454-55). Therefore, in his views the journalists’ organizations can expose the guilty and put moral pressure on him to fall in line of the discipline. If the journalists impose self-regulation, there is no need for the Government to impose any restrictions on the press.

Nehru was not very happy with the way journalists’ organizations played their role in maintaining the high professional standards in the press. He asked the journalists organizations, what effective steps they have taken to raise the standards of the profession? He wanted a bigger and more sincere role to be played by

the journalists' organizations in maintaining the high standards of journalism. "If it came to a question of action, he preferred self-regulation. He was probably asking professional organizations to do much more than they could" (Rau, 1964 : 1249).

Self-regulation is one of the first requirement for any profession demanding autonomy to work. Professional autonomy derives its justification from adhering to the public interest and any deviation from this should be self-controlled. It is an important task of the professional organizations to evolve the code of conduct for the profession and ensure their implementation (Sharma, 2021A). Freedom of the journalists involves two things, firstly free expression of opinions and secondly, the evaluation of professional work only by professional peers. In Nehru's opinion the press should be self-regulated and even the Government need not interfere in the working of the press. He said, "The obvious thing is that there should be self-discipline, not only at the group level or at the journalists' or newspapermen's level but in your organization (AINEC) and in other organizations. Where there is no self-discipline, another kind of discipline has to be imposed sooner or later" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 467).

"When the newspaper world is in an undeveloped state in the country, there has to be more of imposed discipline, but it does not fit with democratic way of life and should not be unduly encouraged. Clearly, there cannot be a vacuum. Unless self-discipline develops or standards grow, some kind of standards have to be imposed... Unless you have the strongest possible public opinion amongst yourselves, unless you add some sanction to that, the code of ethics you are laying down will not go very far" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 468).

Press autonomy must be protected from both, outside interferences and within the profession, from irresponsible journalism. To protect from both these dangers, the role of journalists' organizations is most important. Nehru assigned the task of evolving and implementing code of professional conduct in the profession to journalists' organizations.

## **7. Nehru' Criticism of the Irresponsible Press : How was Freedom of the Press exercised?**

During the later period of his Prime Ministership, Nehru was very upset by the irresponsible behavior of the Indian press. He was

not happy, by the views of the press on burning issues of communalism and casteism. He severely criticized the press for its coverage of these issues and the views expressed in the press. He was aggrieved by the irresponsible reporting by a section of media, particularly, vernacular press and small newspapers. He said that the absence of proper and effective mechanism of self-regulation in the press is responsible for this. He alleged the press for provocative reporting, while covering communal incidents. He argued that sensitive issues and facts should be published with caution and responsibility. Sensational reporting to increase the circulation of newspapers will damage journalists' claim for professional autonomy. If newspaper reporting continues to disturb social equilibrium and self-restrain for public and national interest is not exercised, the government will be compelled to exercise control on the press. In a way, the ball is in the court of the press, either exercise self-control or get ready to face regulations of control.

In his valedictory address to the AINEC, Nehru said that the quality of news, opinions and a sense of social responsibility is more important for the press than the circulation of the newspapers. He said, "Of course, we know that newspapermen and journalists of the past and in the present have laid down in high terms what the press should be and I have no doubt that responsible newspapermen, at any rate, are always trying to reach that standard. Anyhow it seems to me that the only right approach to it is for newspapermen and their organization to tackle the problem and it is not within the competence of an external agency to do so, even though that is the government. They should raise their standards themselves...by making it clear to their erring brethren that what they do is bad... A responsible body has the right to pull up any member of that profession, if he is flagrantly wrong... Such a body should firmly... make it clear that they do not approve this kind of thing" (*Jawaharlal Nehru's Speeches*, 1983 : 456).

Nehru was very critical of the press in their dealing of sensitive issues of foreign policy of the country. He said, "Should a person bring out a sheet with the liberty simply to say and do every kind of wrong thing under the aegis of the noble doctrine of the freedom of the press?" (Chatterjee, 1988 : 57).

Nehru criticized the press, not to enforce restrictions on it but to make it more responsible in the public and national interests. He was

not happy by the misuse of freedom of the press by anyone. He warned the press of the dangers of money involved in the press and its misuse to influence the public opinion for self-gains.

## **8. Restrictions on Freedom of the Press**

“The first Prime Minister of India, who is again ironically hailed as a beacon of liberalism, was insistent on curbing the freedom of the press. According to a report published by The New York Times on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1951, Nehru was steadfast in his commitment towards curbing free speech” ([www.opindia.com](http://www.opindia.com)).

On 1<sup>st</sup> June 1951, the Constituent Assembly amended Article 19(2), (First Amendment Act 1951) to include three new restrictions in the right to freedom of speech, i.e., ‘public order’, ‘friendly relations with foreign states’ and ‘incitement to an offence’. There had been instances of hate speeches delivered to the public leading to incidents of large-scale communal violence. To curtail this, the words ‘public order’, and ‘incitement to an offence’ were included. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee’s speeches condemning Nehru-Liaquat Pact, editorials and news published in left-leaning, English weekly, ‘Crossroads’, published and printed by communist, Romesh Thapar, were very critical of Nehru’s foreign policies. Editorials and opinions published in the newspaper named ‘Organiser’, printed and published by Brij Bhushan, a man of the Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS), were critical of Nehru. This section of the press was looked upon as inciting communal violence and India Pakistan war, and this led to include the phrases of friendly relations with foreign states, public order, and incitement to an offence in the constitution. In the absence of any law, courts were not able to regulate such offences. The amendment gave the government a right to control the freedom of speech to protect public and national interests.

“Nehru claimed that the First Amendment was necessitated by the ‘vulgarity, indecency and falsehood’ that the press was supposedly indulging in. In his views, it was, therefore, necessary to empower the State to crackdown on newspapers to ensure that the ‘main purpose of the Constitution are not defeated” ([www.opindia.com](http://www.opindia.com)). AINEC condemned this amendment and gave a call for suspension of newspapers to oppose the amendment.

Chandrachud (2017) comments, “Freedom of expression was once wide-ranging in India. Then Jawaharlal Nehru asked for

changes. Shyama Prasad Mookerjee's incendiary speeches asking for war with Pakistan led to a law imposing restrictions". Arun Anand writes (2021) "It was an outcome of the Nehru government's intent to clamp down on voices critical of the government. Incidentally, one of the immediate triggers for restricting freedom of expression by Nehru was primarily the battle between him and *Organiser*, an English weekly backed by Rashtriya Swamsevak Sangh (RSS)".

Vaidyanathan (2012) has quoted from *Time Magazine*, "Prime Minister Nehru got his law to curb India's press. Voting 228 to 02, Parliament amended the 1949 constitution, which guaranteed freedom of speech and expression to all citizens. Under the amendment, the government may introduce laws fining newspapers for 'defamation or incitement to an offence'." He again quotes *Times Magazine*, dated 28<sup>th</sup> May 1951, "Part of the Indian press, said (Nehru), is dirty, indulges in 'vulgarity, indecency and falsehood'. To teach it manners, Nehru proposed an amendment to India's Constitution that would impose severe restrictions on freedom of speech and expression. He asked for power to curb the press and to punish persons and newspapers for contempt of court defamation and incitement to an offense".

Krishnamoorthy (2007) writes "Journalists of the Nehru era knew of the times when he had bypassed norms, both of democracy and free press, because he thought they came in the way of building an India of his dreams". He quotes eminent jurist A. G. Noorani saying, "It is dishonest to hail him as a democrat without reckoning with his lapses from democratic norms; a champion of press, he also placed curbs on the press". From the views discussed above, it may be submitted that Nehru was targeted with severe criticism by journalists for curtailing the freedom of the press.

## 9. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it may be concluded that before independence, when Nehru contributed as a journalist, he was a strong supporter of the freedom of the press. In his opinion, the freedom of the press from the control of the Government was necessary because press is the voice of the public. As a freedom fighter, he knew the importance of the press in freedom struggle. As a statesman, he acknowledged the key role of the press in interacting with the masses. He himself established the newspaper named

'National Herald'. He had, therefore, a wide exposure of the newspaper industry and the profession of journalism. After independence, his interaction with the press continued as the Prime Minister of India. He wanted to build a nation of his dreams with the cooperation of the press. He acknowledged the role of the press in developing India as a democratic and socialist nation. However, as Prime Minister, his relations with the press were not always cordial. He condemned the freedom of the press when he was criticized for curtailing the autonomy of the press, to impose his own vision on his opponents and critics of his policies. He enforced restrictions on the freedom of the speech and the press by implementing the First Amendment Act 1951.

The limits to freedom of speech have always been a debatable issue. The definition of the freedom of the press is always evolving. In India, even today, one can observe misuse of press freedom by journalists on several occasions. The Press Council of India has issued elaborative guidelines and code of conduct for the press. Despite these efforts, complaints of yellow journalism, paid news and irresponsible reporting reach the Council.

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