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Kreps, David G., "Performing the Discourse of Sexuality Online" (2009). *AMCIS 2009 Proceedings*. 517.
<http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2009/517>

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Performing the Discourse of Sexuality Online

Foucault, Butler, and Video-sharing on Sexual Social Networking Sites

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ABSTRACT

Though sometimes pitted against one another and at times contradictory, the ideas of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler on the nature and expression of our sexuality and our gender identities help us to gain a deeper and more rounded picture of the impact and import of the burgeoning phenomenon of internet dating websites. This paper looks at the use and prevalence of video-sharing technologies on sexual social networking websites, in the context of notions of sexual identity and an information systems approach to the phenomenon of internet dating.

Keywords

Sexuality, Gender, Foucault, Butler, Internet Dating.

INTRODUCTION

Much of interest has been written in recent years around the subject of sexual identities and internet dating. Studies in the text-based world of discussion forums on the construction of sexual identities (Atkinson & DePalma 2008; van Doorn 2008; Del-Teso-Craviotto 2008;) and the discovery and online learning about femininities (Kelly 2006), have revealed lines of power relations between participants within such spaces, and relative freedoms from the power relations in the offline/real world, but also that the body, although graphically absent, is not any less present. Studies have even suggested that time spent online for sexual purposes can increase that spent offline, as well (Daneback et al 2006), and that time spent online can often be a concealed and secret exploration of sexual behaviour that falls “outside the confines of the heterosexual ‘norm’” (DiMarco, H 2003).

This paper begins with the notion of performance – in particular the performance of sexuality, and most specifically, the performance of the discourse of sexuality. It posits that the proliferation of sexual discourse and sexualities over the last two centuries outlined by Foucault (1990; 1992; 1998) continues apace in the Information Age, if anything accelerated and broadened to a wider public by the phenomenon of internet dating. It also posits that the performativity of gender identities outlined by Butler (1990; 1993) continues, with online categorization in internet dating sites in fact prescribing ever more specific and ‘niche’ roles. This paper contends, moreover, that the practice of video sharing on internet dating (perhaps better described as sexual social networking) sites, is illustrative of why Butler’s criticisms of Foucault in fact fail.

This is a very large topic to which a conference paper such as this cannot do true justice, so the aim of this paper, more narrowly, is to introduce the relevant ideas of the two theorists just mentioned, applying them briefly to some thoughts about two websites, one global the other specifically for the UK, aimed at the gay male community, and to examine the impact of video-sharing on these websites upon these Foucauldian and Butlerian notions of the self. The author, a gay man, has undertaken an ethnographic study of these two sites, having been a member and participant in Gaydar since April 2000, soon after it was launched, and of Fitlads since a year after its launch in April 2003.

THE SCIENTIA SEXUALIS

This paper aligns itself with the fundamental contention of social constructionist approaches to the understanding of self and society, namely that no man is an island, and that our selves and our interaction with each other are indivisible. Specifically, our sexualities, as a part of our personalities, come about as part of that development of self that is a conversation between what may be regarded as ‘innate’ proclivities and the influence of the world in which we develop. Furthermore, in this social context, this paper aligns itself with Foucault’s notion of political technologies of the body, and the progressive disciplining of the self over the last few centuries. His work on the creation of our concepts of sanity through the creation of the medical discipline of mental health (Foucault 1995); the creation of our concepts of good citizenship through the creation of the prison system (Foucault 1977); and the creation of a range of sexual character types and whole modes of desire in recent centuries (Foucault 1990; 1992; 1998), collectively provide an extraordinary insight into how social technologies of organisation, power and control have progressively shaped not just our lives but our bodies themselves, our self-concept, the

individual performances of who we are. Foucault, then, outlines the map of contemporary social roles from our own subset of which we are able to select who we will be in any given situation. This map derives from the social environment of control where power and knowledge are intertwined and focused upon the human body as the object of their interplay. The human body is exposed as object and target of power in the modern era. "It is manipulated, shaped, trained, [it] obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces.... [it is] constituted by a whole set of regulations and by empirical and calculated methods relating to the army, the school and the hospital, for controlling or correcting the operations of the body." (Foucault 1977:136)

Foucault's contention, in his three-volume *History of Sexuality* (1990; 1992; 1998) is that sexuality is discourse. Foucault critiques the commonly held view that sexuality is something that we have, particularly since the nineteenth century, "repressed". On the contrary, he contends that what appears as a "repression" of sexual drives has actually formed, defined, categorized, delineated, and constituted a concept - 'sexuality' - as a core feature of our identities. Far from being suppressed, he argues, we have witnessed a proliferation of discourse on the subject. Foucault's story, in the first volume, *The Will to Power*, (Foucault 1998) focuses around the nature - and sexual content - of 'confession,' first in its Christian context, through the evolution of its use in Christian theology and political influence, to its translation into a 'scientific' form on the sexologist's and then psychoanalyst's couch. These changes together constituted what Foucault describes as the "*scientia sexualis*" (Foucault 1998:67) - sexuality as discourse. This *scientia sexualis*, moreover, joined with the multiplicity of other forces in the power-knowledge network described in Foucault's other works as one of the many political technologies controlling, constituting, directing, and producing the human body in contemporary society.

It is the contention of this paper that this discourse, once perhaps more the domain of the learned and of the professional classes, has with the phenomenon of the World Wide Web, and especially of Web 2.0, become the domain of all. Viewing today's online social networks, and especially the internet dating sites that have proliferated in recent years, from this Foucauldian perspective, we can see that the discourse of sexuality is very much apparent. There are a great range of different kinds of internet dating websites for a panoply of different tastes, where discussion, connection, and the sharing and exchange of confessional photographs and videos can be undertaken, all at the touch of the button for today's computer user.

It is truly not that long ago that spending large amounts of time in front of a computer screen was regarded as the behaviour of a young adolescent male, devoid of social skills. Now, more and more of us are attached to our screens much of the time, at work and at home - and increasingly to our mobile screens on our journeys in between. This activity is increasingly seen not only as socially acceptable and a 'cool' thing to do, but crucial to our economic well-being. The geekishness of the 1980s has in a sense taken over as normal activity, no longer viewed as the behaviour of a social misfit lacking in social skills, it is the social interaction mediated by the computer that has become the norm: social interaction has thus been subtly shifted from the control of the individuals involved to a shared control with the computer networks that now mediate it - a classic Foucauldian transformation that increases disciplinary power. Online social networking is, from this perspective, an almost fabricated form of social interaction that through its advertising and subscription models satisfies the needs of pervasive computer-network-based transnational capitalism as much as the gregariousness of its participants (Light et al 2005; Kreps & Pearson 2009). The bodies of those using these online social networks, moreover, are the nexus of intense power relations, required to perform a myriad technical duties in a multi-tasking environment that has them pinned - literally - rooted to the spot, physically immobile sat in front of the screen. Whether that screen is a large fixed unit on a desk or a small portable unit on a mobile phone, the eyes, concentration and focus of the user of online social networks are captured by the screen for the tasks associated with networking, while other tasks such as making coffee to drink at one's desk, or undertaking a journey on a train or bus, become secondary to the focus upon what is happening on the screen. Small wonder then that the sexualities of these disciplined bodies have migrated to the screen as well.

GAYDAR AND FITLADS

Today's internet dating sites offer up a plethora of virtual sexual identities represented in online profiles. "Given the opportunities the Internet provides for secrecy and anonymity", DiMarco points out, "it is of little surprise that many users are increasingly exploring aspects of their sexual identities and experimenting with their sexuality in ways that may be precluded in 'real' life by a variety of social and personal impediments, constraints and repressions." (DiMarco 2003) Assuming, with Yurchisin (2005:736), that our identities transcend "online and offline boundaries and [are] actually a collection of both online and offline categorisations of oneself," it is clear that our offline selves help to constitute our online selves - sometimes by contrast as pointed out by DiMarco, sometimes by similarity - and that the reverse must also be true: that our online identities help to constitute our offline selves.

When creating an online profile on one of these sexual social networking sites, one must provide information about one's physical appearance, demographic characteristics, and personality traits. Photography, and increasingly video, provide

information about appearance, demographics are often simply age and location, and personality traits often boil down simply to likes and dislikes (both social and sexual). Such data, moreover, beyond free text boxes for self-description, is often collected in a multiple-choice format, and then used as criteria to enable the website to offer matchmaking services, linking profiles with similar choices through a variety of search mechanisms. The requirements of the matching criteria asked for by the two sites being focussed on in this paper, ostensibly to enable easier connections between people, are arguably constitutive of sexual identities. As Light et al point out, “Not surprisingly we find dominant cultural stereotypes reproduced and reinforced through technological design...Although the free text element implies freedom to define oneself as one chooses, the presence of menus and tick boxes shapes a pre-defined notion of what may or may not be an acceptable expression of identity.” (Light et al 2008:307) Making such choices at the outset, when creating one’s profile, may in fact have the effect of locking individuals into specific roles, prior to meeting, from which they are then unable to escape without admitting online dissimulation once face-to-face, at the risk of losing the connection as soon as it is made. Importantly, though, “the greater level of anonymity provided by the internet, as compared to face-to-face encounters, allows individuals to present aspects of their current perceptions of themselves that they would not ordinarily present to other members of society.” (Yurchisin 2005:737). In other words, the options may enable individuals to ‘role’-play at being one of the pre-defined ‘types,’ online, despite reservations regarding such behaviour offline.

The author has made an ethnographic study of two websites, one global the other specifically for the UK, aimed at the gay male community, specifically to examine the impact of video-sharing on these websites. The table below lists what the individual member of each of the two sites is able to see, choose, and make visible about their own sexuality.

Website	Personal Profile	Videos	Niche
<p>Gaydar (Global)</p>	<p>About me, Looking for, Hobbies, Fetishes, Types I Like, Sexual Activities.</p> <p>Add to my favourites,</p> <p>Add to my friends</p> <p>Main picture, secondary pictures, private pictures that can be added to messages</p>	<p>Personal videos on profiles recently introduced</p>	<p>Sign-up includes the opportunity to tick one or more of the following boxes:</p> <p>Fetishes: Armpits, Body Hair, Boots, Chaps, Cut, Denim, Drag, Facial Hair, Feet, Frottage, Fur, Hands, Hoods & Masks, Jocks, Kilts, Leather, Lingerie, Lycra, Muscle, Nipples, Piercing, Rubber/PVC, Smoking, Socks, Speedos, Sportswear, Suits, Tattoos, Toys, Trainers/Sneakers, Uncut, Underwear, Uniforms, Waders.</p> <p>Types I Like: Bears, Bikers, Builders, Chubbies, Clubbers, Farmers, Firemen, Footballers, Geeks, Labourers, Leather Men, Married Men, Medical (Uniforms), Military (Uniforms), Muscle Men, Older Guys, Policemen, Preppies, Punks, Rugby Players, Short Guys, Skins, Tall Guys, Transvestite/Transexual, Truck Drivers, Twinks</p> <p>Sexual Activities: Anal, Bondage, Breath Control, CBT, Cottaging/Tea Rooms/ Beats, Cybersex, Electro, Exhibitionists, Fisting, Glory Holes, Groups, Kissing, Masters & Dogs, Masters & Slaves, Medical, Naturist, Oral, Outdoor, Phone Sex, Rimming, Role Play, S&M, Sauna/Bath Houses, Shaving, Spanking, Threesomes, Tickling, Vacuum Pumping, Vanilla, Verbal/Gob, Voyeurs, Wanking, Watersports, Wrestling</p>

Website	Personal Profile	Videos	Niche
Fitlads (UK)	About, Stats, Visitors, Links, Mates Request to link profiles Main picture, secondary pictures, private pictures that can be viewed by people you add to your 'allow' list if they request it.	Personal videos in either secondary picture list or private pictures area	Aimed mainly at the 'chav' market, including sportswear and bondage fetishists. All secondary pictures on the site are gathered into Galleries members can browse through, in the following categories: Sports -> Scally lad, footy kit, trackies, shorts, socks, trainers, swimming Underwear -> boxers, briefs, jocks Bondage -> tied, pain Naked -> full expose, cock only, arse General -> face, body, clothed, general Personal videos can be 'rated' 1->5 by their viewers, and there seems to be a good deal of competition to get personal masturbatory and coital videos into the weekly Top Ten.

The inclusion of video in these internet dating profiles is a relatively recent but very important development. Fitlads introduced it during 2008, and Gaydar have begun to introduce it in early 2009. Online videos have existed long before this time, but uploading videos, managing, sharing and watching them has been very cumbersome due to a lack of an easy-to-use integrated platform. Technologically, therefore, video on the web has long been beyond the easy reach of most web developers. The technological challenges of delivering streaming video across the web were so great – requiring additional (and expensive) server software, a good deal of bandwidth, and often unreliable plug-ins - that it was not, in fact, until the advent of YouTube in 2005 that video began to become an everyday part of the World Wide Web experience. YouTube solved the challenges by streaming video through the use of Flash – a plug-in originally created by Macromedia and later purchased by Adobe – that had become an almost ubiquitous add-on within browsers around the world. The addition of easy reformatting of uploaded videos into Flash, and of a social network of video-sharers, propelled YouTube into one of the most successful websites yet, along with a host of imitators. Three years later, video-sharing became easier for smaller web developers to implement on their sites, and indeed, almost a necessity for sexual social networking sites wanting to maintain the loyalty of their membership.

But video-sharing has had a significant impact on the nature of sexual social networking. The pornographic aspect of such sites has taken on some unusual and important characteristics, core to the contentions of this paper. In classic pornography, both the traditional cinema version and the more recent online version, the 'ordinary' individual gazes upon the (inaccessible – or at least costly) 'extraordinary' – the fit, classically good looking porn star. Video sharing is different. In this case it is the 'ordinary' displaying themselves to each other, as if at once both claiming to be 'extraordinary', and glorying in the accessibility of their ordinariness – if you like the video you can write to the individual and try to arrange a meeting. Some are simply mobile-phone videos, grainy and not well shot, but others are carefully edited, with accompanying music, perhaps shot with expensive home video cameras, even by second or third parties who do not themselves appear in the video. These latter videos represent perhaps the individual's "perceptions of what are known as their *hoped-for possible selves*" (Yurchisin 2005:737) – again a reference to the potential for online 'role'-play.

But the confessional manner in which young people take photographs and videos of their bodies in masturbatory or coital scenes and post these images and videos on their internet profiles, parading themselves to one another, is more than simply self-advertising in the hope of 'scoring' sexual partners. There is a competitive sexual exhibitionism apparent, encouraged on Fitlads by the 'rating' process and the kudos associated with having one's video of oneself in the weekly Top Ten, that is more to do with communication *about* sex – albeit that that communication is visual rather than oral or textual – than it is about *sex* itself. This is video-discourse - a *scientia sexualis videre* – in which the exchange of imagery online becomes a confessional sexual activity in its own right, quite apart from the physical meetings that may or may not be arranged through the website. The discourse outlined by Foucault between sexologists and psychoanalysts, around the judicial and penal response to and the medical definitions and treatments of the multiplicity of sexualities which were 'discovered' in the

nineteenth century relied heavily upon the 'confessions' of the subject – either patient or felon. Arguably, through the medium of online sexual social networking – and especially through video-sharing - such 'confessions' have now become performances by subjects that now bypass the professionals in order to perform directly to one another. Thus, Foucault's argument that the *scientia sexualis* was also an *ars erotica* in its own right, a "pleasure in the truth of pleasure" (Foucault 1998:70), is perhaps borne out by these activities. But what are we to make of such role-play and performances?

BODIES THAT MATTER

Butler's contention is that *all* gender identity is social and performative. Performativity, as it is known, arose originally from the study of language. As Elin Diamond describes it, "Performativity derives from J.L. Austin's concept of the performative utterance which does not refer to an extra-linguistic reality but rather enacts or produces that to which it refers" (Diamond 1996:4). Austin distinguishes between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts, the former doing what they say in the saying of them, the latter producing certain effects as a result of being said. The concept, in short, suggests that, at least with reference to some cultural realities, 'doing' pre-exists 'being,' and that being, moreover, is something that only exists in the 'doing' of it. The implications of this are profoundly anti-essentialist, putting aside once and for all the notion of an 'essential' self inside the body, guiding and directing one's actions. Yet it goes further than constructionism, too. It says not merely that our selves are the product of social construction, but, specifically with reference to gender, "It's not just that gender is culturally determined and historically contingent, but rather that "it" doesn't exist unless it's being done" (Diamond 1996:4). Gender is an activity, not an attribute. The "act one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene" (Diamond 1996:4-5). Gender is both a doing and a thing done - a pre-existing category and a pre-defined situation. Sexuality, moreover, as an expression of one's gender, all the more so.

Performativity, then, describes a gender constructivism that entails the performed repetition of gender codes, as stipulated by cultural norms, and strips these codes of the very bodily substance they attempt to signify, reducing them literally to codes, whose very existence depends upon their repetition by the performers who are themselves defined by them. It is important to note here, though, that these codes, are not to be considered as in any way existing outside of or beyond their very real instantiation as gender signifiers. The point here is that these codes are actions. Gender is a role presented.

This in turn reflects upon the nature of the "I" that clearly neither 'has' nor 'is' but does gender. As Butler says, "In the sense that the 'I' has no interior secure ego or core identity, 'I' must always enunciate itself: there is only performance of a self, not an external representation of an interior truth" (Butler 1993:12). Freud's argument that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego," (Butler 1993:13) is of note here. As Butler takes it up, it is an 'imaginary morphology,' a body image of self which is the lived body, as opposed to the physical body. This morphologising takes place very early on - indeed the 'sexing' of the body at birth is the first step in the process, and every step thereafter is a reiteration of the norms of sex.

Seen in this light, the masturbatory display of one's body in sexual arousal and orgasm on video in an online sexual social network is an act that enunciates and defines one's gender-role, a presentation and definition of self as porn star, which constitutes one's body as desirable, and mirrors back to oneself an observable body image of self which is both the lived AND physical body at the same time as it is merely pixels upon a screen.

Butler's notion of *citationality* is particularly important, though, in this instance – that the roles we perform pre-exist us, that we cite them in the knowledge that they will be understood because they are as known to those to whom we perform them as they are to us. Crucially, this citational aspect of Butler's performativity allows performative behaviour to fail, by implying that only specific performative actions will succeed. This is very important, because it allows choice among possibilities, trial and error, and the development of "personhood" through experience (Goffman 1990:30). It also allows the role-play as hoped-for self described earlier.

FOUCAULT, BUTLER AND THE BODY

The citational aspect of Butler's work, moreover, dovetails neatly with many of Foucault's concepts. Despite their differences (Butler 1989), Butler is explicit in acknowledging her debt to Foucault, despite Foucault's apparent disinterest in – even hostility to - feminism. Butler's feminism is in truth as post-feminist, as non-gendered as Foucault's approach to sexuality, in this author's opinion, and the tensions between them perhaps somewhat overplayed. Foucault's approach to sexuality is as much that of a social constructionist as is Butler's approach to gender. His study of sexuality rests upon a study of identity, because it addresses the fundamental question of the evolving nature of the self that "experiences" emotions, and places both desire and the desirer in historical context. According to Butler, however, they differ over the question of the nature of the body, and we must examine and overcome this difference to see how video-sharing proves exemplary of the inscriptive power of the confessional discourse of sexual roles taking place in online sexual social networking. Inscription, as those within information systems research will be aware, is a concept not only used by Foucault.

Inscription forms a key part, along with translation, of Latour's mechanism by which actor networks impose their programmes upon people, (Latour 1987; 1991). It also forms a key part of how Akrich's mechanism of delegation achieves its desired behaviours in the users of technological artefacts, (Akrich 1992).

These two approaches to the social construction, on the one hand of sexuality, and on the other of gender, are not mutually exclusive, despite the critique Butler offers of Foucault's position. In her article, "Foucault and the Paradox of Bodily Inscriptions" (Butler 1989) Butler attests that Foucault's position is incoherent. With gratitude to David Dudrick's critique of this paper (Dudrick 2005), it is clear that she is mistaken. Butler states her reasons as follows:

1. Foucault holds that 'bodies are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes' (Butler 1989:602)
2. Foucault is therefore committed to the claim that 'there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of any one of these specific regimes' (Butler 1989:602)
3. Foucault holds that the process of cultural construction [may be understood] on the model of "inscription" (Butler 1989:602)
4. Foucault is therefore committed to the claim that the 'body [has] an ontological status apart from' inscription (Butler 1989:602)
5. Discourse/power form a regime just in case they constitute the locus of inscription
6. Therefore (2) and (4) are inconsistent
7. Therefore (1) and (3) are inconsistent
8. Therefore Foucault's understanding of the body, as expressed in (1) and (3) is inconsistent." (Dudrick 2005:226)

However, all this only holds, as Dudrick explains, if, with Butler, one accepts that when Foucault speaks of the body he is guilty of logocentrism – a derogatory term suggesting that Foucault emphasises language or words to the exclusion or detriment of the matters to which they refer. As Dudrick says, "In order for Butler's paradox to hold, the claim she attributes to Foucault must concern bodies understood as objects." (Dudrick 2005:227) If, however, in (1), it is the body as a concept that is constituted within the nexus of power/discourse, that it is ideas to which Foucault refers and about which he writes, then Butler's assertion (2), that Foucault is committed to the claim that there is no materiality or ontological independence of the body outside of power/discourse no longer follows. As Dudrick points out, to support Butler we must actually read (1) as:

"1b. Foucault holds that *physiological bodies themselves* are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes." (Dudrick 2005:228)

Whereas, in fact, it is more in keeping with Foucault's own work on disciplinary power (Foucault 1995) and in the History of Sexuality (1998) to render (1) as:

"1c. Foucault holds that *bodies 'directly involved in a political field' – that is, souls, - themselves* are constituted within the specific nexus of culture or discourse/power regimes." (Dudrick 2005:228).

In this way, also, Butler's assertion (4) only holds if we agree with her assertion (1c). Contrary to Butler's reading suggesting that Foucault claims that the very 'materiality' of the body is invested with ideas, Dudrick (and this author) read Foucault's conception of sex as an Idea, something "formed inside the deployment of sexuality" (Foucault 1998:152), and quite separate from the anatomical actualities of organs, functions, pleasures etc. It is – to use her own term – the 'imaginary morphology' of which Foucault writes, and not the visceral body itself. Her criticisms, thus, fail.

CONCLUSION

Video sharing in online sexual social networking then, proves to be illustrative of Foucault's concepts of the body as Idea, of sexuality as discourse, for if the discourse of sexuality, bypassing professionals and undertaken between 'confessors' through sharing videos of the body performing sexual roles, constitutes the individual's performative body image of self, as discussed above, then it is not the physical body itself which is thus constituted, but the videoed body.

This is important because we are now free to understand the process of cultural construction on the model of "inscription," as Foucault enjoins us to. It transpires, from this perspective, that inscription and technological design and its outcomes are very much in play within online social networking. As Light et al point out, "The developments in social networking technologies, in their many variants, similarly inscribe specific understandings of the social world and act to enrol users in specific ways."

(Light et al 2008:302). This model of inscription holds that social construction *does* have physiological effects in a literal sense: “The intentional body is made out of the physiological body.” (Dudrick 2005:239). In short, the workings of disciplinary practices cause the physiological body to bear intentionality: the videoed body constituted through the performative and psychological power of the body image of self, encourages exercise and dietary regimes towards attaining physiological resemblance to pre-existing physical ideals of desirability. After choosing one of the ‘types’ in the multiple choice, experience both online and offline through the site encourages the individual not only to dress the part, and act the part, but to look the part naked, too. The auto-erotic video is public, shared, as if an Ancient Greek bath-house were walled with mirrors, and the choices one makes when signing up to Gaydar or Fitlads, for all that they may at the time reflect possible hoped-for selves or secret explorations of as yet unformed aspects of our offline identities, nonetheless through the experience of using the sites on a regular basis can have so profound an effect on the body image of self as to bring about physiological changes the better to resemble one’s fantasy, and therefore the more likely to gain entry to the weekly Top Ten.

Our examination of Foucauldian and Butlerian concepts of sexuality and performed gender roles, then, particularly in the notion of inscription where the two theorists seem to clash, has shown that video-sharing proves exemplary of the inscriptive power of the confessional discourse of sexual roles taking place in online sexual social networking.

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