



USIPEACE BRIEFING

ONLINE DISCOURSE IN THE ARAB WORLD: DISPELLING THE MYTHS

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INTRODUCTION

In an event titled “Online Discourse in the Arab World: Dispelling the Myths,” the U.S. Institute of Peace's [Center of Innovation for Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding](#), in collaboration with Harvard University's [Berkman Center for Internet & Society](#), presented findings from an unprecedented, comprehensive mapping of the Arabic-language blogosphere.

On the 17th of June, 2009, researchers from the Berkman Center unveiled for the first time a new [report on the Arabic-language blogosphere](#), which applied cutting-edge social network mapping analysis to more than 35,000 blogs from 18 countries. This research builds on their previous work of [mapping the Iranian blogosphere](#), which sheds fresh light on the social schisms driving the outcome of Iran's recent elections.

The event engaged an international audience with live streaming video and discussion via online chat and [Twitter](#), including commentary from an online panel of Arab bloggers. More than 150 online participants tuned in from 26 countries, including Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Israel, Brazil, India and Pakistan. A [video archive of the event](#) is also available online on the USIP Web site.

The following brief provides an introduction to the Berkman Center's study, its methodology and findings, as well as the issues and questions that arose during the event's panel discussion.

BACKGROUND: ONLINE DISCOURSE AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

The Internet is currently experiencing a revolution of its own, as top-down, hierarchical flows of information are increasingly supplanted by the user-generated content of “Web 2.0.”¹ At the forefront of this revolution is the blog -- 113 million of them according to Internet measurement firm Technorati -- regularly updated personal journals on the Web that allow millions of people to easily publish and share their ideas, and millions more to read and respond. These trends are increasingly seen in regions of the world where violent conflict is ongoing or imminent. As in the case of more conventional media, the online discourse that is created through blogs and other

¹ The term “Web 2.0” refers to the evolution of the World Wide Web from sites that present static information that users passively read or view, toward a more interactive design that promotes collaboration, information sharing, and user content creation. Examples of Web 2.0 include blogs, wikis, video-sharing sites, social networking, content tagging, and 3D virtual worlds.

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digital media can serve as a powerful information source within conflict zones, while helping to frame our own understand of these conflicts. As USIP Associate Vice President Sheldon Himelfarb pointed out in his introductory remarks at the event: “It has become accepted that modern conflict is a struggle for influence on public opinion in addition to territory and sovereign power, and so new online activity captures the imagination and headlines every day.”

Despite its importance, our understanding of the relationship between online discourse and conflict remains cursory. The “Blogs & Bullets” initiative of USIP’s Center of Innovation for Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding is an effort to provide thought leadership in understanding the Internet’s potential as a robust tool in the peacebuilder’s analytical and operational toolkits.

The mapping of the Arabic-language blogosphere is an important step forward in this effort. According to the Berkman Center’s co-director, John Palfrey, this mapping tells us, “through empirical analysis, whether or not the use of the Internet is having any impact on the way politics are practiced around the world,” and increasing our awareness of its relationship to conflict and political movements in the Arab world. It affords us insights into:

- **Once-hidden discourse in the Arab world**

The blogosphere plays host to only part of the public discourse in the Arab world; it misses dialogue in password-protected discussion forums and social networks. However, the blogosphere is of particular importance because, as Palfrey notes, it “brings chatter that used to be around dinner tables and around water coolers into a public domain, and it allows us to have a window into public discourse that we hadn’t been able to see before.” Across academic and policy communities in the United States and elsewhere, a study of the online discourse in the Arab world helps frame and answer questions relating to the region, its people, and its politics.

- **The offline effects of online discourse**

This mapping provides us with a clearer understanding of how online discourse manifests itself in the ‘real world’ of political activism, social movements, and conflict. Blogs can be utilized as tools to mobilize collective action. The public discourse generated by blogs also informs the discourse in mainstream Arab media. According to John Kelly of Morningside Analytics, the online discourse “ends up in a feedback loop

with mainstream media and other sources of elite power. So it's the part of the Internet conversation that, even though is small, has disproportionate influence in public affairs."

- **Political change in the Arab world**

Both online and offline, the Arab world plays host to individuals and groups seeking to open political spaces and create democratic institutions in a context of authoritarian clampdown. In the Arabic-language blogosphere, activists are trying to use these technologies to advance public discourse and autonomy, and many states are seeking to crack down on that discourse. As a result of this mapping, our view of political change in the Arab world, and the contests at its heart, becomes clearer.

MAPPING THE ARAB BLOGOSPHERE: POLITICS, CULTURE AND DISSENT

The Berkman Center's study "[Mapping the Arab Blogosphere: Politics, Culture and Dissent](#)" was introduced by its authors John Palfrey, Bruce Etling, and John Kelly at the June 17th event held at USIP. They discussed their methodological approach, key findings of the report, as well as implications for conflict management.

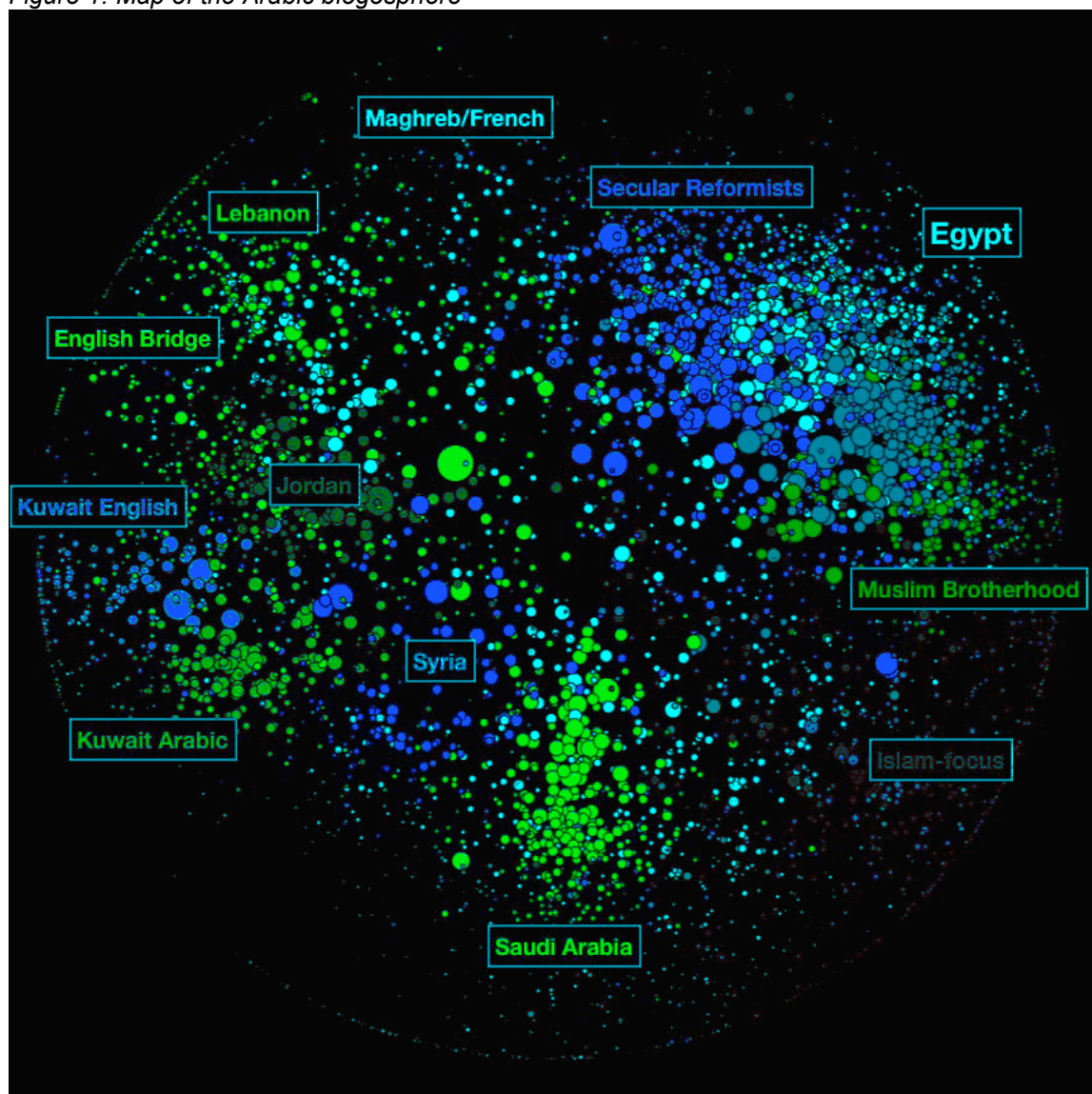
Methodology

The researchers began by selecting the 'public' part of online Arabic-language activity outside of traditional media. Since blogs are the most accessible medium of public discourse online, they formed the basis for the study. This also led the researchers to set aside analysis of more 'closed' online spaces such as social networking Web sites and password-protected, moderated forums.

Further, the Berkman researchers were particularly interested in those blogs that were significantly linked. *Link analysis*, as Kelly explains, reveals "the biggest things going on. Bloggers that are interested in the same issues pull together into networked neighborhoods of densely interconnected bloggers where information flows and where conversations happen. The structure of these networks reflects the interests of these bloggers." These patterns in bloggers' interests and linking practices allow researchers to divide up the blogosphere into *attentive clusters*: "a statistical clustering that separates the bloggers into groups that link to the same Web sites."

The researchers conducted this analysis on a sample of more than 35,000 Arabic-language blogs using both quantitative and qualitative methods, including standardized “human coding” of blog content by Arabic speakers. Scouring blogs for inter-linkages across geographical regions, as well as for key words and topics of discussion, the study created a three-dimensional visual representation of the Arabic blogosphere.²

Figure 1: Map of the Arabic blogosphere



² For more details, refer to pg. 12 of the *Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere* report at http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/sites/cyber.law.harvard.edu/files/Mapping_the_Arabic_Blogosphere_0.pdf. Illustration courtesy of the Berkman Center.

KEY FINDINGS

During the event, Berkman researchers presented an overview of the report's key findings, as well as some surprising results that the analysis revealed about public discourse in the Arabic-language blogosphere.

1. *The primacy of local politics*

Researchers found that there were few discussions that took on a truly pan-Arab character. Instead, the blogosphere clustered around national issues, as figure 1 reveals. In fact, John Kelly characterizes blogs as “the most localized form of Arabic language discourse.”³

The fact that online discourse in the Arab world tends to revolve around national clusters is further reinforced by the nature of political discussion in the Arabic-language blogosphere. As Kelly explains, “when Arab bloggers blog about domestic political leaders, their tone is critical. We see that domestic political leaders are criticized across the map.” Local politics is the most widely-discussed topic in the Arab blogosphere, with a vigor and frankness seldom matched in traditional media.⁴

2. *Pan-Arab resonance of the Israel-Palestine issue*

Despite the ‘national’ nature of most Arabic-language blogosphere, there is one topic that remains important across the region and its blogs: the Israel-Palestine conflict. Support for the Palestinian cause is consistent across the region. As the Berkman Center’s Bruce Etling commented, “The one unifying thing...was the conflict between Israel and Palestine. Especially [due to] the conflict in Gaza [that] happened last year, this really is the one issue that unifies the entire blogosphere.”

Daniel Brumberg, director of [USIP's Muslim World Initiative](#) explained the far-reaching effects of the Israel-Palestine issue. Tying together the issues of local politics, democratic reform, and overwhelming opposition to Israel, he explained that the issue often serves the agenda of authoritarian regimes in the region: “What happens is that everyone can agree on opposing Israel, but that obscures the harder work of actual political reform at the local level.”

³ For more details, refer to pg. 14 of the “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere” report.

⁴ For more details, refer to pg. 33 of the “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere” report.

3. Building bridges beyond the Arab-language world

As the authors emphasized, the Arab-language blogosphere tends to coalesce around Arab countries and their specific local issues. However, many so-called 'bridge bloggers' serve as virtual connections between these fairly discrete blogospheres. Through these bloggers, information, opinions, and news stories spread across different parts of the Arabic-language blogosphere. These bridge bloggers occupy a distinct space in the visual landscape of the Arabic blogosphere, emerging as small points between larger national clusters. Bilingual or multilingual bridge bloggers also serve to link different linguistic communities: Arabic, English, and Francophone.

Bridge bloggers who blog in English are of particular interest to Western observers, since, as Kelly points out, they "connect up with the American blogosphere and the international blogosphere." They are bloggers with "a more Western orientation that are more linked in to American blogs and the international blogosphere." This bridge also provides us with a glimpse of the public discourse regarding American foreign policy and Western values, although we should not assume that their views are representative of the population as a whole.⁵

4. Terrorism and political Islam

Another issue of considerable interest to the U.S. foreign policy community is that of terrorism and political Islam. Mapping of the Arabic-language blogosphere reveals little or no overt support for terrorism. In fact, Kelly commented that blogging in support of terrorism was "extraordinarily rare." Instead, criticism of terrorism was common across the Arab blogosphere, especially in the bridge linking the Arab blogosphere and Western bloggers.

However, many of these groups do not operate in the open spaces of the blogosphere. Instead, they frequent what the report terms 'private publics': "walled-off gardens of password-protected chatrooms." Regardless of the relative inaccessibility of this part of the online discourse, Kelly comments, "The key point is that they're not part of the dominant public discussion." Daniel Brumberg sees digital opacity as a source of worry: "The *ihadists* are not openly blogging; they put up the walls. The fact that we don't have information about them is really important. It does not suggest a lack of influence; it may be quite the reverse."⁶ The Berkman Center researchers also acknowledge the difficulty of assessing a term as subjective as "terrorism" in this context.

⁵ For more details, refer to pgs. 19, 20, and 23 of the "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere" report.

⁶ For more details, refer to pg. 32 of the "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere" report.

5. Iraq: the “missing” blogosphere

Recently emerged from war, and with only nascent telecommunication and Internet capabilities, the state of the Iraqi blogosphere is of particular interest to researchers and policymakers. Interestingly, the Iraqi blogosphere does not emerge as a national cluster like the blogospheres of other countries. Instead, it exists in the bridge between Western and Arab bloggers. Kelly characterizes them as “in some sense, on the road to Washington.” As Iraqi bloggers are most heavily connected to the English-language online dialogue, they may influence the international community, but perhaps at the expense of developing a more robust national online discourse of their own.

Another interesting aspect of the Iraqi bridge bloggers is that they are primarily Iraqi expatriates blogging in America and other parts of the world. According to Kelly, they form another significant channel of information-flow between America and the Arab world: “If one way that the West connects with the Arabic world is through this bridge, another way is [through] Arab expatriates living in the West who are still blogging, spread across all these national clusters. So it's yet another channel of international dialogue.”

6. Bloggers and the Arab media ecosystem

By looking at the news Web sites and online information sources that a particular cluster links to most frequently, blogosphere mapping tells us much about the linkages between blogs and mainstream sources of news in the Arab world. Through this process, known as *cluster focus indexing*, researchers have found that the Al-Jazeera news Web site is the most popular mainstream news source in the region, followed by BBC Online and Al-Arabiya. However, eclipsing them all is YouTube, which forms the largest source of links and news stories in the Arab blogosphere. Furthermore, these videos tend to be more politically-oriented than cultural. As an open platform for user-generated content, YouTube emerges as a powerful citizen-driven media channel, and as a consequence has borne the brunt of government censorship.⁷

DISCUSSION

Following the presentation of the “Mapping the Arab Blogosphere” report, a panel of experts

⁷ For more details, refer to pg. 38 of the “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere” report.

discussed the implications of its findings for politics in the Arab world, conflict management in the region, and future research on the topic. This panel, moderated by USIP's Sheldon Himelfarb, consisted of Daniel Brumberg (acting director of USIP's Muslim World Initiative), Saad Ibrahim (Voices for a Democratic Egypt), and Iraqi blogger Raed Jarrar (American Friends Service Committee and *Raed in the Middle* blog).

1. Online discourse about conflict

The panelists made numerous observations about the connection between conflict and online discourse in the Arab world, as regarding both existing conflicts and conflict management in the future.

The conflicts in the region with the greatest U.S. involvement, Iraq and Afghanistan, were little discussed in Arabic blogs. As Bruce Etling observed, “[o]f the two major conflict that the U.S. is involved in that part of the world, Iraq was rarely discussed. It was not a major topic of discussion....How much do they talk about Afghanistan? Almost not at all.” However, “[t]he one unifying thing...was the conflict between Israel and Palestine.” The conflict remains a powerful theme in Arab public life, and this is clearly reflected in its blogosphere. The Berkman researchers noted that this emphasis may be elevated given the time period of the blogosphere study, from April 2008 to March 2009, which included the height of the 2008-2009 conflict in Gaza.

As pointed out earlier, the themes of terrorism and violent *jihad* had very little resonance in the Arab blogosphere. Across the region, violence of that sort was criticized, and the ‘private publics’ of chatrooms and discussion forums where extremist content abounds remain at the margins of Arab online discourse.

2. Online discourse to prevent and resolve conflict

Bruce Etling acknowledged the role that bridge bloggers could potentially play in the blogosphere as a means of conflict prevention and conflict management. They are “important because these folks blog in English for an American and English-speaking audience, and they are interpreting what bloggers in the region are saying, how they're thinking, and are helping us understand their politics, their culture, and their views on conflict. So they're helping us get beyond all these cartoonish existing frames that we've probably come into when we're looking at these conflicts.” Raed Jarrar pointed out that the study itself still applied highly subjective

categories such as “moderate” or “terrorist” to frame the analysis of Arab online discourse. The potential of bridge bloggers to take on these mediating roles is yet to be fully tapped.

Bridge bloggers can also form relationships across groups to mitigate conflict. As Brumberg observes, one of the potential dangers of the blogosphere is that it reinforces group cohesion instead of bridging communities. “You have secularists talking to secularists, Islamists talking to Islamists, etc. How do we get these two groups talking to one another? My sense is that there is a lot of work that needs to be done in using the blog as a bridge-building mechanism for conflict resolution in that particular regard.”

Such bridging has happened internationally in the wake of the recent post-election demonstrations in Iran. Saad Ibrahim observed “Egyptian and Arab bloggers put themselves in the service of their Iranian colleagues who [were] rebelling in the streets of Iran.” Egyptian bloggers provided Iranian democratic activists with ways to circumvent the Iranian authorities’ clampdown on Internet access. This kind of ‘benign tribalism,’ as Ibrahim terms it, not only served as a way to create linkages between communities, but also to generate considerable nervousness on the part of Egyptian authorities.

3. *Blogs as tools for democratic reform*

A great deal of discussion revolved around the blogosphere and its potential to encourage political change in the Arab world. Ibrahim, a noted democratic activist, was generally optimistic: “What we are really seeing is a new politics in a new age in the region: politics as not dominated by ideologies, but dominated by issues and by technology. And I think that is broadly welcome, and it explains why bashing America in blogs is not a pastime as it is in the written media, which belongs to the last generation...And I think this new politics is what is going to, in the medium- to long-run, help democratize the Arab world.”

Daniel Brumberg echoed Ibrahim’s sentiments, pointing out that the focus on local issues and local politics was a positive sign. However, he also warned that insular online communities could serve the interests of authoritarian regimes: “The threat of the Internet [to these regimes] is the creation of linkages across barriers. And as soon as they emerge, the regimes get really nervous. From the perspective of the regimes, as long as these Internet communities are talking to one another, to some extent, that saps some of the potential [and] their political influence. [If

there's not enough of this bridging, to some extent that may play into the hands of authoritarian regimes."

4. *Navigating governments' influence over online discourse*

Part of the reason for this lack of linkage between different communities and activist groups is due to the clampdown on free speech by nervous authoritarian regimes. This forces supporters of political reform into the private spaces of chatrooms and away from public online discourse. According to John Kelly, "to the extent that freedom of speech is protected and is allowed to thrive, this more public form of discourse, which is visible to everybody and can connect these different communities, can come into being, and people can get out of communicating in these 'private publics.' The blogosphere ends up in a feedback loop with other elite media in a way that discussion in more hidden private publics does not. It ends up informing the larger mass media in the public sphere and helps us move towards a new model of public discourse."

Some groups, like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, have found ways to overcome these constraints. Saad Ibrahim attributes this to the ingenuity of marginalized political groups in the country: "The Muslim Brotherhood, as the report aptly pointed out, are very active [bloggers]. They are always one or two steps ahead of their non-Muslim Brotherhood colleagues, and definitely about 10 steps ahead of the Egyptian authorities. In other words, whatever appears in public is not because the Egyptian authority is tolerant. It is because the Egyptian authority is inept." The challenge remains in translating this active online discourse into tangible outcomes in the direction of political reform in the Arab world.⁸

5. *The demographics of blogging*

The panel was also interested in determining the extent to which bloggers represent a broader population, as well as the social and political biases that inform their approach to political issues. The Berkman report finds that most bloggers are young males. This demographic trend in the direction of youth is important in the eyes of Saad Ibrahim: "[Bloggers] are nearly all young people under 30, and that is not to belittle or to underestimate them, because as a constituency, they make up 60 percent of the population." Thus, this reports maps the discourse of a fast-growing, politically-active cohort in the Arab world.⁹

⁸ For more details, refer to pgs. 19 and 49 of the "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere" report.

⁹ For more details, refer to pgs. 17 and 36 of the "Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere" report.

Ibrahim also points out that blogs represent a new, open space for women of the region. “Increasingly, Saudi women are using blogging [as a form of] ‘electronic unveiling.’ So even though Saudi women are veiled from head to toe, through blogging and electronic media, they are unveiling, they are exposing, they are talking, and they are getting their voices heard. And that is a very welcome sign.” Indeed, the demographic trends in the Arab blogosphere mirror the ‘new politics’ that Saad described.¹⁰

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The Berkman Center researchers, discussants, and audience members suggested areas for future research that could provide clearer insights into the implications of online discourse for violent conflict and political change in the region.

Bruce Etling proposed delving further into the extremist views expressed online on Web sites and chat rooms. He suggested using “text-scraping analysis and deep textual analysis to understand the types of words they use.” Insights gained from such a study could serve as an early warning system for conflict. Further textual analysis could also provide warnings when people are “using dehumanizing language about the other side, using racial slurs, etc.” Such content can often serve as a pointer to imminent violence, since it “allows people within a conflict to more easily lead to violence because they see the other side as less than human.”

Dan Brumberg suggested that further studies provide us with more insight into the demographics of bloggers, as well as their political and social biases. Along similar lines, Andre Goodfriend, a member of the audience and Consul General at the U.S. Embassy in Damascus, Syria, suggested mapping how online discourse mirrors Arab public opinion more broadly.

USIP’s Center of Innovation for Science, Technology and Peacebuilding continues this research as part of its ongoing “Blogs and Bullets” initiative. Current research includes a collaborative research effort with the Berkman Center for Internet & Society and George Washington University to study “New Media, Conflict, and Contentious Politics” more comprehensively.

¹⁰ For more details, refer to pg. 37 of the “Mapping the Arabic Blogosphere” report.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This *USIPeace Briefing* was written by Joel Whitaker, senior adviser to the Center of Innovation for Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding at the United States Institute of Peace, and Anand Varghese, program facilitator for the Center of Innovation for Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding. The views expressed here are not necessarily those of USIP, which does not advocate specific policies.

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The Science, Technology, and Peacebuilding Center of Innovation identifies new practices, conducts research, and develops innovative strategies for applying science and technology to the challenge of peacebuilding in fragile states. It is widely accepted that the pace of innovation is faster now than at any time in human history and may therefore provide novel opportunities to help prevent and resolve violent conflict through the continuous interplay between science, technology and peacebuilding.

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