Internet communication in different political systems: a cross-national study

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Abstract
This paper presents a comparative analysis of Internet communication in 12 countries. The study used methods of cluster analysis of Internet usage profiles, comparative analysis of Internet development indices, and typological analysis of political system features. Features of Internet development in countries with different types of political systems were compared. These include institutional control over the Internet on the part of the state and corporations; restrictions of Internet access; share of users that consider the Internet a living space; share of users that use the Internet in a pragmatic way; share of users that focus on leisure Internet content; share of users that excluded themselves from Internet communication. According to the results of the study, political factors determine the intensity of Internet communication, while the sociocultural factors affect the type of Internet content that is consumed.
Key words: Internet communication; political and communicational functions of the Internet; indices of Internet development; political system; political regime

Introduction

Nowadays, the world is divided into two unequal parts: those involved in Internet communication and those who do not use the web (Castells, 2009; Kiesler, 1997; Nechaev, Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, 2015). The life of two billion users differs substantially from that of the five billion people who do not have the opportunity to use the Internet. Therefore, determining the role of the global network in the life of citizens of various countries that are exposed to intensive development of telecommunication systems is an important scientific and practical issue (Kling, Rosenbaum, Sawyer, 2005; Farrell, 2012; Toktagazin et al., 2016). This primarily concerns European, Asian, Pacific, and North and South American countries. Additional scientific and practical significance is found in the factor analysis of the political and sociocultural factors that affect the Internet usage strategy of citizens of different countries.

This study is based on the methodology of the World Internet Project – an association of 50 countries aimed at developing a universal set of tools for studying trends in Internet communication and the social effects of the web. The empirical objects of the cross-national study included 14 countries – key members of the World Internet Project. Their interest in studying social and humanitarian effects of Internet communication is combined with significant differences in the nature of their political systems and prevalent strategies of Internet usage. The structural, technological, and conceptual features of Internet communication can serve as indicators of social, axiological, and sociopolitical processes in the society (Wynn, 2009).

It is necessary to understand the nature of the correlation between the prevalent Internet usage profile in a country and the formation and development of its political system.

Recent events, such as the Arab Spring and the series of protests in Europe, China, the USA, and other countries showed how relevant it is to assess the role of Internet technologies in the formation of protest attitudes in citizens and their mobilization for protests (Barber, 2001; Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, Kazachenko, 2015). It is

obvious that the web is capable of becoming a powerful lever in politics, political views of citizens, and their protests (Farrell, 2012; Jensen, Jorba, 2012).

Researchers of social and humanitarian effects of Internet communication (Godoy 2016; Dutton, Blank, 2014; Nechaev, Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, 2014) note the unequal development of different sectors of Internet communication. With intensively developing information, communication, and leisure segments of the web, there is a serious problem concerning the development of the capabilities of the Internet in the realization of citizens' political subjectivity and their electronic participation (Chou, Fu, 2016; Curran et al., 2016). The interest of citizens in the political functions of the web is significant; however, the infrastructure that would enable implementing electronic participation is developed very poorly and unequally in different countries. Nowadays, despite the extensive capacities of telecommunication technologies, Internet communication does not solve the problem of the huge gap between the authorities and citizens. This may be one of the factors that cause protest attitudes and protest mobilization of citizens. On the other hand, it is necessary to understand clearly the effect of sociodemographic factors on the formation of attitude to the political functions of the Internet. It is important to identify the social communities that are most sensitive to the technologies of online protest mobilization.

Certain aspects of the dependency of the nature of in-demand Internet content and the citizens' attitude to the political functions of the web have been studied by researchers of the Oxford Internet Institute (Dutton, Blank, 2014). In particular, G. Blank conducted a typological analysis of the so-called Internet cultures. The typological method used in his study was hierarchic cluster analysis. The study identified five types of Internet cultures:
• e-Mersives (12% of UK Internet users);
• Techno-pragmatists (17%);
• The Cyber-savvy (19% of Internet users);
• Cyber-moderates (37%);
• Adigitals (14% of Internet users).

G. Blank's technology was based on the following criteria of British users' attitude to the political functions of the Internet:
- assessment of the effect of the Internet on the exercise of political rights and freedoms;
- assessment of the Internet as an effective means of criticizing authorities;
- assessment of the Internet as a means of raising awareness of the decisions and actions of authorities;
- assessment of the Internet as a means of expanding the possibilities of communicating with people that have similar political views;
- the type of consumed Internet content;
- the degree of comment activity and rate of creation of original content on the Internet;
- significant sources of information.

According to the results of the hierarchic cluster analysis, the more involved people are in Internet communication, the more optimistic is their evaluation of the political functions of the web.

For instance, only the members of the e-Mersives Internet culture, who used all content types and capabilities of the web, had a high potential of electronic participation and attitudes to realizing their political subjectivity on the Internet. Members of other Internet cultures, which focus on the pragmatic and situational use of the web and entertainment on the Internet, consider the web secondary in the exercise of their rights and freedoms. Most e-Mersives are young people, while most Cyber-moderates and Adigitals are senior people.

At the same time, science has yet to make any serious attempts to measure the correlation between the characteristics of Internet communication in countries with

different political systems and citizens' attitude to the political functions of the Internet.

Scientific literature devoted to this subject emphasizes the following regularity: increase in the number of people involved in Internet communication intensifies the emergence of new formats and scales of political communication, which is related to the transparency of authorities, political mobilization of the electorate, coordination of protest movements, crowdfunding and crowdsourcing in the activities of civil society structures, etc. In their work titled The New Digital Age, Eric Schmidt and Jared Cohen (representatives of the Google corporation) name the two billion people who already have access to the Internet members of the "network club" (Schmidt, Jared, 2013). The potential of their influence on the economy, politics, and the social sphere is significantly higher than that of the five billion people without instant access to the network club.

People who practice electronic democracy and electronic voting, Internet services that provide governmental services, Twitter revolutions, political parties that actively promote their programs on blog hosting platforms, political leaders that build "online images" in addition to their regular images, the battle of memes between the opposition and pro-government structures in social networks – these and many other facts indicate a change in the concept of politics under the effect of Internet technologies and Internet users.

At the same time, two polar opposite opinions have formed around the influence of Internet technologies on politics and management in the political science community: an optimistic one ("The spread of the Internet and mobile technologies gives people unprecedented power" – the basic idea of The New Digital Age) and a pessimistic one ("Consumption of information on the Internet does not have a significant relation to either electoral activity or political participation" (Malinovsky, 2013).

The methodological framework of this study is based on the principles of systems, neo-institutional, and synergetic approaches, which are interrelated, as well as methods of cluster (identification of Internet communication profiles) and typological analysis (analysis of correlation between Internet communication features and political system characteristics).

METHODS

The empirical framework of the study includes data of 14 national teams of the World Internet Project, obtained during a mass survey of citizens of China (1500 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Greek Cyprus (996 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Turkish Cyprus (1007 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Poland (2007 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Russia (1600 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Taiwan (1115 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Switzerland (1114 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Sweden (2700 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of the United Kingdom (2057 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of Mexico (2000 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of the South African Republic (1589 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), mass survey of citizens of the USA (1351 respondents, sample is

representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), Chile (741 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age), and Uruguay (2006 respondents, sample is representative for the type area of residence, district, gender, and age). The margin of error in all selected countries did not exceed 3%.

Table 1. Sex distribution of respondents

Country	Men	Women
Great Britain	48.0%	52.0%
China	64.1%	35.9%
Russia	46.0%	54.0%
Sweden	50.6%	49.4%
Mexico	53.0%	47.1%
South Africa	54.2%	45.8%
USA	54.1%	45.9%
Chile	52.2%	47.8%
Uruguay	47.1%	52.9%
Greek Cyprus	48.2%	51.8%
Turkish Cyprus	54.0%	46.%
Poland	47.4%	52.6%
Switzerland	49.8%	50.2%
Taiwan	49.6%	50.4%

Table 2. Age distribution of respondents

Country	Users aged 23 and younger	Users aged 24-63	Users aged 64 and older
Great Britain	14.7%	64.6%	20.7%
China	21.7%	73.8%	4.5%
Russia	21.9%	69.3%	8.8%
Sweden	17.4%	57.6%	25.0%
Mexico	37.8%	57.8%	4.4%
South Africa	26.5%	65.3%	8.2%
USA	14.0%	63.9%	22.1%
Chile	5.4%	68.7%	25.9%
Uruguay	17.8%	65.5%	16.7%
Greek Cyprus	20.7%	64.4%	14.9%
Turkish Cyprus	21.7%	67.4%	10.9%
Poland	15.8%	70.6%	13.6%
Switzerland	13.4%	65.3%	21.3%
Taiwan	3.2%	70.2%	36.6%

The SPSS Base 17.0 statistical treatment package was used to analyze the empirical material collected during the mass survey. The array of these 14 countries was regarded as an integral whole; types of Internet users were distinguished in this "whole". This allows distinguishing the same types of users in new countries in the future. People who "Do not use the Internet" were classified as a separate group.
The selected clustering variables were the ones that revealed the behavioral aspects of Internet usage:
–   Rate of Internet usage at home (per week)
–   Rate of Internet usage at work (per week)
–   Rate of Internet usage in educational institutions (per week)
–   Rate of Internet usage in other places (per week)

–   Rate of usage of wireless mobile devices to access the Internet
–   Experience of using wireless mobile devices to access the Internet
–   Rate of email usage
–   Rate of communication in chats
–   Rate of telephone calls via the Internet
–   Rate of filling of a personal blog with information
–   Rate of posting of photos and images on the Internet
–   Rate of personal status update in social networks
–   Rate of comment activity
–   Rate of Internet search for traveling-related information
–   Rate of Internet search for employment-related information
–   Rate of reading of/search for jokes and humorous content on the Internet
–   Rate of Internet search for health-related information
–   Rate of participation in online games
–   Rate of online purchases
–   Rate of online booking
–   Rate of online bill payment
–   Rate of online banking usage
–   Rate of investment in shares/bonds/funds via the Internet
–   Rate of search for the definition of a term/concept on the Internet
–   Rate of search for information concerning a specific fact
–   Rate of search for education-related information
–   Rate of distance education

The k-means clustering method was used to distinguish the types of Internet users. The use of this method was justified by the fact that the World Internet Project questionnaire used variables with interval or ordinal scales, which allows determining the similarity of objects and centers of clusters that reflect the conceptual filling of this or that Internet behavior strategy.

The selected variables were transformed:

–   The block of questions regarding the duration of Internet usage in various places (at home, at work, in school, etc.) was averaged into a new variable – Rate of Internet usage. On the one hand, this allows leveling the differences caused by the main activity of the respondents: some people spend most of their time at home, while others go to school or work, on the other hand, it allows distinguishing the rate of Internet usage specifically.

–   In the block of questions regarding the rate of usage of various "sides of the Internet" and experience in mobile Internet usage, the answer option "Cannot say" corresponds by implication to the answer "I do not use this side".

–   All selected variables underwent normalization by Z-score.

Typological analysis. The typological analysis can also be used to treat the results of the study. In this case, the basic typing attributes are the prevalent Internet content consumption profiles represented in the results of the cluster analysis. At that, the set of typing attributes should have a three-component structure. The first component is the characteristic of the typed phenomenon; the second component is the characteristic of the social background of the phenomenon; the third component is the factor that explains the existence of the types of manifestation of the studied phenomenon.

Data, Analysis, and Results
The structure of the results analysis includes the following:

- analysis of Internet communication characteristics of the representatives of different Internet usage profiles;
- comparative analysis of the prevalent Internet behavior profiles in the selected countries;
- determination of the correlation between the features of Internet communication in the country and the characteristics of its political system.

The cluster analysis determined the percentages of the various types of Internet behavior in 14 European, Asian, Pacific, and North and South American countries (see Table 3).

Table 3. Distribution of Internet behavior types in the selected countries, in percentage

Country	Innovators	Traditionalists	Entertainment Seekers	Pragmatists	Non-users
UK	14.6	21.7	13.5	27.3	22.8
China	18.1	5.3	17.3	3.5	55.7
Russia	5.9	23.9	33.4	4.4	32.4
Sweden	12.8	16.4	8.8	49.5	12.5
Mexico	3.4	17.7	41.8	1.9	35.4
South Africa	6.3	14.9	8.0	4.9	65.9
USA	23.9	14.6	7.0	40.2	14.3
Greek Cyprus	12.3	13.0	18.2	18.1	38.4
Turkish Cyprus	13.7	10.6	30.2	3.8	41.8
Taiwan	3.6	32.3	15.0	12.0	37.0
Switzerland	6.6	29.6	9.1	39.8	14.8
Poland	8.2	22.5	10.5	23.3	35.5
Chile	9.6	27.8	12.8	12.4	37.4
Uruguay	10.7	22.3	23.0	24.0	20.0

Considering the basis of clustering, the key parameters were the scale and conceptual trend of Internet communication. Each of the distinguished Internet behavior types can be analyzed through these bases:
- Innovators actively consume (12-16 hours daily) all the main types of Internet content;
- Traditionalists are notable for a low level of consumption (one-two hours weekly) of Internet content;
- Entertainment Seekers actively consume (8-12 hours daily) primarily leisure Internet content;
- Pragmatists moderately consume (two-four hours daily) primarily educational and occupational Internet content.
- Non-users are citizens that are not involved in Internet communication.

Consider the results of structuring of the user audience in the selected countries based on the distinguishing of groups of countries that lead in the percentage of this or that cluster.

The Innovators type of Internet behavior is spread the most in the USA and China (see Table 3). This is the type of Internet users, for whom the Internet is a habitat and living space. The sociodemographic profile of this cluster is outlined clearly: single young men and women aged 18-24 with higher education. Members of this type perform their social activities virtually, in the cyberspace. Innovators communicate, search for information, earn money, purchase commodities and services, realize their political subjectivity, and perform other actions online. Such people can use the

Internet for up to 16 hours daily. Such users utilize all the resources and capabilities of the web much more actively than the representatives of other Internet behavior strategies do. The most indicative distinguishing feature of these users is their focus on creating Internet content. Innovators are the creators of Internet content. These people do not limit the filling of Internet content to posting photos and videos (as is the case with Entertainment Seekers); their work on the creation of Internet content may include the development of websites, blogs, and other Internet resources; Innovators are the cluster of so-called Internet fanatics or Internet-obsessed persons, who also acknowledge the significance of the web as a means of realizing one's political subjectivity. Representatives of this type of Internet behavior not only recognize the vast potential of online political subjectivity, but also display their political subjectivity by posting their political comments and creating forums and other platforms to discuss political problems.

The analysis of the sociocultural and institutional context of the USA and China shows the existence of different, but similar in nature, reasons of why these countries are leaders in terms of the percentage of Innovators. In the USA, the high percentage of these users is determined technologically and by the longest history of intensive Internet usage. In China, the relatively high percentage of Innovators in the Internet user structure is related to the perception of Internet communication as a social attribute of mobility and success in life. The attributive purpose of Internet technologies predetermines the focus of Chinese users on the active usage of the capabilities of the web.

The political component of the Innovators' Internet behavior strategy is characterized by a relatively optimistic evaluation of the web as a tool of political and electronic participation. Representatives of this cluster believe that the Internet expands the human ability to exercise rights and freedoms, raises awareness of political decisions, and allows expressing one's opinion regarding the political life of the country.

The conceptual opposite of the above strategy is the Traditionalist type of Internet behavior. This cluster has the highest percentage in Taiwan and Switzerland (see Table 3). The Internet behavior of these users is characterized by irregular and sporadic Internet usage. Representatives of this cluster mostly use the Internet at home, which is related to two circumstances:

- preference of the home computer to access the Internet;

- ability to receive consultative assistance concerning Internet usage from younger family members at home.

Traditionalists have no sustainable interests on the Internet. Representatives of this type use email and social networks and search for information several times per month. They generally regard the Internet as a secondary source of information and an auxiliary means of communication. Traditionalists are a cluster of people that belong to the Television Party and prefer direct communication. For them, the web is an underexplored space, the capabilities whereof are not fully realized by Traditionalists. In particular, representatives of this type do not agree with the notion that the Internet allows one to better understand the actions of politicians or that the web can force politicians to pay attention to what the users think of them. In essence, Traditionalists are a type of Internet behavior that is typical primarily for senior users, who do not depend on the web too much and use is an a secondary channel of communication and an auxiliary and situational source of information.

The leading countries in terms of the percentage of Entertainment Seekers are Mexico and Russia (see Table 3). The explanation for the prevalence of this Internet behavior strategy in these countries largely comes from its essence and concept. Users that engage in this type of Internet behavior use the web outside their homes almost as actively as they do at home and do so more often that other users do. These people generally use their mobile phones or tablets to access the Internet, which is why they

remain online almost constantly. The dominating motives for using the web for the representatives of this type are entertainment and informal online communication. This determines their conceptual characteristics of online behavior. In particular, Entertainment Seekers do the following on the Internet on a regular basis (from several times a week to daily): check/send mail and instant messages, post original content (photos and videos), read blogs, search for humorous content, play online games, and download music, videos, and movies. These people use social networks several times a day, which is significantly more often than other respondents do. The information behavior of such users is almost entirely limited to using the web, which manifests in the consideration of the Internet as the main source of information and means of entertainment and communication. Representatives of this type have a generally positive attitude towards the Internet as a means of realizing one's political subjectivity and believe that using the Internet allows:

- having more possibilities to exercise political rights and freedoms;
- having more possibilities to discuss the actions of the government;
- better understanding the actions of politicians;
- realizing that government officials are forced to pay more attention to what Internet users think of them.

At the same time, while acknowledging the vast potential of the Internet in the realization of one's political subjectivity, the representatives of this cluster are rather apolitical and loyal to the possibility of stricter governmental control over the content on the Internet; they mostly focus on leisure activities on the Internet.

A significant factor in the prevalence of Entertainment Seekers in the Russian and Mexican user audiences is their lack of formedness and instability. These features are characteristic of the so-called "young Internet audiences" (Schmidt, Jared, 2013), the significant characteristic whereof is the prevailing focus on consuming entertaining content.

The Pragmatist strategy of Internet usage, which is prevalent in Sweden, the USA, and Switzerland (see Table 3), focuses on the functional usage of the web: as a means of improving one's level of education, earning money or finding information that satisfies one's occupational interests. These people generally use the Internet at home or at work and mainly use a computer to access it (phones and tablets are used less frequently). These people are rarely interested in entertaining content or social networks; they focus on searching for information they require to do their job and engaging in professional communication. Pragmatists usually regard the Internet and television as equally important sources of information and entertainment. At the same time, the rate of usage of these media does not exceed four hours a day (for comparison, Entertainment Seekers spend 12 hours a day online). Therefore, representatives of the analyzed cluster should be named the persons that constitute the moderate Internet and television audience. Their evaluation of the Internet's political functions is discreet; Pragmatists do not aim to actively use the web as a means of political participation.

The higher percentage of non-users is found in South Africa and China (see Table 3). The analysis found that the dominating factors of noninvolvement in Internet communication were poor education, low income, and senior age. In said countries, Internet exclusion is predetermined by a high percentage of citizens that have the sociodemographic profile that is typical for a non-user (Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, Kazachenko, 2015).

The cross-national analysis of Internet behavior strategies enabled showed that the scale and intensity of Internet communication were largely determined by institutional factors (development of the Internet infrastructure), while the Internet content was largely related to sociocultural factors (national mentality, level of formation and sustainability of the Internet audience, perception of Internet communication as an attribute of a high social status).

The results of the typological analysis that determined the correlation between the features of the political development of a country and the specificity of Internet communication are presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Matrix of the typological analysis along the "Political Development" / "Internet Communication Development" axes in selected countries[1].

	Open political systems / democratic political regimes	Partially open political systems / mixed (hybrid) political regimes	Closed political systems / authoritarian political regimes
Lack of institutional control over Internet communication on the part of the government	Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Great Britain	Uruguay, Chile	
Restrictions of Internet communication imposed by the government			China
Partial control over certain aspects of Internet communication on the part of the government/other actors		Russia, Mexico	
High level of involvement in Internet communication (more than 75% of the population are Internet users)	Sweden, Switzerland, USA, Great Britain	Uruguay	
Moderate level of involvement in Internet communication (50-75% of the population are Internet users)		Russia, Poland, Mexico, Greek Cyprus, Turkish Cyprus, Chile	
Low level of involvement in Internet communication (less than 50% of the population are Internet users)		SAR	China
Considerable percentage of the cluster of users that do not limit the scale of Internet communication to a specific type of content (more than 18% of the population)	USA	-	China
Considerable percentage of the cluster of users that limit the scale of Internet communication to pragmatic goals (more than 39% of the	Sweden, USA, Switzerland		

[1] Determination of the political system and political regime of a country was based on the specificity of the country's political order, its form of government, and features of the electoral system.

population)	
Considerable percentage of the cluster of users that limit the scale of Internet communication to leisure content (more than 10% of the population)	Mexico, Russia Greek Cyprus Turkish Cyprus Chile Poland

The typological analysis showed a correlation between the openness of the political system, the high level of citizen involvement in Internet communication, and the prevalence of the pragmatic strategy of Internet usage (see Table 4: Switzerland, Sweden, and the USA). A significant percentage of Innovators in China is explained by other reasons that are unrelated to the advantages of open competitive democratic systems. For the Chinese, the Internet is an attribute of social prestige and status, which is why a considerable part of Internet users in China, having accessed it, focus on using the web to the greatest extent possible (Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, Kazachenko, 2015).

Furthermore, correlations are typical for such indicators as partial restrictions imposed by hybrid regimes on certain aspects of Internet communication and trends of development of the entertainment strategy of Internet usage among users. This can be explained by the desire of the citizens in these countries to use the most accessible capabilities of the web.

When summarizing the study case, it is worth noting that the cross-national analysis of Internet usage strategies determined the specificity of the effect of sociocultural, political, and institutional factors on the development of Internet communication in different countries.

Discussion and Conclusion

When comparing the results, obtained by G. Blank (Dutton, Blank, 2014) with the results of this study, it is worth noting that the latter confirm the correlation between young age and better readiness of users for online political mobilization, while senior people mostly do not focus on using the Internet as a means of realizing their political subjectivity.

The trend of the "digital generation gap" is typical for many countries (Nechaev, Brodovskaya, Dombrovskaya, 2014). On the one hand, this means that the Internet cannot become a tool for forming protest attitudes in senior persons, on the other hand, it is necessary to support the exercise of rights of those who are barely involved in Internet communication to acquire information about the political decisions and actions of authorities, to express their opinion regarding the political life of the country, etc.

Thus, it is possible to identify two possible consequences of using the Internet as a means of political communication (Artyukhina, 2008):

    1. Accessibility of the Internet increases access to information, which creates prerequisites for more active participation in political processes and gives opportunity to diminish the inequality of the political capabilities of citizens.

    2. The manipulative function of the Internet undergoes latent development and, as a direct result, the society ceases being an active participant of the political system.

These two consequences directly depend on the political regime. Open democratic countries are likely to have the first option – the public will increase pressure on the government and enhance its political significance. Authoritarian regimes are likely to have the second option – political leaders will use the public opinion to promote their own interests.

The scientific substantiation and reliability of the results was achieved through the following methods and procedures:
• theoretical analysis of special scientific literature devoted to the political functions of Internet communication;
• use of logical procedures during the interpretation of research data;
• representativeness of the studied sample;
• reasonable use of methods of collection and analysis of information, which constituted the structure of the empirical model of this study, and triangulation methods;
• method of expert group discussion when considering the results of the study;
• various methods of statistical analysis of empirical data.
The research results introduce an array of cross-national empirical data regarding the correlation between the characteristics of Internet communication and the political system into the scientific discourse.

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