FORUM PEDAGOGICZNE

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DIGITAL PATHWAYS TO PEACE.
THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EDUCATION FOR PEACE

CYFROWE ŚCIEŻKI DO POKOJU.
ROLA MEDIÓW SPOŁECZNOŚCIOWYCH W EDUKACJI DLA POKOJU

Streszczenie: Edukacja dla pokoju to dziedzina nauki i praktyki, która wykorzystuje nauczanie i uczenie się nie tylko do eliminowania wszelkich form przemocy, ale także do tworzenia struktur, które budują i podtrzymują sprawiedliwy i równy pokój i świat. Artykuł bada możliwości, wyzwania i ograniczenia związane z wdrażaniem edukacji dla pokoju z wykorzystaniem przestrzeni mediów społecznościowych. Tekst podkreśla znaczenie świadomego podejścia pedagogicznego przy włączaniu mediów społecznościowych do edukacji pokojowej, potrzebę przemyślanej selekcji, krytycznej oceny i etycznego zaangażowania, aby zmaksymalizować pozytywny wpływ mediów społecznościowych na edukację na rzecz pokoju.

Słowa kluczowe: media społecznościowe, edukacja pokojowa, pokój, budowanie pokoju

Abstract: Peace education is a field of study and practice that uses teaching and learning not only to eliminate all forms of violence, but also to create structures that build peace and sustain a just and equitable world. This article explores the opportunities, challenges, and limitations of implementing education for peace using social media spaces and highlights the importance of an informed pedagogical approach when integrating social media into peace education. There

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is a need for thoughtful selection, critical evaluation, and ethical engagement to maximise the positive impact of social media on peace education.

Keywords: social media, peace education, peace, peacebuilding

Introduction

The world we live in is both dangerous and hopeful. The current scale of ongoing armed conflicts is unprecedented. According to *Global Conflict Tracker* (a tool for tracking ongoing conflicts around the world), conflicts exist in almost all inhabited parts of the world except Australia and New Zealand. The long list of conflicts includes civil wars, interstate conflicts, political instability, sectarian violence, territorial conflicts, international terrorism and unconventional conflicts (www 1). Most of these conflicts are violent in nature and tend to remain stable or escalate. The extent of violence in these conflicts can be gauged from the fact that 70.8 million people have been displaced because of them, in some of which it is estimated that more than 10,000 people have already been killed. In the war in Ukraine alone, more than 8 million people have fled the country as of February 2022, triggering the largest refugee crisis in Europe since World War II. According to the UN refugee agency, more than 13 million people, or nearly one-third of Ukraine's pre-war population, have been displaced since the Russian military invasion, of which more than 5 million are internally displaced and more than 8 million are refugees living in neighboring countries (www 2). By June 2023, according to official figures, at least 8,983 civilians had been killed and 15,442 wounded (www 3).[3] The conflict is now in its second year, and it is difficult to forsee when it will end.

Despite the enormity of the destruction and violence that we observe, the implementation of collective projects to affirm hope, rooted in the practices of everyday life, is also unprecedented. The motivation for the social construction of hope is based on a sense of responsibility and intergenerational accountability (Birnbacher 1999, p. 3). An essential part of this is a fundamental selflessness and sense of hope, which is a powerful motivating force and a way of dreaming of a possible future. There are peace initiatives of varying degrees of breadth and formality: from the international and state level to the grassroots level. Certainly, no initiative in isolation can bring lasting and sustainable peace, but there is nevertheless an ingrained expectation as well as impatience to use available means and spaces to reduce and level violence in the world. One such space is the

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3 OHCHR (UN High Commissioner for Human Rights) believes that the actual numbers are much higher, as the receipt of information from some of the locations where intense hostilities have been taking place has been delayed, and many reports are still awaiting confirmation. This includes Mariupol (Donetsk region), Lysychansk, Popasna and Severodonetsk (Luhansk region), where there are reports of numerous civilian casualties.

relatively new realm of social media and interactive technology, known as Web 2.0 or Web 3.0.[4] Different kinds of social media—each with its own capabilities, limitations, and essentially interactive nature—provide a space where people, previously physically and culturally separated from one another, can "meet" and interact outside the space and structures provided to them by dominant national or institutional discourses. Today, people who have access to even a cell phone can connect with like-minded individuals around the world, participate in global social movements, organize for positive (or negative) change, document actions taken and observed, and much, much more.

The term "social media" is used to refer to online applications that promote users, their interconnectedness, and the content they generate. These media allow users to engage online in conversations with others; create, edit and share textual, visual, and audio content; and categorize, tag, and recommend existing content. These applications include but are not limited to social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter (now X), LinkedIn and Reddit; media sharing sites such as YouTube and Flickr; authoring and publishing tools such as wikis and blogs; and aggregating and republishing content via RSS feeds and tagging tools (Greenhow 2011, p. 140).

Social media are seen as spaces where technology mediates between the cultural and the social. As public goods, they offer a space that allows for multiple voices, transnational audiences, and cross-cultural relationships (Naseem 2020, p. 159). They are also a space where the private voices of individuals can be transformed into public voices, giving validity to the personal and often mundane. Epistemologically, then, social media move the profane into the realm of the sacred. Methodologically, on the other hand, they introduce previously excluded sources and sites of knowledge and position them as a counterweight to traditional logic, empiricism and rationality. They personalize what is public and make public what is private. Social media also connect the experiences of readers and creators who are not in their immediate vicinity, thus globalizing the local and bringing the global closer locally. In other words, they create an imaginary community of shared experiences based on issues of common meaning, interests, and experiences, in opposition to place and physical presence.

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4 In the initial phase of launching the internet for public use, it was largely used as a one-way path for distributing information. People could use the internet to search for information mainly on static websites. This was the basis for learning and collecting data. The situation changed with the advent of Web 2.0, when individuals and groups could start interacting with each other online, further enabled by the advent of smartphones and smartphone apps. Thus, Web 2.0 provided individuals with the ability to be content creators and connect with other web users. Web 3.0 has emerged relatively recently and goes beyond human interaction and content creation and sharing. A key part of Web 3.0 is the idea of providing personalized and relevant information quickly through the use of artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced machine learning techniques (see Rudman and Bruwer 2016).

Dominant discourses—including those of a state, defense, political and educational nature—construct a kind of binary between the national, religious, or ethnic self and the national, religious, or ethnic other. These discourses often create a duet (polyphony) in which conflict inherently arises at the level of values, structure, relationships, or interests. In contrast to these discourses, social media potentially provides a space for interpersonal and intergroup interaction and contact outside the dominant discursive institutions. This provides an opportunity to resist the dominant discourse without activating conflict structures (Naseem, Arshad-Ayaz and Doyle 2017, p. 97) and without the punishing eye of politicians, academics, or clerics. In this sense, too, social media can be seen as a space for sustainable peace education. Creating effective activities that help young people understand social and political issues and ongoing conflicts from different perspectives (including alternatives to those presented in the dominant discourse) "is one of the most significant challenges educators face, yet it is very difficult to accomplish in traditional classroom settings." (Ross and Lou 2008, p. 5). Social media, which is in the realm of everyday practices and technological preferences of the so-called "digital natives"[5] , the "network generation"[6] or "generation C"[7] can provide young people with an opportunity to engage with the diverse people and viewpoints that education for peace requires.

This article presents the possibilities of using social media as a space for peace education. It argues that social media is a valuable arena for facilitating access to usually marginalized viewpoints, forms of expression, and ways of knowing, offering new pathways for understanding the surrounding reality. While the article mainly echoes and signals the recognition of social media as a space where education for peace initiatives can and do occur, it also expresses a realization that

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5 The creator of the term "digital natives" is American media researcher Marc Prensky, who in an article published in "On the Horizon" in 2001 characterized digital natives in opposition to digital immigrants (Prensky, 2001). The researcher referred to digital natives as the generation of people born after 1980, for whom computers and the internet are as natural elements of the world as electricity, radio, and television were for the generations before them.

6 The phrase "net generation" was coined by Don Tapscott (2010, p. 10) to describe baby boomer adults who were different from every other generation because the former grew up surrounded by digital media.

7 The term "generation C" comes from words that specify the behavior of young people growing up in the world of digital media: *Connected, Communicating, Content-centric, Computerized, Celebritized, Community-oriented, Always Clicking*. Thus, this is a generation of people who are connected to the network, who communicate online, who are computerized, who have a strong need to appear in public, who independently select and create content that interests them, who are interested in online communities and who are constantly active in online applications (clicking). The hallmark of this generation is poor communication with older generations (coming from the analog media era), and enthusiasm for using social media, while lacking interest in politics, religion, and work, upon which they place no particular value (Friedrich, Peterson and Koster 2011, pp. 3–7).

the same space is used to publish hateful messages and promote violent ideologies, post-truth, and communication wars (see Boler and Davis 2021). While the use of social media for peacebuilding may be attractive, without a strong critical pedagogy coupled with knowledge of digital spaces, the integration of social media into peace education may only exacerbate the inequalities it seeks to address.

Education for peace

As Albert Einstein rightly postulated, "The importance of securing international peace was recognized by the truly great men of former generations. But the technical advances of our times have turned this ethical postulate into a matter of life and death for civilized mankind today and made the taking of an active part in the solution to the problem of peace a moral duty which no conscientious man can shirk" (Einstein 1984, p. 43). For millennia, scientists, religious thinkers, and political activists have written and demonstrated for peace. But the "philosophy" of peace and education for peace are still in their infancy. And while war theorists and planners are visible in the media and in the corridors of power and universities, scholars who conduct studies for peace and teach and practice peace do so outside the mainstream, away from those who have the power to make and enforce important policy decisions—and often in the face of condemnation, invective, or academic isolation (see Bałandynowicz, 2022).

Peace is something we all desire, and yet, except for relatively short intervals between wars, it seems impossible to achieve. Perhaps "peace," like "happiness," "justice" or "health," is something that every person and culture declaratively desires and recognizes the value of, but few, if any, achieve in a sustainable way. Peace is the basis for social harmony, economic equality, political justice, and individual well-being, but it is nevertheless commonly interrupted—not only in our time, but throughout recorded human history—by violence and wars (opposites of social or external peace), as well as misery and wretchedness (manifestations of a lack of internal peace). Understanding and pacifying our conflicted external and internal worlds is therefore an intellectual and political project of paramount importance.

Peace education is a field of science and practice that uses teaching and learning to eliminate all forms of violence and oppression, but also to create structures that build peace and sustain social justice and global equality (see Quinn 2014; Naseem, Arshad-Ayaz and Doyle 2017; Bałandynowicz 2022). Thus, it is not limited to efforts to overcome conflict, disarmament, and the cessation of physical violence, so a "negative" peace, as distinguished by Johan Galtung (2004, p. 145). This is because such peace does not necessarily constructively transform communities that have been shattered by conflict or allow traumatized individuals to return to their previous lives. Therefore, a "positive" peace is also necessary, meaning the simultaneous presence of multiple desirable states, such as harmony, justice,

equality. "Positive" peace aims to overcome structural violence (which is born out of social relations and the loss of rights by individuals) and cultural violence (which is created by reinforcing the legitimacy of violence through socially recognized values and teachings that make community members feel entitled to use violence against others or to avenge the suffering they have experienced from others) (Galtung and Fischer 2013, p. 173). Education for peace is thus understood not (only) as the study and creation of conditions that promote "negative" peace (i.e., the absence of conflict and violence) but (also) as the creation of conditions for raising awareness, building cooperation, pursuing social justice, and recognizing the ecology of knowledge.

Richard Shaull, an American theologian and missionary who references Paulo Freire's emancipatory pedagogy, noted that education has the dual potential of either indoctrinating or liberating: "Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the current system and bring them into conformity, or it becomes a 'practice of freedom,' a means by which men and women critically and creatively deal with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world" (Shaull 2014, p. 34). This observation also defines the possibilities of education for peace. While various educational spaces can be used to foster anti-peace values such as war, violence, rivalry, militarism, or hatred, they can also be used to develop capacities for peaceful conflict resolution, nonviolence, justice, and respect for differences, also dismantling structures of violence and promoting peace (Galtung 1973, p. 317).

Peace education is therefore not limited to the transmission of knowledge and the formation of skills. It also aims to build new forms and structures of education through curricula, participatory learning, dialogue-based encounters, and different perspectives on historical narratives (see Bajaj 2014). In recent years, there has been an increase in approaches to peace education with the theses of critical pedagogy. Derived from several theoretical currents (Darder, Baltodano and Torres 2003), but heavily influenced by Freire's (2014) paradigm, critical pedagogy seeks to expose and subvert hegemonic values and "given" conceptions of truth that privilege the oppressor and perpetuate social domination and injustice. In general, critical pedagogy promotes educational experiences that are transformative, empowering, and transgressive. Its main goal is to engage teachers and students in a critical, dialectical examination of how power relations operate in schools or society and create or sustain hegemonic structures. It also equips teachers and students with the language of critique and the rhetoric of empowerment to become transformative agents who recognize, challenge, and transform unjust social structures. As Brantmeier and Bajaj (2013, p. 145) argue: "Critical approaches offer peace educators and researchers the contextual and conceptual resources for understanding the structural impediments to advancing the possibility and promise of peace education in diverse locales across the globe. Rather than status quo reproduction, critical approaches in peace education and peace research aim to empower learners as transformative change agents (Freire 1970) who critically

analyze power dynamics and intersectionalities among race, class, gender, ability/ disability, sexual orientation, language, religion, geography, and other forms of stratification."

Critical peace education specifically considers the ways in which human actions dynamically interact with structures and forms of violence and considers the potential of educational spaces (formal and informal) as sites of individual and collective transformation. Following Barraclough (1964), the following text will present how social media are a kind of new "city" where communities can "come together" to engage in critical education for peace, without pressure and relatively without oversight from established academic, religious, and political experts.

The potential of social media as a space for peace education

Analyzing social media in the context of a space for the implementation of peace education, one can see a parallel to the space that the distinguished historian, medievalist, Geoffrey Barraclough (1964) described and called the new "city." In his analyses on the decolonization of Asia and Africa, he observed that colonizers failed to recognize the great potential of colonized societies for self-renewal. He argued: "More fundamental in the long run than the pressures resulting from the interplay of power politics were two other factors. The first was the assimilation by Asians and Africans of western ideas, techniques, and institutions, which could be turned against the occupying powers—a process in which they proved far more adept than most Europeans had anticipated. The second was the vitality and capacity for self-renewal of societies which Europeans had too easily dismissed as stagnant, and decrepit or moribund" (Barraclough 1964, p. 149). Academics and politicians have largely dismissed the progress and potential of many of these societies, calling them "failed states" or "societies in crisis." Meanwhile, the movement to renew these "moribund societies" led to the independence of many former colonies, and to the emergence of 40 new national and cultural identities, all through grassroots civic initiatives, the activation of civic educational potential and the realized need to express their subjectivity in new social and political arenas, (Barraclough 1964, p. 148). Just as Geoffrey Barraclough's new "cities" provided an important space in which sentiments against colonizers and colonization and the need for agency and self-determination could be instrumentalized toward social renewal, social media can provide communities, particularly its younger section, with a space to engage in new pro-peace forms. Social media seems to have surpassed even Geoffrey Barraclough's new "cities" in its potential because of its dynamism and expansiveness due to its accessibility—a lack of static geography in which people from different places are invited to engage with each other on local and global issues. Moreover, the new "cities" (social media) are more participatory and less discriminatory. Leaders (political, religious, academic) used to be necessary for confrontational and community mobilization activities, today social movements

are driven by ideas. Social media participants are not leaders or followers who follow leaders, they are peers, united by ideas, activity, common interest, need for causality, sometimes resistance. Social media provides a space for communities of diverse backgrounds and affiliations to confront social needs for self-renewal and peacebuilding.

Before presenting arguments showing the potential of social media in peace education programs, it is necessary to make clear the assumptions that must be met in order to critically and reflectively build peace. The first is the recognition that social media often serve to reinforce prejudices rather than combat them. The second is that rather than facilitating dialogue across divides, social media often promote superficial exchanges, conformity, and consumption. Finally, social media are not culturally neutral. Unless combined with critical media education, they can do little more than reinforce dominant forms of discourse. The original assumption was that social media would promote equality and democracy by bridging cultural divides and expanding the public sphere. This assumed that because the internet made information easily accessible to more people, access to the internet would surely lead users to learn about and dissolve social inequalities, if only by creating cross-cultural relationships. However, it quickly became apparent that the algorithms used in social media limit polyvocal perspectives and naturalize dominant discourses, instead of expanding cultural and cognitive horizons (Kellner and Share 2005, p. 369). Moreover, Allport (1954) has already demonstrated that mere access to diverse groups and viewpoints will not necessarily reduce biases, but instead can reinforce them.

As with most forms of media, social media are used primarily to encourage users to pursue forms of consumption or consumerism. In the short time since the emergence of participatory networks, social media platforms have reconfigured the dynamics of the public sphere. Each has introduced a kind of "platform policy," structuring the manner and content of messages. For example, Twitter (X) limits the word limit in a post, and Instagram's aesthetic parameters condense visual communication into a fixed vertical frame. Similarly, Reddit and Facebook shape a different kind of constraint on exchanges between users. The platforms personalize the information diet of their users. Add to this the already massive use of bots, trolls, microtargeting and clickbait, and it's quite clear how radically opaque the world of virtual communication is. It is directed at manipulating public opinion, sowing confusion, defaming and suppressing the views of rivals, spreading misinformation and fake news, and/or creating the false illusion that a given claim is popular or gaining popularity (Howard, 2020).

Social media may in fact work against critical thinking and engagement, instead of being a site of social renewal, involving a particularly shallow type of communication in which people are encouraged to "join" but not participate, to be active, however highly conformist, such as "likes," "shares," and "retweets." Point-and-click education may be attractive whole multitudes of university students

and schoolchildren; nevertheless, it is questionable whether skills acquired in this way will be useful in peace education processes, or whether they will allow critical thinking in the context of what individuals create or consume.

Social media can also be exclusionary through its accessibility or lack thereof through unequal access to technology, creating a space of "digital poverty" as well as imposing linguistic hegemony. English is privileged as the default language of discussion, creating an asymmetrical relationship between native speakers and "others."

Despite the challenges described above and others in using social media as a channel of education for peace, given certain conditions and criticality, it can also create opportunities often unavailable in traditional classrooms, supporting learning that is active, collaborative, dialogic, and reflective. Social media learning creates an educational space within which understanding can be developed through dialogue and reflection, and finally, collaboration can be fostered and developed. According to the critical-dialogical approach, taking time for reflection is a key element of effective pedagogy (Michalski, 2020). Stephen Brookfield and Stephen Preskill have demonstrated that the kind of reflective opportunities created by social media encourage independent and critical thinking: "In face-to-face discussions the phenomenon of groupthink, of everyone moving toward the consensual mean, is a constant danger. Few want to risk being the odd person out by expressing a contrary view. In cyberspace, however, the pressure to move quickly toward a shared point of view under the eyes of the teacher is felt much less strongly" (Brookfield and Preskill 2005, p. 232). In addition, as the researchers point out, by responding and publishing their statements in writing students are also more responsible for how they present their positions than in a traditional classroom.

The lack of direct confrontation with the interlocutor is also a major advantage in the situation of peace education programs implemented in conflict or post-conflict areas. A study by Ruth Firer (2008), involving Israeli and Palestinian students found that, while face-to-face meetings with the "enemy" can cause great anxiety and resentment, contact via the internet allowed participants to get to know each other at a comfortable pace and avoid strong emotional reactions. According to the researcher, the online dialogue, allowing time for reflection and internalization of new impressions and mastery of emotions, proved to be an effective tool for pro-peace dialogue (Firer, 2008, p. 196). In her analysis, the researcher referred to numerous studies related to contact between Jewish and Arab youth through social media, ultimately drawing the conclusion that the social media space provides a basis for meaningful interaction while providing sufficient security for personal exposure and intergroup contact (Firer, 2008, p. 102). Communication through social media can generate deep and meaningful connections, facilitating disclosure between unfriendly audiences while allowing them to withdraw from dialogues that make them feel uncomfortable.

Social media also allows people to build community and a sense of security by collectively seeking rational explanations and answers to questions that bother them. An analysis of social media activity during even the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in its early stages, also shows that in the absence of explanations and answers from traditional authorities (religious, political, academic), individuals find social media a space where they can engage with each other and seek understanding. Participatory spaces encourage people to speak out on issues that concern them, but which they don't want to discuss directly. Spaces such as the blogosphere and social networks allow people to take control of conversations that affect and engage them, but which have long been co-opted by academic elites, knowledge brokers, religious and clerical scholars, politicians, and the media. These spaces encourage alternative meaning-making processes that disrupt hegemonic understandings of these issues. Moreover, these spaces help transform individual voices into dynamic public voices (Darder, Baltodano and Torres 2003).

Staying within the realm of peace education communication quality mediated by a participatory application, participants, as a rule, do not see each other but only an assigned icon or profile photo, which frees discourse participants from obvious markers of social status and group membership. The lack of explicit individuation cues counteracts the formation of communication blockages, thus creating opportunities for more complete contact (Hartley 2023). In addition, sharing one's arguments online causes discussions to focus on the quality and strength of the arguments rather than on the person taking the stand. In this way, social media can broaden the range of voices that can be heard.

Unlike the winner-loser debate, the critical-dialogue framework seeks to build mutual understanding rather than agreement. In this framework, differences are not treated as points of division; rather, they serve as a means to identify assumptions, encourage inquiry, develop mutual understanding and foster cooperation (Gurin, Nagda and Zuniga 2013). The most important thing in discussing controversial and contentious social or political issues is to be aware of the need for reflective exchanges, rather than mutually articulating preconceived, ideological positions. In this way, conflict discussions move from an adversarial and confrontational stance, in which some version of the truth must prevail, to a collaborative and communicative synergy, in which not only everyone wins, but additional value is created through mutual learning. Such communication, however, requires students and teachers to understand knowledge as constructed in a particular time, context, culture, and experience. Social media are an excellent venue for this type of inquiry. They also have strategies for maintaining the resulting relationships over time so that new perspectives can be incorporated into a long-term worldview. Social media can meet this challenge by enabling students (and teachers) to maintain long-term relationships that are more likely to facilitate the integration of new ideas into students' real-world contexts.

According to Paulo Freire's thought, "When a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter […] denunciation is impossible without a commitment to transformation, and there is no transformation without action" (Freire, 2014, p. 87). Given that social media is increasingly recognized as a channel for mobilization and social change, its effective integration can facilitate this goal, including in the context of education for peace. Activism has now become less and less dependent on classic social skills, and more dependent on technological competence and mobile devices. Today's activists are brainstorming, planning projects, and coordinating them on wikis or through other social media. Castells (2012) also pointed out that social media has facilitated communication between disenfranchised people, allowing them to share their frustrations, but also allowing them to mobilize and initiate many social movements around the world. Since political and civic groups often turn to social networks to reach out to young people, digital literacy, defined as the ability to critically navigate, evaluate, and create information using digital technologies, should be considered an essential civic and peacebuilding skill (Castells, 2012). Good teaching of participatory media literacy therefore aims to facilitate the transfer of young people's more individualistic engagement with social media to the development of a "public" voice that will also serve civic and peacebuilding purposes.

Peace researchers' analyses in the context of participatory media show a yearning for even greater educational potential in using social networking features to personalize and expand educational experiences, such as connecting students with others who share their academic and professional interests, or fostering a sense of social belonging and peer group support that can help students achieve educational attainment, persistence, and school achievement.

Summary

The promise of participatory media is that voices, especially those that have been excluded and marginalized, can grow, communicate, and connect. They provide a space for people without technical expertise to be part of conversations that are about themselves but rather have been carried out by others on their behalf. In this context, the potential of social media is tremendous. In another sense, however, there are still several limitations to consider, such as language, technical, access-related barriers, the spread of post-truth and the algorithmization of the web. Regardless of these challenges, participatory media has great potential to bring people into a discursive space where they can reflexively engage in areas of peace education. Critical-dialogical pedagogy is proposed as an approach that reflects the interactive possibilities of social media, while expanding the public voice and audience of today's peacebuilders.

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