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## Discourse and Mediation

Lilie Chouliaraki

As text-analytical approaches have become dominant in social scientific research, *discourse* has emerged as an important keyword in the study of mediated communication. Keywords, in Williams' (1976) definition of the term, are important, "binding words in certain activities and their interpretations" or in "certain forms of thought" (p. 13). It is precisely because discourse acts as a binding word in influential forms of thought and analysis across the social sciences and the humanities that its definition is characterized by substantial variation. Whereas all keywords possess a *meaning potential*, rather than a clearly defined and fixed meaning, the specific variations of the term discourse can be seen to reflect the diversity of the disciplines it appears within—each operating with its own epistemic logic and providing a different set of priorities in the study of mediated communication<sup>1</sup> (Garrett & Bell, 1998, pp.2, 9).

Therefore, studying variations in the use of discourse across epistemic domains

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<sup>1</sup> I adopt a broad definition of mediated communication, inspired by Thompson's (1995) cultural approach to mediated communication, which broadly encompasses the study of the technological, social, and institutional contexts for the circulation of meaning in contemporary societies, the latter understood as a particular historical moment, modernity, which is shaped precisely by the emergence of technologically inscribed meaning.

is not simply an exercise in refining the dictionary definitions of the term, but serves the task of conceptual clarification in the interdisciplinary research agenda of mediated communication. If, as Williams (1976) contends, the problem of a keyword's multiple meanings is "inextricably bound up with the problem it is used to discuss" (p. 13), then a discussion on the uses of discourse in social inquiry can help illuminate a central controversy in the study of mediated communication: the nature of textuality, and its relationship to power, in contemporary societies.

Taking, therefore, my point of departure in the distinction between the social sciences and the humanities, I identify two influential appropriations of the concept of discourse within each of these two epistemic domains.<sup>2</sup> My aim is to unfold the complexity of this keyword, showing how each appropriation of the term problematizes textuality and power in a variety of ways, both offering new possibilities and presenting inevitable limitations in the study of mediated communication.

I begin with a discussion of the term discourse, situating it within the structuralist (Saussurean) and critical/poststructuralist traditions that have dominated the use of the term in both the social sciences and the humanities (in "Definitions of Discourse"). I then identify two dominant appropriations of the term within the social sciences (in "Discourse as Communicative Power" and "Discourse as Popular Empowerment") and two dominant appropriations of the term in the humanities ("Discourse as the Textualization of Power" and "Discourse as Symbolic Power'). In conclusion, I point to the research value of operating with a plural and versatile conception of discourse in the study of mediated communication and to the continuing need for

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of discourse has, in fact, problematized the traditional distinction between the two (see e.g., Habermas [1990] on the need to reflect on both the scope of functionalist explanation, in the social sciences, and the limits of "interpretive understanding," in the humanities, in favor of "a general theory of social action"). At the same time, the distinction between the social sciences and the humanities is useful insofar as it delineates relatively distinct research agendas and methodological designs, which I refer to in the main body of this chapter.

interdisciplinary synergies between the social sciences and the humanities in the context of an increasingly complex technological modernity.

## **Definitions of Discourse**

Originating in Linguistics, discourse refers to the capacity of language to produce representations of the world. The “linguistic turn” that today informs the dominant epistemological strands in both the social sciences and the humanities is inspired by a particular theory of meaning-making, that of the structuralist linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (Giddens, 1987; Luke, 2002).

The Saussurean theory of meaning posits that representations of the world, far from the outcome of sensory perception (seeing or hearing) that links the outside world with our minds, come about from the structure of language itself—from the possibility of linguistic signs to be different from one another and yet to complement each other in meaningful relationships within the structure of signs. Building on Saussure’s theory of language, critical and poststructuralist linguistic theory argue that these relationships of meaning-making are not purely systemic (i.e., appertaining to the language structure itself) but also social: They have their “conditions of possibility” in the historical and political relationships in which they are embedded (e.g., Williams, 1975 p. 20). In Foucault’s (1980) terminology, linguistic relations appertain to particular systems of “power/knowledge relations” specific to their historical juncture.

If the Saussurean view emphasizes the “referential” power of language, that is, the capacity of language to represent the world, the critical and poststructuralist views draw attention to the performative power of language, that is, the capacity of language to constitute the world in meaning at the moment that it claims to simply represent it. In this sense, the concept of

discourse draws attention to the linguistic dimension of social power, not as an add-on to the material power of class, gender, or race relations, but as a central terrain for struggle over other forms of social power. Every linguistic utterance, according to this view, comes about from a position of social interest (be this race, gender, or class), and every linguistic utterance makes a claim to truth that seeks to reclaim these interests and reestablish their power through meaning (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, whereas both views of discourse focus on the textuality of language as the primary object for the study of mediated representations, the performative view further alerts us to the historicity of this textuality.<sup>4</sup> This historical dimension of discourse is important because it points to the analysis of discourse as a form of social explanation and critique: If linguistic text is already articulated in the power relations of its social use, then the analysis of text serves precisely the task of identifying not just the linguistic properties of meaning but, more important, broader social processes of contestation, domination, or resistance.

Having informed the study of social life since the linguistic turn, this performative view of discourse provides the study of mediated communication with similar analytical and normative orientations across the humanities and the social sciences. In terms of analytical orientation, discourse poses the question of what we can learn about the social process of mediation by analyzing the texts of mediation. In terms of normative orientation, it asks how the relationships

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<sup>3</sup> Given the emphasis on language and power, my overview inevitably excludes important discourse analytical traditions, such as ethnomethodology and conversation analysis, which may have contributed in major ways to the study of performativity in mediated communication but have not explicitly focused on the link between linguistic performativity and power (e.g., Fairclough, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Textuality refers to the property of individual texts to emerge within specific historical and social conditions of possibility, which are systematically reflected in the discursive structure of each text despite the singularity of each text's semiotic choices (Kristeva, 1980; see also Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999, for intertextuality as a category for the analysis of historicity in texts).

of power that play on the constitution of texts of mediation impact on the social world—whether they do so in reproductive or transformative ways.

The use of discourse in the study of mediated communication can thus be productively discussed in terms of this dual focus on the analytical dimension of mediated textualities (the semiotic dynamics that come into the production of texts of mediation) , on the one hand, and the normative dimension of the power of mediation (the social dynamics that enable or constrain the production of mediated texts), on the other hand. My brief overview of the different appropriations of discourse proceeds, accordingly, by referring to the ways in which the social sciences and the humanities reformulate these two orientations to research on mediated communication: the analytical, focusing on the *textualities* of mediation, and the normative, focusing on the *power relations* of mediation. I next examine appropriations of the concept of discourse in the social sciences and the humanities.

### **Discourse in the Social Sciences**

Covering a broad range of disciplines (from social psychology to politics and from sociology to cultural studies and anthropology), this overview is bound to be partial. However, there are (at least) two different appropriations of discourse in the social sciences, each of which provides its own influential understanding of textuality and power in mediation. The first appropriation can be summed up in terms of *Discourse as communicative power* and refers primarily to textualities in the public/political realm of mediation, whereas the second appropriation can be defined in terms of *Discourse as popular empowerment* and refers to the textualities in private/domestic or popular realms of mediation. Although the discourse perspective has effectively problematized

the distinctions between public/private or political/domestic, pointing at the co-articulation between the two realms, this analytical classification corresponds, in fact, to a key traditional distinction in the study of mediated communication. This is the distinction between the study of mediated communication as “mass communication” versus “communication as conversation” (Schudson, 1978, pp. 320–329) or between mediation as “broadcasting” versus mediation as “dialogue” (Peters, 1999, pp. 33–62).

**1. Discourse as communicative power.** This strand of research is informed by a particular version of critical theory (Calhoun, Gerteis, Moody, & Pfaff, 2002: 351-57) that problematized the Marxian concept of ideology on the grounds that it turned language one-sidedly into a vehicle of domination and people into dupes manipulated by the economic interests governing language use (Hall, 1982:56-90).

Born out of an inflection of the “linguistic turn” (Lee, 1992:402-20), the view of discourse as communicative power recognizes that language is deeply embedded in social struggles over power but avoids linking it straightforwardly with economic domination. Instead, this critical project posits language as a terrain of struggle among multiple and diverse interests while putting forward a normative ideal for public communication as possible to take place outside the constraints of power (Habermas, 1980). Emerging out of this “ideal speech situation,” Habermas envisages a utopian view of society that is founded not on struggle over interests but on consensus.

The textualities of the public realm, in this intellectual project, are therefore understood as formal procedures (or pragmatic principles) that regulate communication in ways that promote rational debate among participants and allow for the best argument to win. Seeking to rescue the

“unfinished project of modernity” from postmodern attacks on reason (Habermas, 1998 pp. 35–55), Habermas’ view of discourse rests on a firm belief in the immanent potential for rationality in language and in the capacity of social actors to use language properly so as to overcome conflict and reach intersubjective understanding.

Whereas this view of discourse has been, undoubtedly, influential across the social sciences, advancing conceptions of social justice and democratic governance based on communicative rationality (e.g., Crossley & Roberts, 2004), it has always stood in a tenuous relationship to mediation. Instrumental as the textualities of mediation may be in summoning up dispersed publics and providing platforms for collective deliberation, the Habermasian account nurtures a deep suspicion of technological communication. This is really a suspicion toward the institutions of the state and the market, which colonize the media with a strategic means-ends rationality and, in so doing, replace the rationality of communication with the manipulative mechanisms of propaganda or advertising (Habermas, 1989).

Criticisms of this view of discourse as communicative action primarily address Habermas’ somewhat rigid normativity (Calhoun, 1995). His strong views on proper communication rest on a universalist ideal of power-free dialogue as a positive thing, on the one hand, ignoring the significance (and indeed necessity) of conflict in society, and a negative conception of mediation as sold to manipulative interests, on the other hand, ignoring the positive potential of technological communication in facilitating public debate and forging crucial moral ties of proximity at a distance (Chouliaraki, 2008:831-52).

An alternative account on the constitutive role of discourse in the public realm, widely appropriated by the social sciences, originates in political discourse theory (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Informed by a poststructuralist view of language, discourse theory entails a



view of textuality that, rather than striving for the ideal of power-free communication, is inseparably bound up with perpetual struggles among competing meanings and cannot, therefore, achieve final closure. Indeed, whereas discourse theory, like Habermas, also conceives of the textualities of mediation as a terrain for the achievement of social consensus, it does not view such consensus as the benign endpoint (or telos) of communicative rationality but rather as the always unstable outcome of social power. Drawing on a post-Marxian perspective of power as hegemony, consensus is here defined as the provisional subordination of some social interests by others that manage to disguise their particularity and present themselves as universal. Consequently, communicative rationality is recast as an ongoing agonistic struggle over the hegemony of meanings in society—a struggle traversed by irrational as well as rational forces and by public as well as private interests that never manage to fully dominate the public realm.

Despite the extensive use of the discourse theoretical perspective in studies on mediated political communication and public opinion as well as new media, civil society, and cultural citizenship, this approach has been criticized on two accounts: (a) for its overemphasis on the openness of discourse and the fluidity of society, paying relatively less attention to the structural properties of power that close off new possibilities of representation in mediated discourse; and (b) for failing to attend to the detail of the textualities of mediation, ignoring the semiotic makeup of texts, and sustaining an abstract style of discourse analysis that often fails to link theoretical claims with empirical reality (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999:118-36).

**2. Discourse as popular empowerment.** This paradigm cuts across several fields of social scientific research, including sociology, anthropology, social psychology, and cultural studies and can be seen as a response to the determinism of Marxian and early Frankfurt School

theorizing, which emphasizes the ideological effects of mediated discourse in terms of disempowering people and sustaining social order (Morley, 1996: 279-93).

The textualities of mediation here refer broadly to the circulation of mediated meaning in popular culture and its creative reappropriation by audiences—starting with Hall's (1980/2001:166-76) encoding–decoding model, which departs from linear models of communication effects, and culminating in Fiske's (1987:224-40) celebration of mediated textualities as sources of popular pleasure and resistance.

The textualities of mediation are now primarily characterized by polysemy: the quality of a text to articulate competing meanings, thereby opening itself up to a multiplicity of divergent and conflicting readings rather than a singular dominant one (Livingstone & Lunt, 1994; see also Kristeva, 1980). Simultaneously, the power of mediation, rather than referring to institutions of power (state or the market), is reconceptualized in terms of social agency. The concept of the active audience refers precisely to the capacity of social actors to engage creatively with the decoding process, providing oppositional or resistant readings of mediated texts rather than preferred or collusive ones (Livingstone, 1990/1998: 172-75).

Polysemy and agency, as epistemological properties of discourse, consequently shift the focus of study in mediated communication. From textuality as distorted communication or as hegemonic meaning emphasis turns onto textuality as audience interpretation, and from power as institutional domination attention is drawn to power as popular empowerment. As Fiske (1987) puts it, referring to televisual communication, "Television's playfulness is a sign of its semiotic democracy, by which I mean *its delegation of production of meanings and pleasures to the viewers*" (p. 236; italics added).

Two important arguments follow from this approach to discourse: a political and a

theoretical one (Livingstone, 1990/1998: 171-89). The political argument thematizes the possibility of resistance through discourse. Combining a view of text as polysemic, that is as having more than one meanings at once, with ethnographies of viewing, which take into account people's own interpretations of the media, the political argument privileges an analytical focus on "moments of viewing"—on people's situated engagements with the flow of mediated textualities<sup>5</sup>. Some foreground the experience of playfulness and desire (e.g., Fiske, 1991), whereas others focus on the subversive dimension of audiences' appropriations of mediated texts, emphasizing their capacity to challenge hegemonic meanings and resist social stereotypes (e.g., Morley, 1980). Despite their differences, both perspectives ultimately reformulate the power relations of mediation in terms of empowerment, complexifying the subtle links between texts and their interpretations and acknowledging the centrality of identity as a crucial terrain for the exercise of a politics of resistance—more recently debated in terms of the new agency of media users through the hypertextualities of emerging communication technologies (Livingstone, 2004).

The political argument on the empowerment of audiences, however, cannot be separated from the theoretical argument that (dominant) text and its (subversive) interpretation is a false dichotomy, which ignores the crucial question of how identity may be constituted in broader contexts of power and discourse, of which mediated communication is only one. Consequently, the theoretical argument seeks to move beyond the traditional power/resistance duality to capture how social actors co-articulate the (prepolitical) contexts of everyday life with public/political ones and, thereby, to reconceptualize anew the possibilities of agency inherent in the flows of mediation (Grossberg, 1996:87-107).

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<sup>5</sup> Influential here is the concept of 'interpretive repertoires' in the field of discursive psychology (Potter and Whetherell 1988: 138-57).

In understanding power as a generalized economy of freedom and control that operates in a multiplicity of intersecting and overlapping contexts (Hall, 1996: 1-18), the discourse perspective introduces new issues in the research agenda on mediated communication, including the importance to reconfigure the distinction between the cultural and political and the need to expand our definitions of public communication toward more cultural understandings of political legitimacy and civil action.

Despite its acknowledgment of power, the popular empowerment perspective has been criticized for a rather underdeveloped conception of the structures of control that operate within contexts of reception. Research on audience resistance, according to this criticism, tends to focus on the creative aspects of people's accounts about mediated texts while downplaying the nature of the texts that are being interpreted by audiences, as well as the broader structural-institutional and psychological-cultural constraints that play on and may further constrain the production of identity (Hall, 1980/2001; McRobbie, 1994). As a result, this perspective has tended to produce celebratory accounts of popular culture that do not fully reflect a more complex understanding of the interplay between discourse and power in processes of mediation.

### **Discourse in the Humanities**

If the research agenda of the social sciences concentrates broadly on questions around the nature of the social world, looking at articulations within and between the public/political and private/popular realms, the research agenda of the humanities focuses on the role that language and visuality, as key modalities of meaning-making, play in constructing the social world.

Although there are productive complementarities between the two agendas, the concept of discourse figures in distinctive ways within the agenda of the humanities. Specifically, discourse

brings together two different understandings of textuality, thereby providing two different views of the power of mediation: discourse as the textualization of power and discourse as symbolic power. I briefly discuss each in turn.

**1. Discourse as the “textualization” of power.** Grounded in the field of postmodern cultural studies, this strand is a literary-based, postrealist version of the linguistic turn that takes the thesis of the linguistic nature of the social to its logical extreme and conflates the social with the textual (Shapiro, 1989: 11-12). Inspired by a “grammatological” deconstruction of modernist conceptions of truth as meaning that corresponds to an external reality, the postmodern account of discourse emphasizes the thoroughly textual nature of reality and refutes the possibility of truth beyond the linguistic meanings through which claims to truth are made intelligible in the first place (*il n’y’a pas de hors-texte*; Derrida, 1976: 157-64).

Combining this textualist view of the social with critical cultural theory that holds technology responsible for emptying content out of mediated meanings, this view of discourse considers mediation to be a catalytic force in turning communication into a pure play of forms, thus stretching too far McLuhan’s claim that “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964, p. 7). Although the critique of technology as corroding the communicative potential of discourse echoes Habermas’ colonization thesis, the textualist conception of discourse is less interested in rescuing the rationality of modernity as Habermas is and concentrates on a thoroughgoing rejection of modernity as a “society of the simulacra”: a society of representation without referents (Baudrillard, 1994).

Indeed, for Baudrillard, whose textualization thesis comes from radicalizing the French

Situationists' critique of image-driven capitalism (Debord, 1995), the dominant textuality of modernity is the spectacle. More than simply denoting a marketized visuality, however, the spectacle now defines a specific form of mediated communication as simulation. Simulation, for Baudrillard, is not a representation of something external to itself but a representation of already existing spectacles that refer to themselves as the "real." In this self-referential definition, simulation cancels any claim to reality except for the reality of the spectacle itself. Simulation, therefore, "... is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2).

The power relations of mediation, consequently, also operate in and through the realm of technological signification. Power here works through the capacity of technology to manipulate representation (by use of analogue or digital techniques of reproduction, alteration, and editing) so as to create a specific reality effect known as "hyperreality" (Baudrillard, 1983 p. 44). Although such effect comes about through media manipulation, hyperreality is not a quasi-real or a faded representation of the real, but an accentuated or perfected sense of the real that blurs the distinction between image and reality. Power, therefore, works by subjecting people to a social experience, which, in collapsing the distinction between the social world and its representations, renders the possibilities for critique and social change obsolete. Indeed, according to Baudrillard (1988), people today are no longer required to call on their capacities to appropriate and reclaim meaning. Rather than exercising reflexivity, media audiences have today become voyeurs who surrender to the seductive attraction of TV, to its "ecstasy of communication," where everything is on constant display and nothing really matters.

The extreme pessimism of this view of discourse reflects a lack of nuance in its conceptualizations of power and textuality in mediated communication. Starting from a semiotic

understanding of the workings of power in society in terms of spectacular visuality (and its reality effects), the textualization of power view not only reduces power to an abstract system of technological signification, but further reduces the plurality of mediated textualities to one specific form of sign, the spectacle, with one specific meaning-making operation, simulation (Chouliaraki, 2008: 831-52). This reductive view both exaggerates the implications of mediated communication in the experience of social life and underestimates the plurality and unpredictability of mediated meanings. As a result, this literary-based theory of mediated communication ultimately provides an amoralistic social theory of modernity as a bittersweet *joie de vivre* that has abandoned both the intellectual project of critique and the political vision of social change (Kellner, 2003).

**2. Discourse as symbolic power.** Perhaps the most influential, but also the most heterogeneous, strand of a humanities-grounded conception of discourse, the idea of symbolic power permeates understandings of mediated communication in the fields of cultural studies (originating in the Birmingham School), as well as media and communications studies (The Glasgow Group), film and literary criticism, critical discourse analysis (CDA) and social semiotics (see Threadgold, 2003; Wodak & Busch, 2004, for overviews).<sup>6</sup>

This is a strand brought together by its normative orientation to combine a critical view of language as socially practice with neo-Marxian views of the workings of power through ideology (Wodak, 1996). While sharing similar premises to conceptions of discourse as communicative power (acknowledging the constitutive relationship between language and power) and as popular empowerment (acknowledging the polysemy of texts), discourse as

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<sup>6</sup> See Thompson (1995) for a Bourdieuan view of the power of mediation as symbolic power.

symbolic power is nevertheless grounded onto a more analytical approach that seeks to bridge the gap between grand questions on social power with the detailed study of language: "...to capture," in Luke's (2002) words, "the dynamic relationships between discourse and society, between the micropolitics of everyday texts and the macropolitical landscapes of ideological forces and power relations, capital exchange and material historical conditions" (p. 100).

Textuality is here considered to be a complex articulation of semiotic choices, situated within the social and political contexts of mediation rather than fully constituting or textualizing these (Fairclough, 1995: 53-74). Certain perspectives emphasize a view of textuality as a dialectic between structures of meaning and the micro-agency of linguistic practice (Fairclough, 1992), whereas others draw attention to textuality as the interface between sociocultural resources of human cognition and the situated interpretative practices of linguistic actors (van Dijk, 1997). Such differences render this strand a productively diverse body of research, with certain perspectives more actively engaging with the research agendas of political theory and sociology, whereas others being closer to studies of social psychology and human cognition. Both perspectives, however, refuse to collapse the textual with the social, thereby making possible a critique of mediation as a particular modality of power, symbolic power, that coexists with and reproduces, but may also change, dominant relationships of power (economic, political, and cultural).

Mediated representations as symbolic power are, consequently, approached as semiotic representations of other forms of power that can be analyzed in terms of the specific ideological implications they may have on media publics. Specifically, this renewed form of ideology critique ("the return of the repressed"; Hall, 1982) deconstructs and demystifies hegemonic arrangements of power in discourse in two ways. On the one hand, it deconstructs operations of



power *within* mediated discourse, identifying the ways in which, for example, racist discourses of immigration may dominate the media and which ideological implications such dominant representations of racism may have (van Dijk, 1988). On the other hand, it deconstructs operations of power *through* mediated discourse, identifying, for example, emerging genres and styles of communication in contemporary media, such as the confessional interview or the reality show (Fairclough, 1995) or the shifting configurations of language and the visual in new multimodal texts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996, 2001).

The main purpose of analyzing discourse as symbolic power, therefore, is to demonstrate that, despite its appearance as a sedimented structure, the discourse of mediation is in fact a relatively contingent arrangement of symbolic power that can be reflected on and changed. Dialectically related to other forms of social transformation, discursive change is here seen to participate in broader struggles for a more equalitarian society, rendering the study of the textualities of mediation an important space for the articulation of critique (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997: 258-84).

At the same time, the conception of discourse as symbolic power has been criticized for downplaying the role of media audiences in the construction of mediated meanings. Despite its theorization of text as polysemic and its recognition of the active audience, most of the studies on mediation as symbolic power understand the textuality of mediation in terms of the workings of media texts, downplaying the ways in which media texts are appropriated and transformed in the everyday practices of culture (Meinhoff & Smith, 2000). This may be connected to the explicitly normative focus of much research in this strand, which tends to concentrate on media texts in the domain of public/political communication, focusing primarily on “the public representation and repression of diversity and difference” (Luke, 2002, p. 108).

## **Conclusion**

Despite differences in the epistemic logics between the social sciences and the humanities, there is an obvious permeability in their research agendas and methodologies regarding the study of mediated communication in terms of discourse. No approach alone can address the crucial question of the nature of mediated textualities and their role in the processes of social transformation, but productive synergies between them, existing and potential, are evident.

To this end, although the exploration of a keyword cannot resolve the epistemological controversies of interdisciplinary research, it can modestly provide this “extra edge of consciousness” (Williams, 1976, p. 21), which is required for refining our conceptual sensibilities and methodological choices in the study of mediated communication. It is through such reflexive interdisciplinary dialogues within specific theoretical and empirical projects, that the use of discourse can continue to inform our understandings not only of how the social worlds looks like but also of how it could ( and should) look like.

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