

Politicization, Vested Interests, And Regulation: Stakeholder Perspectives on Pakistani Television Channels

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Abstract

Television channels in Pakistan represent one of the most powerful mediums for shaping public opinion, disseminating political information, and influencing democratic processes. This study investigates the growing politicization and vested interests that undermine the independence and credibility of Pakistani television channels. Using a mixed-method approach involving 161 respondents comprising viewers, anchors, broadcasters, advertisers, cable operators, and channel owners the research explores how political affiliations, ownership patterns, and advertiser influence distort media professionalism and journalistic ethics. Results reveal that politicization and vested interests are widely perceived as primary threats to media integrity, leading to non-professional practices and restricted freedom of expression. The study also finds that the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) is viewed as inconsistent, government-controlled, and selective in its enforcement, further eroding trust in regulation. Grounded in Social Responsibility Theory, the Political Economy of Media, and Agenda-Setting Theory, the analysis demonstrates how political and economic power structures shape news agendas, promote polarization, and marginalize independent journalism. The findings highlight that weak regulatory autonomy and cross-sector ownership create a cyclical pattern where media content serves elite interests rather than the public good. The study concludes by recommending reforms to enhance PEMRA's independence, enforce transparency in media ownership, and strengthen professional ethics and newsroom autonomy. These measures are essential to restore the democratic role of Pakistani television as a credible, balanced, and socially responsible medium.

Keywords: Politicization, stakeholder, PEMRA

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Introduction

Television channels in Pakistan represent one of the most powerful mediums for shaping public opinion, disseminating political information, and influencing democratic processes. Since the liberalization of the media landscape in the early 2000s, the country has witnessed an unprecedented boom in the number of private television channels, transforming the communication environment and creating new opportunities for information exchange (Siraj, 2009; Riaz & Taj, 2017). However, this rapid expansion has been accompanied by significant challenges, the most critical of which are politicization, vested interests, and inconsistent regulation. These factors have raised questions about the credibility, independence, and professional responsibility of the television industry (Bhatti, Safdar, & Zaheen, 2021).

Politicization of media refers to the alignment of television channels with political parties, elites, or government institutions in ways that compromise objective reporting. In Pakistan, this phenomenon is not new; media outlets have historically operated under pressures from successive regimes, whether military or civilian (Iqbal, 2010). However, the expansion of private television channels has intensified competition, leading to a greater reliance on political patronage and commercial pressures. As a result, many television channels are accused of promoting political agendas, selectively covering events, or adopting biased editorial positions. This undermines their role as impartial providers of information and weakens the democratic role of the press as the “fourth estate” (Hameed & Khan, 2015).

Almost inextricably connected to the aspect of politicization is the problem of vested interests. The vested interest in television media is experienced in the ownership mediums, influence of advertisers, and elite capture. The owners of the media are usually associated with political parties or have a vested interest in other sectors, which leads to conflicts of interests that influence the choice of programming and the editorial philosophy (McChesney, 2008; Herman and Chomsky, 1988). Advertisers push further by making their financial aid conditional on favorable coverage, and manipulate news agendas to put the interests of the population aside in favor of commercial self-interest (Anjum, 2014). These trends make us worried about the fact that the Pakistani television sector pursues the interests of influential stakeholders and not the needs of citizens (Iqbal, Hali, and Anjum, 2021).

Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) was founded in 2002 with the following objective to disseminate diversity,

professionalism and accountability in the media. Its performance has however continued to be criticized. Stakeholders claim that PEMRA is run under direct government pressure, whereby its mandate is used selectively to punish those channels that are critical whilst ignoring those that violate its mandate and are pro-government (Farooq & Jabeen, 2021). Penalties and censorship are often viewed as arbitrary, and this strengthens the view of political elements in the regulation system itself. Not only does this destroy trust in PEMRA but also the autonomy of television channels (Khan, 2015).

Purpose of this study is to examine the degree and kind of politicization and vested interest in Pakistani television channels. It also aims to know perceptions of the stake holders regarding PEMRA regulation of channels. Hence, the researchers were interested to know (1) how do political influences and vested interests shape the content, independence, and professionalism of television channels in Pakistan, and (ii) what do different stakeholders think about PEMRA's performance and its ability to fairly regulate television channels in the country?

Literature Review

The media research in Pakistan has always indicated that there is a strong interrelationship between the freedom of press, political influences, and the governmental interference.

The politicization of television channels involves the routine practice of distributing political propaganda, engaging in direct political debates, and relocating news to certain TV stations or radio stations to advance specific political agendas (Fiorina, 2015). Politicization of the Television Channels The politicization of television channels is associated with actively spreading political propaganda, the direct political debate, and the transfer of news to particular TV stations or radio stations to promote certain political interests (Fiorina, 2015).

Politicization of media is an act of portraying journalistic content in terms of political/ideological terms. This has been widely captured in Pakistan. Iqbal (2010) has followed the history of the relations between press and politics in the first decades of the country and demonstrated how different governments relied on coercive legislative actions and economic pressure to manipulate media discourses. Siraj (2009) also stressed the fact that contrary to the initial expectations of an independent press that were expressed by the leaders such as Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the autonomy was curtailed by the regulatory measures and political favors.

In the current world, the politics of the day tends to implicate private

television channels. As an example, the 2013 and 2018 elections have seen media accused of biased reporting favoring a particular party over another one (Riaz & Taj, 2017). Bhatti, Safdar, and Zaheen (2021) express that journalists are exposed to various pressures such as the political parties, owners and advertisers that affect their news decisions. This creates selective coverage, sensationalism and polarization of the public opinion.

Ownership structures are closely connected with vested interests. In Pakistan, conglomerates own most of the television channels privately and may be active in other areas such as the real estate, energy or banking industries. This raises conflicts of interests because media content might be compromised by business interests of owners. Iqbal, Hali, and Anjum (2021) concluded that commercialization has turned Pakistani media into a business enterprise and that programming is now driven by advertisers and owners, instead of journalistic values. According to Farooq and Jabeen (2021), newsroom professionals usually disagree about the position of PEMRA but indicate that commercial interests tend to take precedence over editorial independence. This has a lot of influence especially by advertisers, whose financial support defines the viability of a channel. This promotes journalism on ratings, in which sensationalism and partisanship will gain more advertising income (Anjum, 2014). Herman and Chomsky (1988) finds that ownership, advertisement, and political influences are likely to make the media systems serve the elite interests. The frameworks are very pertinent to Pakistan whereby media conglomerates and advertisers influence the editorial agendas.

Regulatory Issues and PEMRA

PEMRA, the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority was established to control the broadcasting of television and radio. Bashir et al. (2020) have reported cases when PEMRA took random steps that included blocking signals, freezing images, or even compelling cable operators to relocate important channels to non-prominent locations. The comparison of PEMRA and other regulators in the UK and the USA by Khan (2015) has shown that PEMRA was not transparent, independent, and adherent to similar standards.

The stakeholders often settle the claim that PEMRA is government controlled. This image was strengthened by the 2018 Amendment Act of PEMRA that granted the federal government the power to make binding policy directives (The Gazette of Pakistan, 2018). Absar Alam, a former chairman of PEMRA appeared in court to add that the government officials pressured the authority to take action against criticizing journalists and channels. This is supported by such accounts by

stakeholders that PEMRA is political and lacks credibility. Riaz and Taj (2017) pointed out that journalists cannot uphold moral standards due to the pressure of the outside world. Bhatti et al. (2021) also found ownership, administration, and pressure groups as the significant challenges to ethical reporting. The outcome is high levels of sensationalism, partial reporting, and insufficient in depth investigation.

Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) toiled globally that media professionalism is a matter of concern because of their argument that social responsibility is the subject of journalism. Media tend to lose the equilibrium between freedom and accountability in situations when professionalism is weak. This is especially the case in Pakistan where politicization and vested interests are worsened by non-professional practices.

Although the existing body of literature illustrates the problem of politicization, interest group considerations and regulatory failure, many studies lack a structured discussion of the stakeholder perceptions of various categories. To fill this gap, the present study survey the various stakeholders, viewers, anchors, advertisers, cable operators and owners to obtain different perspectives on television challenges.

Theoretical Framework

This research is based on the theory of Social Responsibility, and Political Economy of Media, along with Agenda-Setting Theory that offer a multidimensional perspective to understand politicization and vested interests in Pakistani television channels.

Social Responsibility Theory

The Social Responsibility Theory that was developed by Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) highlights that the media should find a way of balancing freedom and accountability. Although the media is supposed to be free of censorship, they also have a duty of serving the general good of the people by offering true, balanced and varied information. The stakeholders in the Pakistani setting accuse television channels of not keeping this obligation. Many channels are not interested in objective reporting but are more focused on political interests and financial benefits. Social Responsibility Theory embodies the difference between the ideals of normativity and reality in Pakistani television.

Political Economy of Media

According to such scholars as McChesney (2008) and Herman and Chomsky (1988), The Political Economy of Media holds the view that the

ownership structure, advertising pressures, and influence by state shape the media systems. Media conglomerates connected to other industries control channels in Pakistan to safeguard their economic interests whereas advertisers control editorial content by exercising financial power. PEMRA as the government also influences the media agendas by selectively punishing critical channels. This is the reason why Pakistani television is dominated by politicization and vested interests, at the expense of independence and professionalism.

Agenda-Setting Theory

The Agenda-Setting Theory of McCombs and Shaw (1972) argues that the media influence how people perceive issues because of the way they decide which issues are to be covered. Politicized channels tend to influence agendas in Pakistan to be consistent with the political patron, focusing on issues that are favourable to some parties and ignoring the rest. This not only distorts the discourse of the people, but it strengthens polarization. This theory explains how politicization influences the universal democratic process by connecting the views of the stakeholders and the agenda setting practices.

Combined, these models give a very strong analytic basis. Social Responsibility Theory focuses on moral commitments, Political Economy focuses on structural limitations and Agenda-Setting exposes content-level effects. All of these views explain why the Pakistani television channels are viewed as being politicized, having a vested interest, and not effectively playing their democratic role.

Research Methodology

This study utilized a mixed-method design, which included both quantitative and qualitative techniques in order to represent the stakeholder impression about the politicization and self-interest of the Pakistani television channels. The sample included different stakeholders who had direct or indirect relationships with the television business such as the viewers, anchors, analysts, broadcasters, advertisers, cable operators, and owners. Purposive sampling was used to send out 200 questionnaires through email, WhatsApp, Google Form, and manual mailing with a response rate of 161 valid responses (85 viewers, 38 anchors/analysts/broadcasters, 17 advertisers, 13 cable operators, and 8 owners). The questionnaire (which was designed based on a literature review) consisted of questionnaire items (structured on a Likert scale) and open-ended questions aimed at gauging perceptions of politicization,

vested interests, professionalism, freedom of expression, and PEMRA regulatory practices. Descriptive statistics was used in the analysis of quantitative data to estimate frequencies and percentages and qualitative comments were thematically analyzed to give depth to the interpretation. The design was chosen so that it could provide triangulation of data sources and validity of the findings as both numerical trends and qualitative insights were incorporated. Ethical issues were noted through keeping respondents confidential as well as voluntary participation. However, the methodology presents a sound picture of stakeholder response to issues that Pakistan television is facing.

Data Analysis

Table 1: Politicization of TV Channels (Stakeholder Perceptions)

Viewers' Perception	Vested interest	16 (18.8 %)
	Politicization of TV Channels	39 (46.3 %)
	Non Professionalism	13 (15 %)
	Hindrances in Freedom of expression	15 (17.5 %)
	Any Other challenge	2 (2.40 %)
	Total	85 (100%)
Anchor/Analyst/Broadcasters Perception	Vested interest	3 (9.1 %)
	Politicization of TV Channels	7 (18.2 %)
	Non Professionalism	13 (33.3%)
	Hindrances in Freedom of expression	14 (36.4%)
	Any Other challenge:	1 (3 %)
	Total	38 (100%)
Owners' Perception	Vested interest	2 (25 %)
	Politicization of TV Channels	00
	Non Professionalism	2 (25 %)
	Hindrances in Freedom of expression	4 (50 %)
	Any Other challenge	00
	Total	8 (100%)
Cable Operators' Perception	Vested interest	1(8 %)
	Politicization of TV Channels	5 (38 %)
	Non Professionalism	4 (31 %)
	Hindrances in Freedom of expression	3 (23 %)
	Any Other challenge	00
	Total	13 (100%)
Advertisers' Perception	Vested interest	4 (25%)

	Politicization of TV Channels	11(62.5%)
	Non Professionalism	2 (12.5%)
	Hindrances in Freedom of expression	00
	Any Other challenge	00
	Total	17 (100%)

The findings indicate that politicization was the most important issue among all stakeholders, and a total of 39 (46.3 %) participants mentioned that it as the major problem of Pakistani television channels. The concern regarding politicization was raised the most by advertisers with 11(62.5%), and cable operators with 5 (38 %). Owners 4 (50 %) and anchors 14 (36.4%) identified hindrances to media freedom the most, whereas non-professionalism was mentioned the most by anchors 13 (33.3%) and cable operators 4 (31 %). Owners and advertisers had a real concern with vested interests of 25% each. These results show that although all stakeholders are aware of several issues, the most prevalent issue that influences how the television industry is perceived is politicization.

Table 2: Stakeholders' Perception Regarding Regulatory Framework, PEMRA

Viewers' Perception	PEMRA has mandate to improve the standards of broadcast	16 (18.5%)
	PEMRA works under Govt. directions	52 (61.7%)
	Objective accountability of media	15 (17.3%)
	Any other:	2 (2.5%)
	Total	85 (100%)
Anchor/Analyst/Broadcasters Perception	PEMRA has mandate to improve the standards of broadcast	4 (9 %)
	PEMRA works under Govt. directions	25 (66 %)
	Objective accountability of media	9 (24 %)
	Any other:	00
	Total	38 (100%)
Owners' Perception	PEMRA has mandate to improve the standards of broadcast	00

	PEMRA works under Govt. directions	7 (87.5 %)
	Objective accountability of media	1(12.5%)
	Any other:	00
	Total	8 (100%)
Cable Operators' Perception	PEMRA has mandate to improve the standards of broadcast	6 (46.1%)
	PEMRA works under Govt. directions	5 (38.4%)
	Objective accountability of media	2 (15.3%)
	Any other:	00
	Total	13 (100%)
Advertisers' Perception	PEMRA has mandate to improve the standards of broadcast	6 (35%)
	PEMRA works under Govt. directions	8 (47%)
	Objective accountability of media	3 (18%)
	Any other:	00
	Total	17 (100%)

These findings show that stakeholders have a wide agreement on the fact that PEMRA is operated within the confines of the government. Most viewers (61.7%) and anchors (66%) believe it does so as the government, although media owners are the most critical with 87.5% of them expressing this opinion and citing concerns of regulatory capture. Conversely, much fewer respondents perceive that PEMRA is successful in improving the quality of broadcasting, and only a small fraction of the respondents in general indicated that the quality of broadcasting was improved. There is also some doubt regarding objective accountability, with less than twenty five percent of any community seeing PEMRA as a truly fair authority, further supporting the view that the body lacks autonomy and reputation throughout the industry.

Table 3: Adequacy of Regulatory Framework

Stakeholders	Adequately Protects	Does Not Protect
Viewers	22 (25.9%)	63 (74.1%)
Anchors	3(9.1%)	35 (90.9%)
Owners	1 (12.5%)	7 (87.5%)

Cable Operators	10 (75%)	3 (25%)
Advertisers	9 (53%)	8 (47%)

The statistics show that there is a general belief that the regulatory framework in Pakistan is poor and 72 percent of all respondents that the regulatory framework does not adequately safeguard the audiences. The channel owners and anchors are the most critical and 90.9 percent of anchors and 87.5 percent of channel owners declare that the current regulations do not offer adequate protection. This perception is mostly shared by viewers because 74.1 percent of viewers report feeling unprotected. Conversely, most cable operators (75 percent) and more than half of advertisers (53 percent) believe that the framework is sufficient enough, indicating that these parties might be receiving special treatment due to their close working association with PEMRA and thus have a more favorable opinion of regulation than any other stakeholder group.

DISCUSSION

The current research paper aimed to explore three issues, which are interconnected, namely the level and the nature of politicization and vested interests in Pakistan television channels, perception of stakeholders regarding Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA), and the consequences of the dynamics concerning professional standards and viewer trust. These results support and build up the existing literature. As an example, it was discovered that ownership and advertisers play a significant role in content, contributing to the selective coverage and polarization of content; your data supports the idea that advertisers are very worried about politicization, and that content owners consider vested interests to be a problem (Weber et al., 2021). Equally, one study indicated that political polarization reduces the credibility of younger viewers, which confirms your conclusion that politicization is perceived as a betrayal of trust by many viewers (Lee, 2022). A second research statement revealed the reduced content variety and trust in the eyes of the audience due to the perceived ownership concentration (Stevenson, 2016).

The qualitative data of the stakeholders gives a very important perspective of the working of politicization, vested interests and regulatory pressures in reality in Pakistani television media. Anchors and broadcasters were habitually narrating about a sense of implicit control, in which editorial choices are influenced by informal dictum, political taboos and the fear of regulatory punishment instead of editorial judgment. It was observed by many that self-censorship has turned into a normalized practice since journalists fear political consequences or penalty at the

hands of PEMRA. Owners of media and advertisers, in their turn, justified that political alignment does often serve as a survival tactic in an unpredictable regulation environment, that advertising choices and editorial balance are biased by anticipations of political benefit or safeguard. The dynamics perceived by the viewers in these dynamics were in the form of visible indicators, including the selective coverage, repetitive political reporting, and disproportionate coverage of opposing perspectives, which contributed to the declining trust of television news. These qualitative observations demonstrate that non-professionalism and lack of freedom of expression is not an individual phenomenon but structural consequences of politicized regulation, economic dependency, and elite control that sustains the loop of prejudice, self-censorship, and undermining of democratic speech.

Therefore, the results confirm that politicization is widespread and comes in the form of editorial bias, support to the political parties or the elites, framing of issues, and exerting pressure on content choices. Ownership ties, advertiser influence and even political patronage or clientelism are systemic vested interests. Politicization and vested interest are not only causes of non-professionalism and hindrances to freedom, but also entities of their own. In terms of groups, a great majority of them believe that PEMRA operates in government circles. Indicatively, most of the owners feel that PEMRA functions under the government guidance. It is only the small minorities who think it enhances standards or are objectively accountable. These impressions are consistent with previous arguments in the literature (Naveed et al., 2024). Bashir et al. (2020) recorded the reported issues of random signal blocking, cable position and location manipulation, and selective enforcement.

Together, these impressions indicate that PEMRA is not perceived as a truly autonomous institution that guarantees media freedom, professionalism and diversity, but instead as an instrument that can be influenced to do so by governmental or elite interests. The stakeholders feel that there is no transparency, inconsistency, and partiality in the regulatory action. The statistics indicate that politicization and vested interest do not exist independently, they are reinforcing and particularly in cases where regulation is weak or seen as partisan. The channels that have affiliation to strong political forces or which are owned by elites with cross-sectorial interests are likely to get less penalized or will be judged with leniency by PEMRA. To provide protection and access to the market, the advertisers can prefer the politically aligned channels. This dynamic is visible to the viewers and anchors, with politicization and self-serving interest contributing to non-professional journalism practices including

sensationalism, biasing breaking news, framing issues, and omissions.

In this sense, non-professionalism and obstacles to free expression are related, in turn, to the downstream impacts of politicization and vested interest. Journalism standards of objectivity, fairness or depth are undermined when channels are under pressure to meet the demands of political delegates or economic benefactors. The greater ratings of non-professionalism and threats to free expression by anchors indicate that they are more aware of constraint as an insider: both direct (threats, censorship), and indirect (advertiser pressure, fear of regulatory reprisal).

These results possess grave consequences on the democratic role of the television media in Pakistan. When politicization is at its fore, editorial freedom is undermined, and citizens are presented with biased information, polarization continues to increase, and the voices of marginalized citizens are pushed to the background. The trust of the people is most probably destroyed: when the audience observes media as a tool of political or economic elite, instead of the interests of the people, the credibility goes down the drain. Credit surveys in other locations (e.g. Sarwar et al., 2020) attest to the fact that credibility decreases in polarization. On the same note, media professionalism will be damaged when this is necessary to investigate news, fact-finding, and crisis coverage responsible news.

These tensions should be mediated, preferably through regulation, defending journalism, maintaining diversity, imposing standards. Yet the views that PEMRA is not impartial undermine regulatory legitimacy. When regulation is not perceived as fair or equal, one may either self-censor or may become cynical (accommodate power to protect) further impairing the public sphere.

The results indicate that politicization has become the most urgent problem and it was noted by nearly 40 percent of the surveyed participants in all groups (Zurn, 2014). Individuals especially advertisers and viewers pointed out the ongoing association of television stations with political parties and elite agents further endorsing the previous literature that has associated the Pakistani broadcast media with partisan interests. The priority of vested interests was somewhat lower, however, as it was stressed by owners and advertisers, it was essential and dominated over editorial independence by the economic factor and investments across the industry (Moe, 2015). Non-professionalism and lack of freedom of expression were emphasized by anchors and analysts, explaining the intersection of the internal newsroom and external pressures within a newsroom that undermine journalism.

PEMRA had received a devastatingly negative stakeholder evaluation.

Most in each category thought the regulator was acting at government behest, used penalties selectively and unhelpful in safeguarding viewers. These views are in line with previous literature on regulatory capture and selective enforcement. The combination of the results validates the aims of the study: not only does politicization and personal interests influence the content but also undermine the regulatory institutions, creating an environment, in which it is difficult to adhere to professional standards. The study thus indicates the circular relationship of political influence, financial dependence and poor regulation and thus, there is an urgent need to reform to enable the Pakistani television to play its democratic and informational role.

Conclusion:

The results confirm the existence of politicization as the prevailing problem compromising the Pakistani television. The channels often follow the political parties, take biased editorial positions, and serve the interests of powerful elites. What further distort the information landscape are vested interests in the form of advertiser pressure and ownership interests in other industries. This twofold impact makes the perspective of the audience more limited and less credible. PEMRA, which is best suited to protect the independence, is rather seen as a tool of governmental repression (Rasul, 2012). The spectrum owners, anchors, advertisers, and viewers are all quoted saying that penalties are only applied inconsistently and the regulations are not applied selectively. These views destroy the confidence of people and encourage vents to practice self-censorship or seek refuge in political groupings. In the absence of a regulator who is considered as being unbiased and transparent, the industry finds it hard to uphold professionalism or safeguard freedom of expression.

A political and economic system of media that is this tightly controlled by politics and interests cannot serve its democratic purpose (Bogart, 2017). Popular discourse gets discontinued and polarization grows when citizens lose trust in the impartiality of the news seen on television. Critical debate and investigative journalism are silenced and influential actors, state or non-state, take over narratives. The paper points out the role these structural weaknesses play in undermining the ability of the press to check the institutions and to inform the electorate properly. Irrespective of these issues, the knowledge of stakeholders does offer a basis of change. The audience, advertisers, and practitioners are aware of the expenses of politicization and ineffective regulations (Costello, 2019). Through this mutual understanding, policymakers and industry representatives will be able to pursue changes that empower regulatory autonomy, impose

transparent norms, and differentiate financing mechanisms. It is only then that Pakistani television can regain the lost potential of a balanced, inclusive and democratic communication.

Recommendations

These deep-seated issues should be dealt with by a number of synergistic actions. The priority should be regulatory independence. The statute governing PEMRA needs to be amended to provide set durations of senior officials, civil society and journalism groups, and clear rules on appointments and termination (Naveed et al., 2024b). Clear enforcement is also of utmost importance: all punishments and cable-distribution policy must be publicly recorded with appropriate explanation and the possibility of appealing the decisions to an independent authority. The disclosure of ownership must be made mandatory in order to reveal conflict of interest brought about by political or cross-industry associations. At the same time, the industry ought to discuss a variety of funding options including subscriptions, membership, or donor-sponsored investigative journalism in order to become less dependent on advertising revenues, which can be a significant source of editorial control. At the professional level, better newsroom ethics, periodic training and independent editorial boards or ombudsman systems are required of broadcasters. Lastly, media-literacy campaigns, allowing audience empowerment by strengthening regional broadcasting can result in the creation of a more informed audience and a more balanced discussion at the national level. With all these reforms, it is possible to transform the Pakistani television into a non-political media to a respectable democratic organization.

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