

THE INTERNET AS A PUBLIC POLITICAL SPHERE

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Abstract

The emergence and evolution of the internet have reshaped the landscape of political communication and discourse, transforming it into a public sphere that transcends geographical boundaries and traditional hierarchies. This paper explores the role of the Internet as a platform for political engagement, communication, and mobilization. Reviewing different theories of the public sphere and empirical studies, it examines how digital technologies have democratized access to information, enabled diverse voices to participate in political discussions, and facilitated collective action. The internet's potential as a public political sphere is accompanied by challenges and controversies. Issues such as echo chambers, filter bubbles, and the spread of disinformation raise concerns about the quality and inclusivity of online political discussions. Moreover, the concentration of power among a few tech giants poses risks to democratic governance and freedom of expression. Despite these challenges, the Internet also presents opportunities for enhancing democratic practices and civic engagement. Platforms for citizen journalism, online petitions, and social media activism empower individuals to hold governments and institutions accountable. Moreover, digital tools enable marginalized groups to amplify their voices and advocate for social justice causes. If people can freely connect to the Internet without corporate, economic, and governmental restrictions, then the Internet can function as an open and democratic public sphere. This paper concludes by discussing future directions for research and policy interventions aimed at strengthening the Internet's role as a vibrant and inclusive public political sphere.

KEYWORDS: Internet, New Media, Politics, Public Sphere, Democracy

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Introduction

In the early stages of the Internet when traditional media still dominated the political process in terms of communication, the Internet was used as a secondary or supplementary communication channel. It published content and information that was prepared for mainstream media, press, and electronic media, without adjustments and additional content modifications. The very nature and infrastructure of the Internet, as a decentralized network, and the fact that no government has control over the Internet, makes it a suitable platform that can assume the role of a public sphere where individuals will participate in a global exchange of information. On the Internet, they can gather information, exchange ideas, and make informed decisions. Accordingly, individuals can convey their interests online in this new sphere, which today has transformed into a global communication network.

The media as a whole, like the Internet, serves the public by performing the important role of informing and creating a forum for public debate. The Internet thus contributes to the democratic process by opening a new space for public dialogue. The Internet, as a platform of the public sphere, emphasizes inclusion, participation, and freedom of expression. In the participatory democracy of the Internet, the citizen has real opportunities to take part in public debates and to influence political decisions. The development of new communication technologies and the Internet in the 21st century has expanded the opportunities for public communication. Participants in public communication can connect much more easily, select the content they will follow, personalize communication and, of course, take part in public debates, not only by following it, but also by publishing their own content, comments, and opinions. By sharing and recommending they also contribute to the validation and valorization of the media content, as information that has wider reach and dissemination become more important for the society.

In a large number of expert reviews, the claim that the Internet has revived the public sphere is debated and accepted as a revolutionary step forward. The aforementioned participatory and interactive possibilities of the internet have largely suggested vivid comparisons with Habermas' descriptions of the ideal public sphere. Comments on websites and social networks, the possibilities to share and convey our views and reactions, as well as the options to organize public events and form communication networks at any time, seem to largely justify such comparisons. Although the Internet and social networks have numerous drawbacks, it can still be said that public discussion has never been easier and more inclusive. The Internet enhances dialogue and information exchange, which is one of the fundamental categories for democratic political systems.

In the period before the emergence and development of the Internet on a global level, precisely these values, dialogue, and inclusiveness, were defined as key categories for democracy in a society. The Internet manages to overcome the problems of information control and filtering in centralized communication systems. Today, through online media, the decentralization of information sources and opportunities for inclusive public debate has become the new standard. They not only democratize the flow of information but also shape a new kind of culture, the so-called. „participatory culture“, ie a culture of open participation in public communication. Habermas, who criticized electronic media for „simulating face-to-face communication“, observes in the Internet the realization of some of his ideas and the transformation of the Internet into a new kind of public sphere. It can be affirmed, as Mark

Poster states, that „The era of the public sphere as face-to-face communication is over, so the development of democracy must take into account new forms of electronically mediated communication“ (Poster 1997, 220).

OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to several authors, the Internet has the potential to function as a public sphere. In the printed edition of the popular magazine „Wired“ from 1996, the Internet was mentioned as a renewed hope that it could represent a new public sphere:

The public square of the past with its pamphlets and vigorous debates is being replaced by the Internet, which allows ordinary citizens to participate in the wide national dialogue, publish a newspaper, distribute electronic pamphlets to the world, and generally communicate with larger audiences than ever before. (The Internet) allows ordinary citizens to gain access to a huge and wide range of information (Warf and Grimes, 2013, p. 7-10).

The idea of the Internet and online media as a public sphere is accepted by a large number of authors, and the following can be distinguished:

- Yochai Benkler emphasizes the emergence of the new networked public sphere:
- „The easy approach to communicating in the public sphere through the Internet allows individuals to transform from passive readers and listeners to potential speakers and participants in active conversation. The Internet allows users to change their relationship with the public sphere. They no longer have to be just users and passive observers but can become creators and active subjects. In this sense, the Internet democratizes modern societies“ (Fuchs, 2014, pp. 1-2).
- Zizi Papacharissi describes the Internet as „the emergence of a virtual sphere 2.0“, in which citizens/users participate and express „disagreements with the public political agenda“. They express their opinions on blogs, by watching or posting content on YouTube, or by posting comments in various online groups.
- Manuel Castells emphasizes the invasions of the Internet as a new sphere: „Construction of the new public sphere, as part of the network society, progresses by building communication protocols between different communication processes“ (ibid.).
- Jean Burgess and Joshua Green argue that YouTube is a „cultural public sphere“ because it „enables interaction of users with cultural differences and encourages the development of a following of the political Other who has different beliefs and identities“ (Fuchs 2014: 1-2).

The functional public sphere implies a series of communication conditions in society that allow the circulation of ideas, debates, and free formation of public opinion. In these newly created communication conditions, mass-media and new interactive platforms serve to provide communication links between citizens and power holders in society. Before the Internet, the press and broadcast media (radio and television) were media that were main parts of the public

sphere. They served to facilitate the formation of public opinion, but at the same time, they were characterized by limited access, for only selected individuals, and a limited number of people could publish content and information on them. This is the so-called one-way communication model in the traditional media, based on the dichotomy of publishers versus audience, or producers versus consumers of media content. The Internet, on the other hand, facilitates two-way communication, ie. users can receive and consume information but also react to information and create information and content that they can use in online communication. In other words, they are not just an audience but also potential and impactful communicators in public discourse.

People don't watch or just listen to the Internet like they do with television or radio. Instead, they surf it, program on it, post their own content and information, write comments, and keep adding things to it. Communication on the Internet is a social activity that involves exchange, give and take. The roles of reader and writer, producer and consumer of information are blurred and they often overlap. (Balkin 2013)

In „The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere“ Jurgen Habermas explains that „citizens function as a whole when they can organize and connect in a free way, and this is through freedom of public assembly, association, as well as freedom of expression and publication of their opinions on matters of general interest“ (p. 73). Just as a free press helps maintain a democratic society, a free and uncensored internet serves the same functions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this paper, it is essential to outline the methodological approach to investigate the Internet as a public sphere. In this research we discuss the rationale behind the methodological choices, detailing the research design, data collection methods, and analytical techniques utilized in this study. Our study seeks to address the following research questions:

- How do internet platforms facilitate public discourse and participation?
- To what extent does the internet help inclusivity and diversity in public discussions?
- What are the main challenges and limitations associated with conceptualizing the Internet as a public sphere?

Additionally, building upon Habermas' theory of the public sphere, we conceptualize the internet as a multifaceted arena for communicative exchange and political engagement. We draw on key concepts such as accessibility, inclusivity, public debating, and the role of digital media in shaping public discourse. Given the exploratory nature of our inquiry, we employ qualitative research methods to capture the richness and complexity of online interactions. Specifically, we analyze textual and visual content from social media platforms, online forums, and news websites to identify patterns of discourse and thematic trends. Also, through an in-depth examination of selected online communities and digital platforms, we explore the dynamics of public engagement and community formation.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

According to many analysts, the Internet gave a new impulse to the democratic public sphere and helped in its revitalization. In that process, many of the previous shortcomings that critics had noted were corrected. In this context, the criticisms mainly referred to the fact that the public sphere before the age of the Internet, was public only in the sense in, for example, schools or health facilities are public. They are intended for everyone, but control over them is still one-sided, by smaller groups in society that control the conditions for communication in the public sphere. This is especially evident when the public sphere is analyzed through the role and functions of the mass media. They dominated the public sphere in the past and were a key factor in how it functions and what is the social role of the public sphere. The control over the mass media by a small number of people de facto drastically reduces its democratic capacity.

The Internet has changed the economics of the functioning of the media, it takes away the exclusivity that only those with huge financial resources and power can own and control the media. Then, the Internet dramatically reduced the costs of production and transmission of information and news, and the concentration of media (vertical, horizontal, diagonal) in a short time became a secondary topic of the theorists of democracy. (Bachovska 2018: 10)

Postmodernists, such as Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty, Jean Lyotard, Ernesto Laclós, Chantal Mouffe, and others, criticized the public sphere from a position of dominance of the so-called „macropolitics“, i.e. the framing of the public sphere in the big political ideologies and in which the so-called „micropolitics“, or the voices of the smaller and weaker social groups, are subordinated (Kellner, 2001: 3). It is precisely this space of „micro-narratives“ that the Internet has largely enabled: the inclusion and circulation of micro-narratives, of the voices of smaller groups, of marginalized segments of societies, rebellious individuals and others, who through it have gained voice and participation in the new public online sphere. One of the specifics of this transformation, according to Kellner, is „the replacement of critical reasoning with opinions and subjective comments“, which is the dominant content that the Internet enables. However, the newly established pluralism of the internet offers new opportunities for articulating dissident and marginalized voices. In addition to voting, democracy also implies public debate, but also participation in public affairs. In the era of mass media, before the Internet, the majority of people were kept out of democratic debate and discussions, and through broadcasting technologies were reduced to „passive consumers of infotainment“ (ibid.). Access to the media is controlled by large corporations and only a small part of the spectrum of opinions and voices is included in the content these media circulate.

„In the era of the Internet, anyone with online access can participate in a public debate or discussion, that enable them to have political influence thus forming empowerment of large social groups that were outside of political discussions in the era of the mass media“ (Kellner 2001: 6).

In his analysis of the early 2000s, Kellner finds various illustrations for his theories and views, citing as examples the movements of the Zapatistas and anti-capitalist activists and how they used the Internet for new and radical political organizing. However, there is certainly room for

criticism of this new model of the public sphere, and the authors usually associate it with the fragmentation of information and groups that are active on the Internet. The Internet enables greater inclusion, but reinforces the fragmentation of different groups into „information micro-clusters.“ Between these groups, which are present on the Internet, there is no causal or dialectical relationship, he concludes. For Mark Poster (1997), the postmodern public sphere is based on the idea that it is „a mediated (new public) space, not a technology, but a space for communication flow and a place where our subjectivities cannot be firmly established, so they are the result of the influence of the very network in which they are involved“. This is a space where the participant in communication, The Subject, participates as a manifestation of „the post-structuralist concept of subjectivity that is completely different from Habermas' theories based on the autonomous and rational subject that is at the center of the public sphere“ (Poster 1997: 215) . Poster elaborates in detail the aspects that make the Internet a new public sphere, and at the center of his analyzes and arguments are the so-called „virtual communities“, which are a synthesis of virtual reality technology with the Internet.

„Internet technologies impose a dematerialization of communication, and thus a significant transformation of the subject, that is, the individual, who participates in it“ (Poster 1997: 215).

The new public sphere, as Poster describes it, is based on this fluid subject that is drawn into online communication and in which „existing hierarchies of race, economic class, age, social status, and especially gender are weakening“ (1997: 224). The main criticism of Habermas's theories about the public sphere were the factors of exclusion of parts of society, so the enhanced inclusion (inclusivity) of the Internet fills the gaps of Habermas's public sphere, and the Internet is interpreted as an emancipatory and democratizing public space. In that sense, Poster argues, the Internet through virtual communities realizes Habermas's ideals of the public sphere by accepting and fulfilling its main functions as defined by Habermas.

One of the key features of the Internet, which is very important for the fact that it is slowly gaining a central place in the media system, is precisely that the Internet enables audience participation. What was once a marginal part of the media system, such as the ability to comment on websites or online forums, is now becoming a central function. The most important media and journalistic stories aim to attract the attention of the audience, with the effect of these contents being increased if they motivate viewers to engage in further discussions online and on social networks. With this key function of the Internet, the involvement of the audience, the additional value of information is created. The additional value that the information and contents receive on the Internet, through the reactions of the audience, affects the editing of the program framework of the media (the so-called „agenda setting“). The stories and online content that cause significant reactions and comments from the public get priority and additional coverage of the topic. With the development of the new participatory media culture, user-generated content is gradually increasing the pressure on traditional media. In that sense, the traditional media are also pressured to adapt to the habits that the audience develops on the Internet, This usually translates to increased audience involvement and reactions to the content, mostly through increased presence and posts on social networks, where the content is open for public discussion. The Internet as a public sphere has a strong influence on the media, but also on the economy, politics, and culture. One important peculiarity of the Internet, which goes in favor of its function as a public sphere, is the reduced importance of

social status as a factor in public discussion. The positive side of online platforms that offer the opportunity to participate in discussions and posts anonymously or through an arbitrary user-name, is that the user's social status is subordinated to his or her arguments, or „what is said is more valued than who says it.“ This sort of neutralization of social status helps egalitarianism, that is, it gives all participants in the public online discussion equal positions to present their arguments. Of course, anonymity on the Internet also has its negative sides, such as abuses in spreading misinformation or hate speech, which are facilitated and often followed by hiding the identity of the people who create and spread these contents.

Anonymity on the Internet has the potential to be beneficial in the formation of critical discourse because it promotes the free flow of ideas without privileging any of the participants in the discussions. When users can report or share certain information anonymously, they are more willing to contribute to public forums. It must be noted that complete anonymity is a complex issue on the Internet, as IP addresses, and other data, can be traced back to identify the user. Nowadays it is common, for example, for online media to have sections for commenting on the news, marking that the reader likes the article, or an option with a few clicks to share the content through different communication channels (social networks, e-mail, chat service, direct message, etc.). In cases where there are no comment sections on the websites themselves, the media and journalists encourage the discussion on their content by sharing them on social networks (Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, etc.) where users have various options to engage in a discussion. Readers can leave comments, reply to other people's comments, confirm agreement or support (by liking), or share further any information posted. Certain media outlets offer opportunities to rank content by number of comments and likes, or publish „top comments“ for the day or the week, also further encouraging discussion and participation in public debate. The researchers agree that the higher the number of citizens participating in politics is, the closer society gets to realizing the ideal of a public sphere. By facilitating communication in connection with elections and the political process, the Internet takes on a more important role in the democratization of society.

In political science studies, there are many terms that speak about the scope of the concept of digital democracy: electronic democracy, teledemocracy, democracy of the digital age, cyber-democracy, and „on-line“ democracy. The framework of digital democracy is the web (the networked world). Digital democracy is also defined as a virtual form that affects political processes, and it can also be considered as an electronic form of governance and articulation of different interests. (Bachovska 2018: 11)

The democratic potential of the Internet comes to the fore especially when it comes to inclusiveness of minority groups and communities. The Internet can enable disadvantaged, underrepresented, and marginalized groups to participate in discussions online. Social media and online discussion forums make it easy for anyone to initiate and participate in public discussion on issues of particular interest to them, or for issues of general public interest. For the stability of society, these groups must be included in the political process. This fulfills the key prerequisite that Habermas states for the public sphere, i.e. the inclusiveness of the public sphere. Members of smaller groups and minorities get the opportunity to represent their group or themselves without external pressures or conditioning. Because the Internet is inclusive the public can easily participate in democratic processes and discussions, both at local and global levels. The Internet can also initiate public debate and provide a forum enabling a sort of

political globalization, i.e. involvement of citizens from different societies in political debates of other countries, which could be potentially of global importance or interest, such as, for example, the presidential elections in the USA, the referendum and the debates surrounding Brexit, the trade war between USA and China, war conflicts and many other influential topics. Participation in public political discourse can result in a better-informed population on issues related to local, as well as transnational topics, creating better policies, increasing public trust, and preventing conflicts. Despite Habermas' view that the public sphere remains re-feudalized, he also states that there is potential for it to be revitalized. For this to happen, an environment must be created in which people can freely communicate and mobilize around issues of common interest. The Internet has transformed political discussions because it not only provides people with information, it also enables collaborative content creation, civic activism to fact-check public discourse and media content, and the ability for the public to produce and disseminate information themselves. The real value of the public sphere for democracy, which goes beyond the right to vote, is the offered opportunity to exchange ideas, to debate with others, and under the influence of this public discourse, to make political decisions.

Furthermore, the rise of blogs, as independent platforms for publishing user content, the broadband internet that enabled the mass exchange of data and content (through the so-called „peer to peer“ exchange), and the emergence of YouTube in 2006, changed the foundations of mass media. Traditional filters of information, controllers of the flow of information, as well as selectors of what topics are important, had to adapt to the new „participative culture“. The involvement of the citizens in the process of information creation and distribution, previously reserved only for selected groups and professionals, has double consequences. On one hand, it is an opportunity for inclusiveness and diversification, but at the same time, it is also a threat to media structures from losing their function and position in society, both in terms of communication and economics. The strengthening of these processes had an impact on academic circles and studies. The focus of media research has shifted to audience studies and the culture they develop on online platforms. Users are stepping into a sort of symbiosis with the media, but this time the symbiosis is more complex than in the era of the traditional media because it is an interactive process in which both components influence each other. The researchers emphasize the difference between interactivity and participation, in which participation stands out as an enhanced type of involvement that goes beyond simple interaction and implies a higher degree of activity. Some of the consequences of this symbiosis are an increase in the time users spend interacting with the media and, on the other hand, there is the evident expansion of the public sphere at the expense of the private sphere (Lister et al, 2009: 210). Audience research shows that often the interest in user involvement exceeds the technical possibilities provided for it. For example, in studies of the reality television show „The Big Brother“ broadcasted in Great Britain, it was reported that the interest in commenting and reaction to this show on Channel Four TV often crashed the servers and websites. Forums and comment sections were flooded with users eager to comment and share their impressions of this program (ibid.). This type of content is usually transmitted simultaneously through web streaming which, in addition to the television channels, allows viewers to engage with the program at any time. Analysts highlight this newly developed „desire to be part of the show“ as a phenomenon that is changing not only the audience's viewing experience but also the nature of the media sphere itself (Jenkins 2006). Henry Jenkins researched the relationship between the audience and the media to detect the changes occurring in the Internet age. He states that „New media have offered new tools and technologies that allow archiving, appropriation, processing, and republishing of media content, leading to the emergence of numerous subcultures that promote a new kind of ‚do-it-yourself ‚ production“.

Also according to Jenkins, a new type of „trans-mediality“ is being developed, which is changing communication trends and forming a new media culture based on enhanced knowledge about the programs. It encourages an enhanced flow of content, ideas, and narratives through various multimedia channels that create „new active models for audience tracking and engagement“. Increased audience involvement is also transforming media markets by changing the relationships between the participants themselves, and subsequently fragmenting the media market.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Although the Internet is a decentralized system with no single central control over it, how it functions as a public sphere can be controlled by external factors. The power of the corporate-controlled media in the circulation of information and the legislation in different states to some extent can determine the dynamics of how the Internet will function as a public sphere. The quality of the online public sphere depends on the diversity of the participants in the public debate and how political diversity will be included in the debates. However, the fact that the Internet tends to personalize and target specific audiences leads citizens to express their opinions in fragmented forms. This contributes to making it more difficult to identify different political positions and understand them by the majority of citizens in specific societies. The online public space cannot be localized, and it is difficult to create defined contexts for different political perspectives that are reflected in public debates on the Internet. The media are no longer able to keep citizens gathered in defined groups that are going through shared experiences. As Giddens states, „The Internet is blurring the distinction between home and workplace“. According to research, the time spent by the modern man at the workplace remains the same, while a quarter of the respondents confirmed to be working from home in addition to time spent at their workplace. So, life from classical dualisms of home and work, private and public, has merged into a continuous flow that is organized with the help of the Internet (Giddens 2005: 475).

„The Internet promotes and encourages mobility, not only in terms of communication, but also in terms of status, class, social role, and character“ (Stevenson 2003: 62). (Stevenson 2003: 62).

Stevenson here emphasizes the possibility of individuals changing their social positions and status, as one of the results of the information revolution. In contrast to traditional media that tended to centralize and create a mass audience, the Internet works in the opposite direction: it tends to personalize and fragment the audience to the extent that mass media will probably disappear, as a social integrator connected to geographical space and separate locations. In this way, the Internet undermines the national public sphere that was mediated through traditional media⁴. National state structures that are aware of the power of the Internet not only to inform the public but also to mobilize it, often reach to deal with these issues through direct control of the Internet. One of the notable examples was the events of November 2019 during the civil

⁴ Kai Hafez calls this a kind of „Babylonization of culture“, alluding to the legend of the Tower of Babel (The Myth of Media Globalization, 2007, pp. 103-104).

protests in Iran when the authorities completely blocked internet access in the country on several occasions in an attempt to cut off the organizers from each other and fragment the protesters from their usual coordinating of the protests⁵. The state apparatus in democratic systems through the instruments of control over infrastructure in exceptional circumstances can restrict who can connect to the Internet. This shows that the Internet as a public sphere still has its „gatekeepers“ who can control access to the Internet. Manuel Castells (Castells 2008) interprets these issues in one of his articles in the following way:

Global society now has the technological means to exist independently of political institutions and mass media. However, the capacity of social movements to change public opinion depends largely on their ability to shape the debate in the public sphere⁶.

According to Castells, if people can freely connect to the Internet without corporate, economic, and governmental restrictions, then the Internet can function as a public sphere. The Internet may provide a forum for public debate, but with the commercialization of information and mass media products and the corporate goal of making a profit, these ideals are still in danger.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the internet has undeniably emerged as a new public and political sphere, fundamentally altering the landscape of communication, information dissemination, and civic engagement. Through its decentralized nature and accessibility, it has democratized access to information, empowered marginalized voices, and facilitated unprecedented levels of interaction and participation in the public discourse. However, this transformation is not without its challenges, including issues of digital inequality, disinformation, and the erosion of privacy. Traditional control systems, like state apparatus can still impose their filters and systems of gatekeeping by restricting access to the internet. As we navigate these complexities, it is imperative to recognize the internet's potential as a catalyst for positive social change while actively addressing its limitations and safeguarding the principles of inclusivity, transparency, and accountability. By developing a public sphere that fosters constructive dialogue, critical thinking, and respect for different perspectives, we can harness the full potential of the internet as an inclusive public sphere for the benefit of global society as a whole.

LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Access to the Internet is still not universal, and certain demographic groups are underrepresented in online public communication. This digital divide can skew our understanding of the inclusivity and representativeness of the online public sphere. The algorithms and personalized

⁵ "Iran on Sunday introduced a near-total nationwide blackout of the internet, making one of its most draconian attempts to cut off Iranians from each other and the rest of the world, as widespread anti-government unrest gripped the streets of Tehran and other cities for a third day", Farnaz Fassihi (Nov. 17, 2019), "Iran Blocks Nearly All Internet Access" [online], New York Times, available at <https://is.gd/r48H05> (accessed 01/04/2024):

⁶ Castells, 2008.

content delivery mechanisms of the main digital platforms contribute to the formation of filter bubbles and echo chambers, limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints and constraining the deliberative potential of online discussions. Also, commercial interests and platform policies still shape the structure and dynamics of online public spheres, influencing the visibility of certain voices and the prioritization of particular issues. The fluidity of online interactions and the asynchronous nature of digital communication present challenges in capturing the temporal and spatial dimensions of the online public sphere, while the anonymity afforded by online platforms can facilitate the spread of disinformation and disorder, undermining the quality of public discourse and discussions. In regards to further research, comparative research across different countries and cultural contexts can shed light on variations in the functioning and impact of online public spheres, considering factors such as regulatory frameworks, socio-political climates, and media landscapes. Drawing on insights from diverse disciplines such as sociology, political science, communication studies, computer science, and psychology can enrich our understanding of the complex interplay between technology, society, and democracy in the digital age.

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