

Centre for the study of
Media,
Communication &
Power

**Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and
Power**
King's College London

Submission to:

Inquiry into Fake News

Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee

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About the Centre

The Centre for the Study of Media Communication and Power is an academic research centre based in the Policy Institute at King's College London. The Centre conducts research and analysis on news media, news media content, the civic functions of the media and technology, and the relationship between media and politics.

The author of the study, Martin Moore, is director of the Centre for the Study of Media Communication and Power in the Policy Institute at King's College London. He has had over a decade's experience working on projects related to news standards. This includes academic research, technological innovation, and policy proposals. He was the founding director of the Media Standards Trust in 2006. This submission reflects the views of the author based on previous experience and on research done since joining King's College London in 2015. The author is an employee of King's College London.

Tech Giants and Civic Power (Moore, 2016) provides relevant context for understanding the origins and context of the current phenomenon of fake news, by examining the role of Silicon Valley companies, notably Google and Facebook, in news distribution, self-publication and other civic functions.¹

¹ Moore, M (2016) *Tech Giants and Civic Power*, Centre for the Study of Media, Communication and Power, King's College London, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/CMCP/Tech-Giants-and-Civic-Power.pdf>

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Summary

1. There is no clear or consistent definition of fake news
2. Fake news is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to social media
3. There is a dearth of evidence about the scale, dissemination or effects of fake news
4. Fake news is a symptom of much broader structural problems with our digital information environment
5. Remedies solely or heavily based on technological fixes or market-driven corrections will not, on their own, address these problems
6. Any hasty attempt by government to introduce measures to address fake news will have unintended consequences – some of which are likely to be damaging to free speech and democratic discourse
7. The government could seek to better understand the conditions that enable fake news, consider progressive interventions to promote and sustain public interest news and information, call for greater and more transparent self-governance by tech platforms, and inquire into the use of digital platforms for political campaigning

I. What is fake news?

There is no clear or consistent definition of fake news.

Craig Silverman, author of the BuzzFeed articles that sparked off the current global concern about fake news, defined the term narrowly. Fake news, Silverman said, is news wholly invented for the purpose of generating clicks and therefore revenue.² He identified a cottage industry of people in Macedonia who were making money by making up news and promoting it via social media.³ These people – and others like them – had worked out that content earned money on social media for being engaging and share-able, not for being trustworthy or authoritative. Indeed, they discovered there was no penalty associated with producing fake news. So they invented news-like content that was engaging and share-able. In the lead-up to the highly partisan US election this happened to be ‘news’ about Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.

Even Silverman’s narrow definition of fake news loses its clarity when you look at some of the ‘yellow journalism’ being done in the US before and after the 8th November (*The Washington Post* ‘For the “new yellow journalists”, opportunity comes in clicks and bucks’).⁴

If you go beyond this narrow Silverman definition — as many people subsequently have — then the term quickly becomes highly subjective. This was apparent, for example, when a US journalism teacher tried to draw up a list of fake news sites, some of which took strong exception to her definition.⁵

Clare Wardle, from First Draft News, has identified seven different types of problematic information.⁶ She sets these types on a scale based on their ‘intent to deceive’. These different types of information have to be considered, Wardle writes, according to the motivations of those who produce them and the means by which they are disseminated. ‘Pope endorses Trump’ would therefore be defined according to the type (fabricated content), the producer (satirical news website WT05 News) and its dissemination – chiefly via Facebook.⁷

Attempts to define the term fake news have, however, been further complicated by its politicization and the general debasement of the term since the US election. President Trump has used the term, often capitalized, on an almost daily basis to undermine mainstream media and news stories he does not agree with. Jeremy Corbyn has used the term to dismiss news, as has Rupert Murdoch, as has Bashar Al-Assad.⁸

The difficulty of defining fake news is not simply semantic. Without a clear and coherent definition, this submission will suggest, there cannot be a clear or consistent response.

² <https://nowtoronto.com/news/craig-silverman-exposed-the-fake-news-racket/>

³ https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm_term=.hblRvkBzo#.brXXImPO8

⁴ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/for-the-new-yellow-journalists-opportunity-comes-in-clicks-and-bucks/2016/11/20/d58d036c-adbf-11e6-8b45-f8e493f06fcd_story.html?utm_term=.a00e3c196125

⁵ <https://inews.co.uk/essentials/news/technology/melissa-zimdars-removes-fake-news-list-claiming-harassed-doxed/>

⁶ <https://medium.com/1st-draft/fake-news-its-complicated-d0f773766c79#.c9dlode5k>

⁷ <https://web.archive.org/web/20161115024211/http://wt05news.com/us-election/pope-francis-shocks-world-endorses-donald-trump-for-president-releases-statement/> according to FactCheck.org <http://www.factcheck.org/2016/10/did-the-pope-endorse-trump/>

⁸ <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/jeremy-corbyn-bbc-fake-news-trump-reignation-rumours-labour-party-leader-clive-lewis-brexit-bill-a7570721.html>; <http://www.cityam.com/255888/rupe-rt-murdoch-pleads-newspaper-stop-using-fake-news-quote>; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/bashar-al-assad-syria-hanged-13000-political-prisoners-amnesty-international-fake-news-era-product-a7573961.html>;

2. Is fake news a new phenomenon?

Fake news is not a new phenomenon, nor is it limited to social media.

The *New York Sun*, the first newspaper to rely more on advertising than cover price, drove up circulation by reporting on ‘astronomical discoveries’ on the moon including creatures with wings and lunar trees.⁹ During the First World War the British press, encouraged and led by the government, published numerous false stories about German atrocities. In August 1939, *The Daily Express* front page informed its readers, ‘No War This Year’. Neither was the 2016 US Election the first in which fake news is reported to have affected the outcome. In 1924 *The Daily Mail* published a letter, purported to be from the Secretary of the Comintern Grigory Zinoviev, which Labour supporters at the time and since believed had a profound effect on the UK general election.

Nor is fake news limited to social media. A cursory search of UK national online news sites during a fortnight in the lead up to the EU Referendum last May reveals that they published numerous stories that are demonstrably false:

- ‘Town in fear as repeated sightings of WEREWOLF on the prowl... in HULL’ (*Express*, 24 May, 2016)¹⁰
- ‘Forget Atlantis – there’s a mystery island just off the coast of BRITAIN’ (*Daily Star*, 21 May 2016)¹¹
- ‘What are these mysterious ‘pillars’ on the moon? UFO-hunters claim video shows ‘structure’ on lunar surface’ (*Daily Mail*, 24 May 2016)¹²
- ‘Is this demonic ‘Devil’s Bible’ the work of Satan himself?’ (*The Sun*, 29 May 2016)¹³

This despite each of these news organisations being signed up to a Code of Practice which states that they will ‘take care not to publish inaccurate, misleading or distorted information or images, including headlines not supported by the text’.¹⁴ ‘Fake news’ may partly explain why trust in the UK press has been consistently low, and trust in tabloids – particularly red-tops – consistently below 15% of the population. Equally, it may partly explain why there appears to be ‘a limited appetite for fake news in the UK’.¹⁵ There is, as yet, no evidence to suggest that the levels of accuracy are rising or that the self-regulatory body set up by the major publishers – IPSO – is having any identifiable positive effect.¹⁶

The political, economic, and social motivations for creating fake or highly distorted news have existed since the invention of the printing press. Roundheads and cavaliers published pamphlets during the English Civil War making unfounded political claims against the other side (leading John Milton to make his seminal argument for free speech in *Areopagitica*). Inflated and invented news was used to boost circulations of the Penny Post and the ‘yellow press’ of the late eighteenth century.

Mark Twain wrote a satirical news story about the discovery of a petrified body in 1862. Twain was trying to illustrate the absurdity of many of the stories being published in the press about ‘petrification’ by satirizing them. Yet he discovered that people were altogether too credulous. The story was published, as news, in newspapers all around the world:

⁹ Wu, Tim (2017) *The Attention Merchants*, London: Atlantic Books

¹⁰ <http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/672636/Fears-American-werewolf-prowling-HULL>

¹¹ <http://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/517004/Mystery-island-lost-city-atlantis-hybrasil-phenomenon-ireland-uk-britain>

¹² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3606183/Video-shows-UFO-hunters-appearing-spot-giant-pillars-moon.html>

¹³ <https://www.thesun.co.uk/archives/news/1222562/is-this-demonic-devils-bible-the-work-of-satan-himself/>

¹⁴ <https://www.ipso.co.uk/editors-code-of-practice/>

¹⁵ https://www.buzzfeed.com/jimwaterson/fake-news-sites-cant-compete-with-britains-partisan-newspape?utm_term=.qkPXIGEKA#.ykRW5YD9g

¹⁶ See analysis of IPSO in CMCP submission to DCMS Consultation on the Implementation of Leveson, <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/publications/CMCP-Consultation-Submission-for-DCMS-100117-Final.pdf>

'I chose to kill the petrification mania with a delicate, a very delicate satire. But maybe it was altogether too delicate, for nobody ever perceived the satire part of it at all'¹⁷

Orson Welles' radio broadcast of *War of the World* in October 1938 used fake news flashes to dupe listeners into thinking that Martians had landed at Grovers Hill, New Jersey.

The production of fake news – for political or financial gain, or for drama or satire – is centuries old. The difference between this and the current phenomenon of fake news is chiefly with respect to its extent, its dissemination, and its effects. Although we know enough about the current phenomenon to have cause for concern, we do not yet know enough to understand how best to respond.

¹⁷ <https://americanliterature.com/author/mark-twain/short-story/the-petrified-man>

3. What evidence exists of the extent and effects of fake news?

There is a dearth of evidence about the scale, dissemination, or effects of fake news shared via social media.

At the same time, anxieties about its impact have been voiced by political and tech leaders around the world. In November 2016 Barack Obama said that “If we are not serious about facts and what’s true and what’s not, and particularly in an age of social media when so many people are getting their information in sound bites and off their phones, if we can’t discriminate between serious arguments and propaganda, then we have problems”.¹⁸ Angela Merkel expressed similar anxiety then and since, saying in January that ‘we are facing a crisis of reasoning’.¹⁹ In February 2017 Apple’s Tim Cook said fake news was ‘killing people’s minds’.²⁰ Even Mark Zuckerberg, having first dismissed the idea that fake news influenced the US election as ‘crazy’, wrote a 5,700 word manifesto, published on 16 February, acknowledging the role of social media in helping promote fake news, and proposing ways in which Facebook can help deal with it.²¹

These concerns were triggered by the series of articles published by BuzzFeed shortly before and after the US election. These included one that reported, ‘Hyperpartisan political Facebook pages and websites are consistently feeding their millions of followers false or misleading information’.²², another about teenagers in Macedonia,²³ and another that found the ‘top fake election news stories generated more total engagement on Facebook than top election stories from 19 major news outlets combined’.²⁴ According to an Ipsos MORI poll that BuzzFeed commissioned in November, three-quarters of Americans who saw fake news believed it.²⁵

Since then concerns have been raised about fake news problems accentuated by social media in Brazil, Italy, Germany, France, South Sudan and the Philippines.²⁶

Concerns raised by global leaders are shared by a majority of the US public, according to polling by the Pew Center in December. The poll found that 64% of Americans ‘say fabricated news stories cause a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events’.²⁷ The same research found that about a third of Americans reported seeing fake political news, though 4 in 10 felt confident they could recognise it if they saw it.

An academic study published in January 2017 was, however, less impressed by the extent or impact of fake news in America. ‘Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election’, by Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, found limited recall of fake news stories on social media, and even more limited belief in those stories. ‘For fake news to have changed the outcome of the election,’ Allcott and Gentzkow write, ‘a single fake article would need to have had the same persuasive effect as 36 television campaign ads’. Their study was based on a 1,200 person online survey conducted shortly after the US election, combined with web browsing data from Alexa and Comscore.

Also in January, a Pew study showing that the main source of news for Trump supporters prior to the election was not Facebook but Fox News cast further doubt on the impact of fake news. Fox

¹⁸ https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/18/world/europe/obama-angela-merkel-donald-trump.html?_r=0

¹⁹ <http://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/will-trump-shock-drive-germany-back-into-arms-of-merkel-1.2953964>

²⁰ <http://www.recode.net/2017/2/12/14591522/apple-ceo-tim-cook-tech-launch-campaign-fake-news-fact-check>

²¹ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>

²² https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/partisan-fb-pages-analysis?utm_term=.a1R83RgIO#.bx3pAdjwQv

²³ https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/how-macedonia-became-a-global-hub-for-pro-trump-misinfo?utm_term=.hblRvkBzo#.brXXImPO8

²⁴ https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/viral-fake-election-news-outperformed-real-news-on-facebook?utm_term=.il54r6xpQ#.ghaj5z0eq

²⁵ https://www.buzzfeed.com/craigsilverman/fake-news-survey?utm_term=.mt7WzAPkO#.ctvj6epar

²⁶ See links by Clare Wardle <https://firstdraftnews.com/misinformation-reading-list/>

²⁷ <http://www.journalism.org/2016/12/15/many-americans-believe-fake-news-is-sowing-confusion/>

News was the main source of news for 40% of Trump supporters, as compared to 7% for whom it was Facebook.²⁸

The extent and impact of fake news is therefore contested and, until we have further information, it is hard to draw conclusions as to its effects.

Yet, although there is limited research on the extent and effects of fake news distributed and consumed on social media, research and concern about media effects goes back at least a century and is voluminous. '[W]hen a people can no longer confidently repair 'to the best fountains for their information,' Walter Lippmann wrote in 1920, 'then anyone's guess and anyone's rumor, each man's hope and each man's whim becomes the basis of government'.²⁹ The first extensive empirical study about the effects of media on voting patterns was conducted in the 1940s. Since then the number of books and articles published about the effects of media on: crime, voting, public attitudes, social cohesion, violence, extremism, and other issues could fill many libraries.

This research is not, and could never be, conclusive, yet it is extensive and does provide significant insights into the potential effects of fake news (which would require a much longer submission to detail). There is also an evolving understanding of the different sources of fake news, the motivations of those who produce it, and public attitudes towards it.

Our understanding of the current phenomenon is, however, severely constrained by the technology platforms themselves. The data that would inform our understanding of the nature and extent of the problem, and its effects, is proprietary. Until the platforms make this data available for independent research it will be impossible to assess the problem properly.

²⁸ <http://www.journalism.org/2017/01/18/trump-clinton-voters-divided-in-their-main-source-for-election-news/>

²⁹ Lippmann, Walter (1920) *Liberty and the News*, New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe

4. Is fake news the underlying problem?

Fake news is a symptom of much broader structural problems with our digital information environment.

Fake news is a symptom rather than a cause. The underlying cause is related to the digital information and news ecosystem that enables and encourages fake news, along with other political and social problems associated with tech platforms – such as dark propaganda, filter bubbles, echo chambers, trolling, abuse and bullying. Fake news is to the problems of our information system as freak weather is to climate change, a dramatic and damaging event that diverts attention from its underlying issue.

The news and information ecosystem

The news and information ecosystem we now inhabit encourages and facilitates the production, dissemination and consumption of fake news. This is a consequence of many factors, that include:

- Our digital civic space is now dominated by a small number of technology corporations – Google and Facebook in particular – whose economic models are based on the collection, re-use and monetisation of personal information—mainly through selling attention (as documented recently by Tim Wu)³⁰
- There is a political propaganda arms race online that is enabled by the digital platforms but which is—for the most part—opaque and almost entirely unaccountable
- We rely, for our digital information filtering mechanisms, on signals of authority that blur—and sometimes entirely obscure—the distinction between trustworthiness/authority and popularity/engagement
- The traditional news business model has fallen apart and with it much of the reporting that used to provide the foundation for our civic knowledge and understanding
- There is evidence of considerable amounts of false news being shared and read by large numbers of people. It may not be as much as first feared (or it may be more), and may not be believed by as many – but we do not currently have adequate information by which to judge
- Certain national governments, notably Russia, appear to be using communication to deliberately interfere in the elections of other countries
- Extremist political groups are successfully colonising the news ecosystem³¹
- Private companies have made claims that they can influence elections using opaque, psy-ops digital campaigns (for example, Cambridge Analytica)
- There is growing evidence that some people do inhabit digital echo chambers that are cementing their pre-existing political beliefs³²
- There are few penalties for lying or publishing false material on social media platforms

Any responses to fake news need to acknowledge and understand the much broader and deeper problems in our digital news and information environment.

³⁰ Wu, Tim (2017) *The Attention Merchants*, London: Atlantic Books

³¹ See Jonathan Albright's work at <https://medium.com/@d1gi>

³² See recent research by DEMOS, in partnership with CMCP <https://www.demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Echo-Chambers-final-version.pdf>

5. Will technology and the market solve the problem on their own?

Remedies solely or heavily based on technological fixes or market-driven corrections will not, on their own, address these problems.

It has been argued that fake news – and related problems – can be solved by a combination of intelligent technology (notably Artificial Intelligence - AI) and by market mechanisms. This brief submission has sought to indicate why – though technology and the market could ameliorate aspects of the problem – they will not solve it.

Using AI, ‘Facebook can understand the sharing patterns that characterize fake news, and potentially use its machine learning tactics to root out the hoaxes’, Steven Levy wrote at Backchannel in February 2017.³³ This is also an impression given by Mark Zuckerberg in his February Facebook post on ‘Building Global Community’, in which he talks about ‘building AI that can read and understand news’.³⁴ First Draft News is also reported to be working with both Google and Facebook to ‘incorporate code to stop the spread of fake news’.³⁵

Technology should be able to reduce the spread of certain types of news (such as that which is shared without being read first), and to show where news is disputed. However, the long history of fake news, the political, social and economic motivations for producing it, and the ease of self-publishing online, mean that technology will only ever partly address the problem. It also elicits dangers of its own with regard to the value-driven choices that engineers will have to make when determining which news to promote and which to suppress.

Nor are market-driven corrections likely to solve, or even alleviate, the problem. The technology platforms on which this news travels are reliant on advertising that prioritises popular and engaging content that is shared widely. The content is not distinguished by its trustworthiness, authority or public interest, since these are not criteria that drive likes and shares. As Frederic Filloux wrote in December:

‘Unfiltered news doesn’t share well, not at all:

- It can be emotional, but in the worse sense; no one is willing to spread a gruesome account from Mosul among his/her peers.
- Most likely, unfiltered news will convey a negative aspect of society. Again, another revelation from The Intercept or ProPublica won’t get many clicks.
- Unfiltered news can upset users’ views, beliefs, or opinions.’³⁶

These and other structural factors suggest that the problems of fake news and similar issues on social media are unlikely to improve substantially over time since to elevate public interest news over other content would threaten the social media business model.

³³ BackChannel, Medium, 23 February 2017, <https://backchannel.com/inside-facebooks-ai-machine-7a869b922ea7#.d93n0h3gg>

³⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/notes/mark-zuckerberg/building-global-community/10154544292806634>

³⁵ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/blogs-trending-38769996>

³⁶ <https://mondaynote.com/facebooks-walled-wonderland-is-inherently-incompatible-with-news-media-b145e2d0078c#.9g6tngo75>

6. How should the UK government respond to fake news?

Any hasty attempt by government to introduce measures to address fake news will have unintended consequences – some of which are likely to be damaging to free speech and democratic discourse.

The government should be wary of responding too quickly to the phenomenon of fake news, since:

- The problem is still poorly defined and understood
- There are many steps that can be taken to address aspects of the problem before there is a need for government intervention

Other Steps

The tech platforms could do more to ameliorate aspects of fake news in the short to medium term. This includes:

- Acknowledging differences between types of information – anyone, for example, can currently sign up for and submit articles to Facebook Instant Articles. There is no distinction between those producing journalism and those producing fake news
- Developing clearer signals of authority for news – both public and machine-readable – that give the reader greater ability properly to assess its trustworthiness
- Distinguishing news from other sources – for example visually in the Facebook newsfeed

However, there is – and should be – a limit to the nature and extent of intervention by the tech platforms themselves. The more responsibility these platforms take for identifying and obscuring or removing fake news, the more they will become ‘arbiters of truth’. Given their scale and reach, this would represent a genuine threat to free expression and would give them even greater power over our civic space than they already have.

News organisations could do more to increase the accuracy and verifiability of the news they publish, for example by:

- Making news stories more verifiable by the public (for example by consistently linking to original sources)
- Providing descriptive and consistent metadata about news that provide better signals of authority (for more on news metadata see [hNews](#), [rNews](#), and [schema.org](#))
- Participating in independent and effective self-regulation³⁷

Unintended consequences

Hasty responses by governments to the problem of fake news are likely to have unintended and potentially damaging consequences. For example:

- Threats to impose major fines on the tech platforms for not removing fake news are likely to lead these platforms to censor more material – particularly material which is controversial – even if it is true
- Establishing government bodies to monitor or police fake news – as in the Czech Republic – represents a threat to media freedom, whatever reassurances the government provides³⁸
- Calling for the tech platforms themselves to take greater responsibility will further empower the platforms and put civic decisions into the hands of private, commercial non-UK corporations (as with Google search and the right to be forgotten)

³⁷ For further information see CMCP submission to the DCMS Consultation on the implementation of Leveson <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/sspp/policy-institute/publications/CMCP-Consultation-Submission-for-DCMS-100117-Final.pdf>

³⁸ <http://www.mvcr.cz/cthh/clanek/centre-against-terrorism-and-hybrid-threats.aspx>

7. Is there a role for government?

The government could seek to better understand the conditions that enable fake news, consider progressive interventions to promote and sustain public interest news and information, call for greater and more transparent self-governance by tech platforms, and inquire into the use of digital platforms for political campaigning.

1. Seek to better understand the conditions that enable fake news

Acknowledge that the current phenomenon of fake news is a consequence of much broader and deeper problems in our digital news and information environment. To better understand this environment the government could:

- Encourage the technology platforms to make their data more transparent so that it is possible to do independent research;
- Support independent research that assesses the actual extent, dissemination and effects of fake news on digital platforms;
- Explore the extent to which existing regulations, laws and norms remain relevant in a digital environment.

2. Explore progressive interventions

It is becoming increasingly apparent that certain democratic functions we previously associated with the 'Fourth Estate' cannot, or will not, be performed in the future by commercial media organisations or technology platforms.

If these functions, which are central to a working democracy, are to be sustained, then market failure should be acknowledged and progressive interventions considered. These could include, for example, support for the development of civic technology that enables the public to find information about and scrutinize public authorities.

3. Call for greater and more transparent self-governance by tech platforms

We now rely heavily on a small number of US-based technology companies for many of our news, information and communication needs. We have to take on trust that these organisations will organise, manage and service these needs responsibly and without discrimination. This trust has been partly undermined by the exposure of fake news. It is likely to be further undermined by other communications problems in the future.

In order to maintain public confidence in these platforms, the organisations should consider reforming their governance arrangements. They could, for example, make transparent the principles according to which they create and evolve their algorithms. They could establish governance mechanisms – such as independent Boards – to check that the algorithms accord by these principles. Without action to reform their governance it may be difficult for them to sustain public confidence.

4. Inquire into the use of digital platforms for political campaigning

There has been a marked shift in the methods adopted by political campaigns in the last decade, towards targeting specific voters with tailored messages via technology platforms, and evolving these messages depending on voter response. Much of this is being done opaquely. This is leading to rising concern that such communication – which can privilege better resourced candidates/parties and is not open to public scrutiny – may be bypassing existing UK electoral laws and regulations, and threatening fair and open elections.

A Parliamentary inquiry examining the ways in which candidates, parties and political campaigns are using these platforms, could shed light on how they are being used, and assess the extent to which their use is consistent with fair and open elections in the UK.

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