The Lurking Class: From Parasocial Postal Clerks to Hypersocial Vloggers

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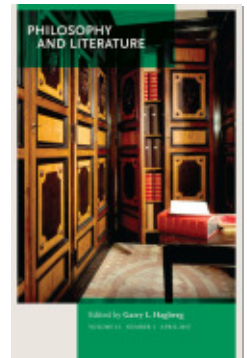
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Abstract. Philosophers and critics of social media warn us of a lurker's complex: the unsettling belief that "real" communication is happening on someone else's blog or Facebook page. But this complex is hardly new. In popular works of fiction, the bored postal clerk has been a recurring symbol of the alienated, modern gossip hound stuck on the fringes of someone else's discourse. Rereading these post office novelists can help us clarify and critique our own online behaviors.

Before becoming an internationally renowned sadhu espousing words of wisdom in an Indian forest, Sampath Chawla pulls down his pants. The wedding guests are horrified. His supervisor at the small-town post office fires him on the spot—it is, after all, his daughter's wedding.

In Kiran Desai's novel *Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard*, the oafish Sampath probably shouldn't have been invited to the wedding in the first place. At the post office he has been sulking for some time. "The post office. The post office. The post office. It made him want to throw up."[1] More troubling, he routinely opens other people's mail and reads their private letters throughout the workday. The letters give Sampath insights into the lives of his fellow villagers, seemingly better off than himself. The crude act at the wedding isn't the first time we see Sampath exposing something private.

The leering, eavesdropping postal clerk is a recurring trope in works of fiction. What makes the post office such a revealing setting is its privileged place in countries as diverse as India, Austria, England, and the United States. Jürgen Habermas lists the European post office as

one of the important institutions for encouraging a democratic public sphere of fraternity, rational debate, and political exchange.[2] At the post office, privileged men with shared interests came together to deliberate on and shape the common good, developing their ethical and political character along the way. That's one of the reasons that cultural theorist Bernhard Siegert believes the post office to be "something of an overlooked state apparatus."[3] Historians point to the post office as a critical arena for generating and fomenting the American Revolution.[4]

When men lived further away from these public spheres, they could still participate in the circulation of meaningful discourse through letters and telegrams that also passed through the post office. But as more and more communication was carefully sealed under wax and paper, Western society began to suffer what Ned Schantz calls "the hallucination of interiority."[5] Postal employees began to turn within, anxious to know what others were writing. Shut out from the possibilities of more meaningful public discourse, shut in with their own privately recorded thoughts, disaffected postal employees imagined themselves to be inferior to all the other people sending out messages across the world. This "hallucinating" cast of characters is what intrigued so many nineteenth- and twentieth-century readers, as we shall see.

In more recent times, philosophers and cultural studies theorists have observed the growth of lurking "parasocial" relationships online. The argument (first articulated by Horton and Wohl with regard to American television viewers in the 1950s[6]) is that we often find ourselves subtly engaged in what we perceive to be two-way relationships, whether with actors on television, celebrities on Twitter, or vloggers (people who broadcast video blogs) on YouTube. In reality, the social investment is usually one-sided. Such relationships inevitably prove to be parasitic, indelibly defined by loneliness, isolation, and idolatry. Spurring on these parasocial engagements is a common fear that meaningful communication is going on somewhere else.

The fictional characters discussed below believe that genuine, authentic communication is going on somewhere out there and that they, the postal clerks, might access it by crossing over to the other side of the counter. As parasocial viewers, readers, or lurkers online, we cling to a similar hope that we would be better off by getting invited to follow the right blogs or by clicking and befriending just the right people. But as the novelists of the post office world taught us long ago, such a promise is undeliverable.

I

In Richard Wright's novel *Lawd Today!* antihero Jake Jackson knows that he is about to be reprimanded. He's been called into the office to meet with the supervisor. Already without money, love, or hope, Jake is forced to answer the dreaded question: "Listen, Jackson, have you been doing anything that would make you unfit for the postal service?"[7]

He is unfit, of course. Woefully unfit. He drinks too much, physically and emotionally abuses his wife, and gambles away his paychecks in bridge games with his post office pals. Jackson is a deeply flawed character who lives in a tensely passive tense. Things happen *to* him, not *by* him. His black skin, poor social standing, and inevitable bitterness limit his ability to improve himself in realistic and meaningful ways. His unrequited hopes are continuously dashed by the outside, segregated world. At the post office he is also deeply bored.

> It was a huge, dark grey building, almost the color of the sky, occupying a square block. Just to look at it depressed Jake. A sudden sense of all the weary hours he had spent within those blackened walls filled him with foreboding. As he mounted the steps he wondered if he would have to go on this way year after year 'til he died. Was this *all*? Deep in him was a dumb yearning for something else; somewhere or other was something or other for him. But where? How? All he could see right now was an endless stretch of black postal days. . . . (Wright, pp. 115–16)

These "black postal days" might involve sorting, casing, stuffing: all indoors, in basements or backrooms. Wright knows this routine well. He worked temporary jobs at the Chicago post office on State and Dearborn Streets from 1929 to 1937. The days were long and monotonous. The fictional Jackson "became aware of the dark part of his blood and nerves, whispering, suggesting, counselling" (Wright, p. 131).

What, exactly, does the "dark part of his blood" counsel? The book ends before we get the answer, but the reader isn't given much reason to hope that people like Jackson will ever have real opportunities to turn their lives around. Too many of his friends and coworkers slowly waste away. "The post office," says Jackson, "ain't no place for a man with consumption" (Wright, p. 74).

Like Wright's postal deadbeat, Charles Bukowski's autobiographical Henry Chinaski is another troubled character with "a dumb yearning for something else." Another drunk, another gambler, another abusive lover who misses too much work and slowly falls apart after twelve years

working at the post office. "See these numbers painted on the end of the case?" his supervisor asks him threateningly. "Those numbers indicate the number of pieces that must be stuck in a minute. A 2-foot tray must be stuck in 23 minutes. You ran 5 minutes over." The supervisor takes special pains to point out the "23" painted on the tray, but Chinaski isn't so easily fooled. "'That 23 doesn't mean anything,' I said."[8]

It is precisely the meaningless of his job, relationships, and worldview that weighs Chinaski down. The mindless drudgery of day-to-day life becomes strangely dizzying. By the end, Bukowski's character suffers from undiagnosed, psychotic spells. "The spells lasted about a minute. I couldn't understand it. Each letter was getting heavier and heavier. The clerks began to have that dead grey look. I began to slide off my stool. My legs would barely hold me up. The job was killing me" (*PO*, p. 87).

Because of their ugly character flaws, neither Chinaski nor Jackson is a particularly sympathetic character. However, Bukowski takes some pains to point out that even good men are laid low by the mindless work of the post office. George Greene (G.G.) is a mail carrier, not a clerk, who works at the post office for forty years. "Neither liked nor disliked" at the post office, he gives out candy to the kids along his route in a wealthy Los Angeles neighborhood. "Good old G.G." starts to break down in his sixties. Unappreciated, unloved, he has an episode at the post office. "Several times during the morning I saw him falter," Bukowski writes. "He'd stop and sway, go into a trance, then snap out of it and stick some more letters" (*PO*, p. 28).

Nobody notices or seems to care. Chinaski offers help, to no avail. G.G. "put his head down, put his head down in his arms and began to cry softly" (*PO*, p. 29). After forty years of service to the post office, the drudgery finally sends him over the edge. Poor G.G. "The 'good guy.' The dedicated man. Knifed across the throat over a handful of circs from a local market—with its special: a free box of a brand name laundry soap, with the coupon, and any purchase over $3" (*PO*, p. 29).

Poverty, class, and the desire—or more often the need—to keep a steady income keep the postal workers on their appointed rounds. Reflecting on his colleagues who stayed behind at the post office, Bukowski writes his longtime publisher, John Martin, about the inevitable consequences, the "diminishing humanity of those fighting to hold jobs they don't want but fear the alternative worse."[9]

It is worth asking, then, what are some of the alternatives that the fictional and real-life postal clerks fear worse than their own steady descent? Sorting mail was never lucrative. But the truth is that worse

jobs have always been out there. Bukowski got paid more at the post office than he did at an art store, for example. Money and monotony can't tell the entire story. Otherwise we might sympathize with Sampath's father, who is fed up with his "good-for-nothing" son. If the post office job is so terrible, why not apply for a job at the hospital, the convent, or even the "Utterly Butterly Delicious Butter Factory"? (Desai, p. 42).

II

One unique characteristic of the post office counter is that it serves as a literal and literary window to a more interesting, richer world—particularly if the clerk is also a telegraphist. Then the constant yearning is fed by secret messages adventuring out into the world.

In his novel *The Post Office Girl*, Stefan Zweig describes Austrian ennui in the years between the two world wars. His heroine, Christine Hoeflehner, is portrayed as a simple young lady living with her mother in the country. Earning decent-enough pay at her regional post office, Christine has the occasional suitor outside of work, tries out dance lessons for a time, and is generally responsible and punctual at the office.

But by the middle of the novel, Zweig makes clear what the reader has already come to know: "Something was wrong with postal official Christine."[10] Like Jackson before her, and Chinaski after, Christine is bored of the post office life. Every day is like another; every day is filled with the same "sad look of administrative stinginess" (Zweig, p. 3), the same "black, blue, red, and indigo pencils, the clips and clasps" (p. 4), unfailingly efficient, "always the same, the same, the same" (p. 7). Christine's workday begins in bed, with eyes groping upward, fear at having woken up late and missed an appointment, "tired and vacant, waiting for the implacable command of the alarm clock" (p. 157).

The future is bleak, but unlike Jackson and Chinaski, Christine has an imagination that is constantly fired. The postcards arrive from faraway places. She sends and receives telegrams from all corners of the globe. Although each telegram is a constant reminder of her own unendurable position, collectively they help her "get out of harness for the first time, to be free," to feel life apart "from this meaningless grind, this deadly race against time" (Zweig, p. 18). Other people are free. Why not Christine?

She is weighed down not so much by the middling salary or the drudgery but by the regular reminders that so many other people seem to have it better than she does. Christine learns this lesson firsthand

when good fortune comes to her by way of a telegram. Her wealthy aunt and uncle invite her to stay with them in Vienna. She is showered with riches, dressed in the finest clothes, and paraded out in high society. Christine revels in the dance hall, with its "jarring, kneading, pummeling beat" (Zweig, p. 60) and its "insistent, coaxing rhythm" (p. 62), an altogether "enchanting room, luminous with candelabras and electric lights, pulsating with music and dancing" (p. 65). After a night of freedom, she feels as if "she stepped out of a bath, renewed and refreshed, every nerve quivering" (p. 65). But even bathwater gets stagnant after a time; the filth from the post office is only temporarily removed. Having tasted wealth, freedom, even sensual love, "the same, the same, the same," is all the more untenable when she returns, inevitably, back home.

The unnamed heroine in Henry James's novella *In the Cage* also works as a telegraphist, but in an upscale London post office. Strikingly similar to postal official Christine, James's central character passes her identical days with the same petty tasks, "a life among hams and cheeses."[11] She works in an "innermost cell of captivity, cage within a cage" (James, p. 10). The cage is an apt metaphor. Like Paul Laurence Dunbar's caged bird that "beats his wing," animals in a cage face a double shame. Confined by limits beyond their control, caged animals can see outside, to others who move more freely. The telegraphists also have contact—sometimes direct contact—with other people "out there," the ones who have the enviable freedom to lead productive and meaningful lives. All too often a "distinguished person makes a flower-like bend to the less fortunate, dropping fragrance" (p. 10). Genuine emotional connection is nearly impossible for James's caged telegraphist, "sandwiched there between the counter-clerk and the sounder" (p. 43). As the free-spirited Captain Everard drolly observes, "It must be an awful grind—for a lady" (p. 57).

The public and private spheres of the workers are equally diminished. The telegraphists who people the pages of Zweig's and James's post offices can only serve those on the outside who use words to build long-distance, meaningful relationships. Evocative words refer to faraway adventures outside the cage. In these letters, postcards, and telegrams are coded allusions to caring relationships, happy, passionate, and sometimes illicit loves. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the post office was seen as the place that connected people, encouraging deeper bonds and loving relationships (Hewitt, p. 10).

Love was on the minds of many female telegraphists–turned–romance authors. By the middle of the nineteenth century, women were beginning to fill the skilled positions at the post office that required writing

various communications and decoding messages from around the world. For many European and American women this brush with the public sphere was only a brief window between leaving their parents and getting married, after which they often left post office work behind. Historian Thomas Jepsen points out that fictional stories written by women and published in *Harper's*, *Atlantic*, and appropriately, *The Telegrapher* tell of flirtations and budding messages of love wired out by educated and audacious women who worked in post offices.[12]

In James's novella, Captain Everard carries on a lengthy affair with Lady Bradeen, facilitated by the post office's speed and efficiency for delivering words, in this case the secret language of high society and its "squanderings and graspings" (James, p. 18). Though Captain Everard and Lady Bradeen write in mysterious languages, Christine cracks the code, reduced as she is to living out her private and public life in a voyeuristic, imaginative space. What she most longs for is to be on the other side of the cage. To be where the action is, where the money is. The two are not quite synonymous. Both Zweig and James make a distinction between money that allows for spontaneous, creative movement and money that stifles that same freedom. Their characters revel in the money that "casually flutters into your hands," in contrast to money carefully earned and accumulated "so patiently, coin by dark, heavy coin" (Zweig, pp. 80–81).

James's character shares the belief that "one is more in the right place where the money was flying than where it was simply and meagerly nesting" (James, p. 36). Of particular interest to the postal workers is what James describes as "flying money." It is the "gleam of gold" (p. 19) that fires their imagination, "expensive feelings" (p. 14) that point to a richer, more mysterious existence than the one the clerks unhappily foresee for themselves. The fictional postal clerks are doomed to a "world of whiffs and glimpses," "brushed by the bouquet," without hope of picking the daisies (p. 17). Crushed by the lack of opportunities, shut out from the world they see every day, the postal workers bide their time. "It was intolerable . . . and yet they tolerated it" (Zweig, p. 218).

Zweig's contemporary, psychologist Alfred Adler, also observed this seemingly common experience of feeling worse off than others. Adler believed that the "inferiority complex," a phrase he coined, was one of the most noteworthy neuroses in the twentieth century. The inferiority complex is distinctly social in nature. Sufferers do not feel inferior to some objective standard but, for Adler at least, they feel inferior *to others* on the horizon of their everyday world. Fictional postal clerks were not the only ones to suffer from it.

III

We know enough of the aforementioned authors to say with some confidence that they, too, believed that something more interesting was going on outside the post office. A deeper relationship exists between the fictional characters of the post office and the writers who create them. Whether they are born with a losing hand or simply "playing the loser," as Sartre puts it,[13] the characters and writers long for escape to the place where the better discourse, bigger action, and "flying money" are perceived to be.

For Wright and Bukowski the advantages of choosing a creative career over the menial work of the post office are obvious. But that choice is also a false dichotomy. Like all government agencies and bureaucracies, the post office has its midlevel management jobs and its upper-level, socially respected positions. What we see is no longer the inferiority complex in the workplace. For the luckier, better-educated, bourgeois postal workers, the inferiority complex seems to have morphed into something else. Robert Service, a banker turned poet, calls it the "author complex."

> There was my Escape Idea cropping up again. And at the back of my mind always the Author Complex. Perhaps I could dodge my destiny of being a pot-bellied banker, and even publish a little book. At my own expense, of course. I might become one of those amateur authors who are such a nuisance. It would salve my vanity. An author. A poor wretch with dreams, but somehow different from the crowd. All this I thought in the moonlight of mountain magnificence; inspired by sublime scenery to sordid schemes of self-enrichment, because in the end they meant escape to freedom.[14]

It seems strange and somewhat disingenuous to think of educated postal officials or "pot-bellied" bankers desperate for some kind of "escape to freedom." We might ask ourselves: what exactly are they escaping to? The first thing Service does after quitting his job is isolate himself in a cabin in the woods in the Yukon Territory. It hardly seems like the kind of glamorous freedom dreamed up by postal official Christine or James's caged telegraphist.

Service is refreshingly open about salving his vanity through writing. Bukowski and Wright also have some sense of a secret talent that they, and not all of their colleagues, share. It's not quite the inferiority complex from which so many of their characters suffer. Instead, the author complex is closely related to another neurosis that Adler diagnoses: the

superiority complex. History is rife with authors who become enchanted with their own "special magical power," as Adler describes the complex. Before writing his most famous books, Gustave Flaubert noted, "I have the infirmity of being born with a special language, to which I alone have the key."[15] In many ways the authors mirror their envious fictional clerks, who privately yearn to join the magical discussions taking place somewhere on the other side of the cage.

As readers of these novels, we are not immune to the complex of craving the freer, more meaningful discourse we perceive in others. Like the female telegraphists in James's and Zweig's stories, readers of novels since the 1800s have taken a special interest in the private lives of others. Other philosophers of literature have pointed out this uncomfortable connection. Jeremy Hawthorn observes that "both the reader and the telegraphist intercept other peoples' private messages."[16] Schantz also reminds us that "narrative interest since the novel has been above all an interest in the private lives of other people—the interest of gossip," albeit "gossip with an impossibly well-informed friend" (*Gossip*, p. 4). We leeringly read books in order to slip into someone else's most private thoughts. Quite often such duplicity is rewarded: by the end of a good character's story we may feel as though we have made a new, like-minded friend.

In the second half of the twentieth century, as television replaced the post office as the most influential medium for digging into the private lives of others, new labels and behaviors were attached to the old neuroses. Drawing on the work of W. J. McGuire's discussion of television, Jonathan Cohen discusses how "mass communication 'connects the individual with various human networks' by providing consumers with a sense of being a 'part of the human drama.'"[17] But many television viewers who believed they were "part of the human drama" in unique and desirable ways seemed to be fooling themselves. Whether they were adolescents watching their favorite television stars[18] or adults watching the television news,[19] many chronic television viewers were lonely, their loneliness characterized by "a *discrepancy* between the amount of interaction individuals need and the amount that they perceive is fulfilled," in this case by TV.[20]

Like the readers and literary postal clerks of the previous century, television viewers began vicariously participating in the "activities, feelings, and thoughts" of the people they followed.[21] In their living rooms and bedrooms, with no one else around, television viewers identified with the seemingly more adventurous characters they watched on television.

However, it seems more accurate to use Hoffner and Buchanan's phrase, "wishful identification,"[22] when describing this one-way connection. Even after turning off the television, viewers continued to believe that their favorite television characters were living meaningfully or adventurously and were therefore worthy of emulation. More than emulation, viewers began to see themselves not as passive observers but as active participants in a thoughtful, ongoing dialogue with their role models.

Television viewers shared something with the authors, readers, and fictional characters of the post office. They all pried open windows into the lives of others, where they perceived authentic dialogue was taking place. But as many philosophers and cultural theorists point out, these wishful identifications were usually parasocial relationships. The dialogue was really only a monologue, and the monologue was an analogue to Adler's inferiority complex.

IV

As the primary locus of social discourse moves from the post office to television to social networks on the Internet, we see a similar trend develop around a continuously expanding celebrity culture. Like the fictional postal clerks of days gone by, idolatrous fans suffer many of the inferiority complexes that come with "wishfully identifying" with the celebrities they follow online. But if we imagine ourselves to be involved in authentic conversations with celebrities like LeBron James or Margaret Atwood, we may again be fooling ourselves. "Conversation implies at least two-way communication, social rather than parasocial relations, and dual access and awareness."[23] As nonparticipating "lurkers" on news boards and Twitter feeds, our attention online is largely parasocial.

For the Robert Services of the twenty-first century, blogging can be an easily accessible forum for launching oneself into wider discourse. Ethnographic studies of a range of blogging sites show an often lively exchange that is more social than parasocial. Readers and writers work together in developing political critiques, recipes, and medical advice.[24] Blogging, it would seem, can lead to meaningful relationships, shared interests, spirited dialogue: all features important to developing a genuine community. Though a sense of community might exist for some writers, many others find that their contributions to the world of online discourse fall on deaf ears and blind eyes. Manuel Castells observes how "*this form of mass self-communication is closer to 'electronic autism' than to actual*

communication."[25] Castells compares blogs to messages in bottles, adrift on the ocean with only the slimmest chance of reaching some faraway, unexpected destination. Blogging for many still offers little more than a one-way ticket to one-way relationships.

In the last ten years, video versions of blogging, or "vlogging," have grown rapidly in popularity. Like segments on traditional television news programs, individuals are on camera espousing their views. One important difference, however, is that the person often videotapes him- or herself, commonly at home, and may lack any traditionally acknowledged broadcasting credentials. Another important distinction is that vlogging "is a form whose persistent direct address to the viewer inherently invites feedback."[26] Viewers can, and frequently do, respond to the ideas discussed. Like the blog, this new form of knowledge circulation seems to be something more than parasocial. Vlogging can be a creative act, one that is "a social process, rather than a static individual attribute."[27]

By far, the most transformative space for promoting vlogging is YouTube. Started in 2005 and sold to Google in 2006, YouTube, with its urge to "broadcast yourself," is described as "the epicenter of today's participatory culture"[28] and is in a position to "play a key role in helping to construct meaning, communities of interest, and the frameworks of evaluation so important to the cultural experience."[29] On YouTube one finds many reincarnations of the postal dreams of yore: common people seeking wider relevance in the circulation of social, political, or aesthetic discourse. On YouTube are the cherished "most viewed" vlogs, where the meaningful dialogue is perceived to exist. YouTube succeeds at generating spaces where people can comment on and discuss what they have viewed. It certainly appears that "people do use sites such as YouTube to enhance their social circles and social lives."[30] Exchanging pen and paper for the video camera has never been easier.

However, while YouTube appears to be genuinely participatory (and is experienced as such for many), the great majority of YouTube users are passive lurkers, watching videos privately, occasionally scrolling down to read two or three comments without caring to participate themselves. In that sense YouTube users "treat it more as a television than as an interactive, communicative site."[31] With all the fluctuating ideas and discourse available one or two clicks away, YouTube viewers are like nineteenth-century postal clerks, inundated with ideas from all over the globe. Rather than throw themselves into the circulation of discourse, most viewers content themselves with parasocial relationships in what Gunnar Iversen terms "a hypersocial place." He writes, "YouTube is an

ocean of images and sound, offering all kinds of experiences. Letting your fingertips do the traveling, you have access to a mobile space that can take you anywhere—and most often takes you nowhere."[32] As our literary guides long ago described, the long-term effects can be mind-numbing.

For the multinational companies that encourage these parasocial relationships, the effects can be profitable. Alongside the authors and characters we idolize and wishfully identify with, we imagine ourselves as comrades-in-arms in a righteous revolution. But money still matters on YouTube; words of wisdom are circulated cheaply like coupons in the mail. It is noteworthy that when Robert Service left the bank to become a writer, his supervisor wholeheartedly supported him. A banker through and through, the manager understood that words were money and money meant power in the circulation of discourse. If Service could make thousands of dollars outside the bank, he should be congratulated even if the supervisor couldn't completely comprehend it all:

> "All this money," he said. "What does it represent?"
> "Verse," I said. "Just verse."
> He looked bewildered. "It's a strange world." He sighed and scratched his head; and I agreed it was indeed a strange world. (*Ploughman*, p. 346)

In Zweig's novel, Christine makes a suicide pact with her lover. They intend to run off with the post office's money and kill themselves when they get found out. Christine understands the risks. She won't fool herself anymore. The illusion of freedom may be fun for a while, but "there's something missing in every plan. . . . Everyone forgets something" (Zweig, p. 256).

As nightly lurkers in multiple social networks online, we have become the modern-day postal clerks, helplessly longing to contribute relevantly to the conversation somewhere beyond our reach. We have yet to adequately answer Jonathan Cohen's question about "why people talk to people they don't like or have nothing to gain from, why they search 'the net' without knowing what they are seeking, or why they still watch TV even when 'there's nothing on'" (Cohen, p. 47).

Consistently engaged in parasocial relationships in a hypersocial world, we enviously look on at others' online discourse or else we reach out to nobody ourselves, our words unread like unopened mail in the dead letter office in Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener." We can try to slip through the magical firewall where all the meaningful discourse

takes place, but "there's something missing in every plan." Inevitably, we discover that this secret kingdom of meaningful discourse is somewhere just beyond our reach. And even if we are lucky enough to access that enchanted realm, we know, like the heroes in Zweig's book, we'll probably get caught.

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Many thanks to Bill Irwin and Aryn Martin for their edits and suggestions on earlier drafts.

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