PERFORMING COVID-19: TRUMP'S SHIFT OF RHETORIC DURING THE CORONAVIRUS CRISIS IN THE USA

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ABSTRACT: The article studies American President Donald Trump's discourse within the period between January and March, 2020, when he had to respond to the beginning of the coronavirus outbreak in the USA. The material of the research was collected through continuous sampling and contains the president's tweets, interviews and White House briefing conferences. The method applied to analyze the sample is three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) that ensures achieving the purpose of the study, namely to explore Trump's discursive strategies employed to address the coronavirus crisis, to preserve the politician's domination in the public discourse and to react to the criticisms of his opponents and oppositional mass media that pictured the virus as a dire threat and accused the president of inefficacy and negligence. The analysis has revealed a shift in Trump's discursive strategies starting from the middle of March, 2020: while in January the president attempted to maintain the social order by presenting the coronavirus as ordinary, emphasizing US authorities' success in curbing its spread and accusing opponents of alarmism, in late March, however, Trump admitted the sweeping scope of the pandemic and even claimed his prior knowledge of its danger. Thus, the research has uncovered the president's strategies used to recontextualize his actions towards the ongoing events and to create new representations of social reality aimed at hegemonizing his opponents' discourse that conquered the US public sphere.

KEYWORDS: discourse, CDA, discursive strategy, shift, rhetoric, hegemony, pandemic

1. Introduction

In late December, 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared detecting a pneumonia of unknown cause in Wuhan, China, which, 10 days later, was identified as a novel species of coronaviruses similar to SARS and MERS. The virus spread quickly within China and some other countries, which made the WHO declare the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020. In February, COVID-19 was classified as the world's "public enemy number one" (Balibouse, 2020). Later, on March 11, the WHO declared COVID-19 (or the novel coronavirus) a global pandemic (World Health Organization, 2020). Politicians were quick to pick up the pandemic in their competition for voters' support, which transformed the pandemic from a medical issue into a political one. In countries like the USA, political actors' rhetoric is always constrained by media and other agents that resist the hegemony of powerful groups' discourse. Trump's presidency (2017 - 2021) was plagued with such crises as the Congress' impeachment and the struggle with media. When facing these two crises, Trump kept his discursive patterns unchanged and preserved his leading position within the existing order of discourses in the public sphere. Though he devoted his last year in office mostly to mobilizing his supporters for the 2020 election, he had to face the coronavirus crisis whose discourse wiped out all other discourses in the American public domain in 2020. Thus, for Trump, the social, political and health crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic turned into a communication crisis: to protect his discoursal position, he exploited his political rhetoric to its full, yet he failed to appropriate the situation and, consequently, to achieve his political ends. It should be noted that Trump's discourse on the coronavirus crisis has been analyzed: some authors explore his arguments with health officials (Cathey, 2020); others focus on the change of his tone in the course of events (Goldberg, 2020; Rogers, 2020; Dale, 2020). In addition, there are publications on Trump's

manipulation of information about the disease (Qiu, 2020), on changes in his rhetoric and on his contradictory statements (Breuninger & Wilkie, 2020; O'Neil 2020; Rieger, 2020). However, no study has yet examined Trump's discourse on the crisis by applying a linguistic, rhetorical or critical discourse analysis. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to uncover Donald Trump's discursive patterns used to maintain the existing social and discoursal order and, thus, to protect his discourse in the public sphere. To achieve this objective, the research analyzes President Trump's choice of vocabulary, syntactic constructions and stylistic means employed to strengthen his discourse, to make it hegemonic and, finally, to attempt to recontextualize the crisis as a reaction to the developing pandemic. Hence, the scientific novelty of this research lies not only in studying the crisis discourse as such but also in explicating how a crisis may turn into a communication dilemma in political discourse.

2. Theoretical Framework

The research draws on the assumption that discourse is a practice "not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting and constructing the world in meaning" (Fairclough, 1992, p. 28). The structure of discourse is associated with power, ideology and social interest (van Dijk, 1996; Fairclough, 1995), which shapes the social system (van Dijk, 1996; Fairclough, 2001). Mass media play a significant part in shaping a society through media discourse: media messages are employed to construct discourse and give it momentum. This function of governmental and non-governmental mass media has been studied extensively (see, for example, (Fajri, 2018; Fajri, 2019; Kirniawan & Utami, 2017; Ononye, 2017; Ononye & Nwachukwu, 2019; Sofyan & Zifana, 2019)). These studies have resulted in the conclusion that power and social interest are pursued through meanings embedded in media texts. These meanings are verbalized by speakers or writers and then extracted by audiences in situations when discourses struggle to shape 'common sense' (Fairclough, 2003). According to Wodak & Fairclough (1997), though discourse molds society, knowledge and situations, "the discursive event is shaped by the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s)" (p. 258). In other words, circumstances may outpower discourse in cases when a crisis causes large-scale damage, breeds uncertainty, a loss of control and brings about a breakdown in social structures (Shrivastava, 2005, p. 64). Emergencies exacerbate the struggle of discourses for public opinion. In a competitive environment, the discourse that matches audience's beliefs tends to win. Thus, the closer a discourse gets to the collective thinking of the public, the more powerful and hegemonic this discourse becomes.In addition, a crisis challenges established discourse practices and exposes the "the chaos and the daily coping mechanisms" (Wodak 2011, p. 154) of policy-making and political action. Within such a context, actors attempt to present their actions as the appropriate response and to hold their antagonists accountable for the crisis. Fairclough (2010) calls the latter strategy 'attribution of blame'. By recontextualizing critical situations of unexpected events, participants (e.g., political parties and politicians) struggle to promote their own discourses. Thus, emergencies induce elite political actors to shift their discourses: in an attempt to achieve their political ends in the public sphere and to gain hegemony, they engage in what Gramsci (1971) refers to as a 'war of position'.

Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony and his concept of 'counter hegemony' sheds light onto the discourse dynamic: insufficient hegemonic discourses may allow counter-hegemonic discourses to gain prominence because the latter fill in the lapse of meanings and/or relations. Counter-hegemonic discourses take over the public sphere if they are flexible enough to adapt to social changes. It is within this ideological struggle between discourses that powerful political actors peruse 'strategic selectivity' (Jessop, 2007). Frow (1985) calls this phenomenon "political functionalization of speech" (p. 204), whereas Fairclough (1995) refers to it as "tactical polyvalence of discourses" (p. 81) and notes that "changes in discoursal practices and restructuring of orders of discourse" are "facets of an evolving hegemonic struggle" (Fairclough, 1995, pp. 80-81).Thus, responding to a disaster or crisis, rhetors need to attain a 'disposition' of the situation and expose a new 'gestalt' (Consigny, 1974, p. 179) so as to offer the audience "decorum", i.e., "the shaping of speech and argument to fit with the occasion" (Martin, 2015, p. 35). The one "who wins the public consensus is the party whose discourse is defined as a proper discourse" (Teittinen, 2000, as cited in Sujito et al., 2019, p. 26). Therefore, situations bring about the need for rhetorical interventions and "the exigence circumscribes the parameters of rhetorical strategy" (Martin, 2015, p. 30). It is noteworthy that situations may be created by rhetors who want to shape "reality by defining the situation through argument" (Vatz, 1973, as cited in Martin, 2015, p. 30).

Overall, any social crisis denaturalizes the order of discourses and disrupts their relatively stable flow by creating a disorderly stream of discourse production and distribution, which leads to a

crisis of a special type: communication crisis. "In many crisis situations the essential decision to be made concerns precisely the communication process itself" (Ogrizek & Guillery, 1999, p. xvi). This statement holds for epidemics due to their critical nature. For example, Powers and Xiao (2008) argue that the health crisis was coupled with 'a crisis of communication' during the SARS epidemic. The 2020 coronavirus pandemic displays obvious similarities: it may also be seen as a crisis of communication and a struggle for hegemony over the public consensus. Consequently. the study of Trump's communicative behavior should be "interpreted in terms of its relationship to existing orders of discourse and discursive practice as well as its relationship to existing social structures, ideologies and power relations" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 95). In other words, it is a struggle for attaining an influential place in the broader public discourse.

3. Methodology and Materials

The study employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1995; Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak & Meyer, 2009; Wodak, 2015), a "problem-oriented, interdisciplinary approach", focused on "studying social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach" (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). CDA helps to explore the relationship between discursive practices, their social functions and the broader context of social and cultural processes (Fairclough, 1993); it serves as a diagnostic tool to systematically "investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power" (Fairclough, 1993, p. 135). According to van Dijk (1985, p. 7), CDA provides "powerful, while subtle and precise, insights to pinpoint the everyday manifestations and displays of social problems in communication and interaction" as well as explores how discourse (conversations, news reports, other genres and contexts) is used to reproduce social dominance (van Dijk, 2008, p. 87). The current research analyzes lexicon, syntax, semantics and contexts of Donald Trump's verbal messages, i.e., the study focuses on the language and pragmatic features singled out by Freeden and Stears (2013, p. 176) as significant for comprehensive Critical Discourse Analysis. By merging language means and extralinguistic factors, the study employs CDA "to theoretically bridge the well-known 'gap' between micro and macro approaches" (van Dijk, 2008, p. 87), where language and its means lie in the micro level, while social inequality, power relations and hegemony belong to the macro level. In particular, the research makes use of the three-dimensional CDA approach that considers discursive practice "as simultaneously i) a language text, spoken or written, ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), iii) sociocultural practice" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 97). In other words, the three-dimensional approach allows to correlate the structure and elements of verbal texts with their production and interpretation and, then, to establish the relation between the discourse and social processes (productive and interpretative). It should be underlined that the three-dimensional CDA is a viable method to apply to crisis discourse since it explains how "conditions of abnormality and crisis" facilitate the political opposition to establish new social orders and how this may entail paradigm shifts and transformations (Burns & Carson, 2005, p. 283). Since this article is concerned with exploring President Trump's strategies to recontextualize his discourse during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, the research was arranged in the following stages. At the first stage, the material of the study was collected through continuous sampling of Donald Trump's messages that had appeared from January 1 to March 31, 2020. This stage produced the sample of 57 texts (2 interviews, 20 tweets and 35 White House briefings). At the second stage, the epidemic-related excerpts of the texts were selected for further analysis.

The third stage of the study involved applying the three-dimensional CDA, i.e., the analysis of language means was followed by identifying tactics within a discursive strategy (discursive practice) seen as embedded in the broader social context. The fourth stage consisted of viewing Trump's discourse in its dynamics. This was conducive to achieving the objective of the research, namely to reveal the shift in Trump's strategies and to correlate it with extralingual (social) factors that forced the president to modify his rhetoric on the coronavirus epidemic within the two-month period.

4. Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study are arranged into two parts to represent the two stages of Trump's public performance when dealing with the pandemic issues in January – March, 2020: 1) protecting the existing discourse on the crisis situation and 2) shifting the discourse on the pandemic, respectively.

4.1. Protecting the existing order of discourse

During the times of crises, national leaders become an official source of information for the nation regardless of their adherence to the truth and, consequently, they are expected to react to

emergent threats by addressing their citizens (Malouf, 2020). Thus, the very time the outbreak started in China, the talks of the pandemic prevailed the world's political leaders' discourse and Trump was no exception even before any coronavirus cases in the United States.   On January 20, The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the United States (CDC) confirmed the first case of the novel coronavirus in the USA in the state of Washington (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, January 21, 2020). Since that time, President Trump was rather optimistic about fighting and regressing the virus (Samuels & Chalfant, 2020): starting from the beginning of the outbreak in January till mid-March, he publicly underestimated the risk and threat of the pandemic (Qiu, 2020; Blake, 2020a) and kept maintaining this tone (Bump, 2020; Blake, 2020 b).

To implement the downplaying strategy, the president used the following discursive tactics:

- emphatically presenting the virus as a minor problem by giving figures (*zero, one, five, fifteen*) to convince Americans that the number of cases is negligible and by repeating '*(very) little problem*':
  (1) *It's **one** person coming in from China.* (Trump, CNBC News, January 22)
  (2) *We have **very little problem** in this country at this moment — **five**.* (White House Briefings, January 30)
  (3) *...the level that we've had in our country is **very low**... We have a total of **fifteen**.* (White House Briefings, February 27)
  (4) *And again, when you have **fifteen** people, and the **fifteen** within a couple of days is going to be down to close to **zero**...* (White House Briefing, February 27)
  (5) *...we're finding **very little problem. Very little problem**.* (White House Briefings, February 27)
- presenting the spread of the disease as controlled:
  (6) *...We have it **totally under control**.* (Trump, CNBC News, January 22)
  (7) *The Coronavirus **is very much under control** in the USA.* (Trump, February 24)

His messages emphatically state that, to gain the control over the outbreak, the US Administration puts aside all political considerations and works persistently with every possible party to make the coronavirus controllable. To create this representation, the president uses *we* for his team and *everyone, everybody, all* for other parties, which, in combination with boosters *totally, everything, very* and *much*, depicts him as a strong leader determined to deal with the problem:

  (8) *...**we're working very closely with China** and other countries.* (Trump, Fox News, January 30)
  (9) ***We** are in contact with **everyone** and **all** relevant countries.* (Trump, February 24)
  (10) *Well, **we**'re testing **everybody** that **we** need to test.* (White House Briefings, February 27)
- being positive by focusing on progress rather than regress in (10) and (11) and expressing optimistic predictions in (12) and (13):
  (11) *… those people **are** all **recuperating successfully**.* (White House Briefings, January 30)
  (12) *... those people **are getting better**... We have a total of 15. Of the 15 people... Eight of them **have returned to their homes**...* (White House Briefings, February 27)
  (13) *It's **going to be just fine**.* (Trump, CNBC News, January 22)
  (14) *The virus that we're talking about having to do, a lot of people think that **goes away in April**, with the heat, as the heat comes in, typically that w**ill go away in April**. **We're in great shape** though.* (Trump, February 10)
- accusing the Democrats and the "Fake News Media" of a new hoax, i.e., Trump maintains the discourse he adopted as early as the 2016 presidential campaign:
  (15) *The Fake News Media and their partner, the Democrat Party, is doing everything within its semi-considerable power (it used to be greater!) to inflame the CoronaVirus situation, far beyond what the facts would warrant.* (Trump, March 9 a)

The strategy behind this rhetoric is "a distinctively rhetorical activity" that invites audiences "to form judgements by weighing up alternatives, anticipating outcomes and selecting what seems the appropriate option in light of their goals" (Martin, 2015, p. 30). Trump's ultimate target is to counter fear culture (Chaiuk & Dunaievska, 2020) whose proponents insist on the complete shutdown. The president anticipates the outcome: in case of the shutdown, suicides "*definitely would be in far greater numbers than the numbers that we're talking about*" (White House Briefings, March 24).Trump's messages of that time display his maneuvering aimed at keeping the status quo of the existing social

and discoursal order. In other words, he combats the alternative "alarmist" discourse of the crisis by relying on "a lot of people's" opinion (see example (13) above) and his own assumptions. Building statements on intuition without suggesting any scientifically-based solutions challenges people's trust in scientific medical discourse typical of the times of pandemics, and it is this faith in scientific progress that his media opponents exploit (Chaiuk & Dunaievska, 2020). Globalizing his management of the crisis by relating it with the actions of Chinese professionals who are "even building hospitals in a matter of few days" (Trump on Twitter as quoted in (Phelps & Travers, 2020)) is an effort to convince the audience of his professional response to the outbreak.During the second stage of the outbreak, Trump keeps struggling with the ever stronger "fear discourse", yet he modifies somewhat his messages by:

- comparing the coronavirus with other viruses (*Ebola, flu*) and producing statistics to show that COVID-19 is not a more serious threat:

  (16) ***The level of death with Ebola*** *was a virtual 100 percent*. (White House, February 25)

  (17) ***This is a flu. This is like a flu.*** *And this is a **much different situation than Ebola***. (White House Briefings, February 27)

  (18) *So last year 37,000 Americans **died from the common flu**. It averages between 27,000 and 70,000 per year. Nothing is shut down, life and the economy go on. At this moment there are 546 confirmed cases of CoronaVirus, with 22 deaths. Think about that!* (Trump, March 9 b)

  Accepting this argument delegitimizes demands of Trump's opponents for drastic changes to the social order.

- assuring emphatically (*number one, a great job, no nation*) that the US is ready for the challenge and the Administration takes the necessary measures:

  (19) *The Johns Hopkins, I guess — is a highly respected, great place — they did a study, comprehensive: "The Countries Best and Worst Prepared for an Epidemic." And... **We're rated number one for being prepared***. (White House Briefings, February 27)

  (20) *And **we're prepared**, and **we're doing a great job with it***. (White House Briefings, March 10)

  (21) ***No nation is more prepared or more resilient*** *than the United States.* (White House Briefings March 11)

- comparing the US death rate with other countries' statistics:

  (22) *I mean, think of it: the United States, because of what I did and what the administration did with China, we have 32 deaths at this point... Thirty-two is a lot. Thirty-two is too many. But **when you look at the kind of numbers that you're seeing coming out of other countries, it's pretty amazing** when you think of it.* (White House Briefings, March 12)

The high death numbers of the previous year seasonal flu in (17) and the very few cases of coronavirus in (21) engage the audiences in the game of numbers and brings them into the evidence-based reality. In other words, this strategy is aimed at encouraging logical thinking, which is expected to lead to the conclusion that, due to the relative scarcity of cases and the low death rate, the response of Trump's administration is efficient. This comparative narrative functions as an argument to make people get back to normalcy and daily routines: the present is nothing different from regular data on seasonal influenza. Addressing other discourses of similar critical situations is an attempt to break the vicious circle of constraints imposed by the alternative pervasive discourse enhanced in media. In the long run, the argumentation induces the audience to doubt the alternative hegemonic discourse that overhypes the situation. Thus, at this stage, Trump still struggles ideologically to protect the existing social and discourse order, to strengthen his rhetoric against the alternative coronavirus pandemic discourse that disturbs the equilibrium and starts to gain hegemony in the public sphere.

4.2. Resituating discourse and the shift of rhetoric

From March 16, 2020, however, Trump starts to change his rhetoric and modify his communicative patterns so much that at times his statements stand in direct contrast to his own previous messages (O'Neil, 2020; Rieger, 2020). Presumably, this occurs as a response to an ever-increasing popularity of his opponents' discourse: Trump faces fierce criticism from experts and media ranging from accusations of him belittling the threat (Samuels & Chalfant, 2020), contradicting health officials and experts, building upon his personal subjective information (Superville & Woodward, 2020; Blake, 2020b; Bump, 2020) and falsifying information about the virus (Qiu, 2020). Fear-cultivating media coverage, with Trump's insistence on playing down the threat in the background, makes the public

opinion of Trump's optimistic messages more skeptical: polls show negative ratings of Trump's administration (Agiesta, 2020) and Americans' considerable mistrust of Trump's discourse on the coronavirus outbreak (Pace & Fingerhut, 2020). However, Trump's greatest challenge of the time was the increasing number of confirmed cases and deaths that entailed pessimistic expectations in the society. On March 10, 2020, the confirmed cases in the USA surpassed 1000 (The New York Times, Mar 10, 2020) and a week later the number increased to more than 5000 (Feuer, 2020). The grave tendency resulted in that on March 26, the New York Times reported that the United Sates led the world in coronavirus confirmed cases with "at least 81,321 confirmed infections and more than 1,000 deaths" (McNeil Jr, 2020). By the end of May or, to be exact, on May 26, CNN announced that the number of deaths due to COVID-19 had "surpassed the number of US military deaths in the Vietnam, Korean, Iraq and Afghanistan wars combined" with more than 100,000 deaths (Willingham et al., 2020).

In response, from March 16, Trump radically alters the tone and shifts to the discourse that "doesn't match his rhetoric over the last two months" (Yen et al., 2020) by

- stating that the virus is dangerous and IS a problem, emphatically weaving negatively connoted vocabulary to talk about the virus (*bad, contagious, vicious, coma*):
  (23) *This is a **bad** one. This is a **very bad** one. This is **bad** in the sense that it's **so contagious**. It's just **so contagious**... My focus is really on getting rid of this **problem** — this **virus problem**.* (White House Briefings, March 16)
  (24) *But it's not the flu. It's **vicious**. When you send a friend to the hospital and you call up to find out, how is he doing, it happened to me... And you call up the next day, 'how's he doing?' And he's **in a coma**? This is not the flu.* (White House Briefings, March 31).
  Interestingly, Trump starts claiming that he was aware of the danger long time ago:
  (25) ***I've always known**, this is a real – this is a real – this is a pandemic. **I felt** it was a pandemic long before it was called a pandemic. All you had to do was look at other countries... no, **I've always viewed** it as very serious.* (White House Briefings, March 16)
- equating the virus to Ebola and the Spanish flu and combining this comparison with the statement that the similarity was not expected:
  (26) *We have a problem that a month ago nobody ever thought about. Nobody in the — you know, I've read about it. I read about — many years ago, **1917, 1918**. I've seen all of the different — the different **problems similar to this** that we've had.* (White House Briefings, March 16)
- admitting that the media has been delivering '*very fair*' news on the virus:
  (27) *I think a lot of **the media actually has been very fair**. I think people are pulling together on this. I really **think the media has been very fair.*** (White House Briefings, March 16)
- predicting negative course of the pandemic in future:
  (28) *This could be a hell of bad two weeks. This **is gonna be very bad two — or maybe even three — weeks… This is going to be three weeks like we haven't seen before**.* (White House Briefings, March 31)

Thus, the events force Trump to change the way he addresses the nation and to recontextualize the crisis: he transforms his rhetoric to adapt to the socially accepted frame. By doing so, he solidarizes with his audiences and attempts to gain the leading position, but this time in the alternative discourse. In other words, he resituates his rhetoric and shapes it according to the common-sense stream of the current public discourse. This reconceptualization of the situation is conditioned both by the need to shatter the constraints of the intervention and by the inability to override the alternative discourse that keeps on gaining in power. Hence, Trump recedes and strategizes more reality-based messages in order to regain his dominant discoursal position.

5. Conclusion

The research examines how, leading his country through the coronavirus and trying to secure the dominance of his discourse, US president Donald Trump strategizes his discursive behavior within the period of January – March, 2020. At the first stage, facing the press at almost daily briefings and maintaining contact with the public on Twitter, Trump strives to preserve the existing social and discoursal order by employing the downplaying strategy: he insists that the virus is a minor problem, emphasizes his Administration's effective problem management, expresses optimistic expectations of prompt curbing the outbreak and accuses media of being inappropriately alarmist. The study shows that, under the pressure of the ever-soaring morbidity and death rates in the USA, Trump's performance

starts to shift in that he admits the gravity of the epidemic, yet keeps belittling it by using comparisons along the three criteria: he compares the coronavirus with the lethality of Ebola and Spanish flu; he also compares the US' exceptional preparedness for the epidemic with that of other states, which helps him to explain the lower death rate among Americans at that stage. However, enhanced by media, medical experts and health organizations, the alternative discourse counters the president's messages and finally succeeds in taking over the public sphere, backed up by the reality-based evidence, i.e., the number of confirmed cases and the death rate. Eventually, this undermines Trump's reasoning. The ideological struggle, the discursive hegemony of discourses and the degree of disruption caused by the COVID-19 crisis make it "possible for the genre conventions to be altered or challenged" (Martin, 2015, p. 35). Trump cannot manage all the discursive events and texts in the public sphere and fails to secure hegemony for his own discourse. As a result, from March 16, Trump is forced to further the shift of his discourse in order to fit in, to construct new sense-making rhetoric that may capture the collective beliefs and moods created by the changes in the public opinion. He addresses the public with the messages that finalize his switch to the hegemonic discourse: he recognizes the gravity of the problem, the scope of the pandemic and the authorities' limited ability to handle the threat; he openly declares the media coverage to be fair and publicly predicts a negative course of the pandemic. In an attempt to preserve his authority as the leader, he claims his awareness of the dire situation from the very beginning of the outbreak. The resituated discourse provides a broader margin to maneuver the situation and to cope with the progressing cruciality of emergencies.

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