

International public relations: A comparative analytical review

Jeremiah Iko Paul *

Department of Marketing, School of Business Studies, The Federal Polytechnic Idah, Kogi State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

With increasing globalization, shared situations transcend national lines and contiguous boundaries as key factors. Globalization has dissolved national boundaries into a distinct set of situational particulars. There is an unrestrained phenomenal growth of public relations. This growth is really about the increasing presence of international institutional structures to define its practice and to legitimize it globally. International public relations structures accurately reflect the diversity of worldwide communication processes both in theory and in practice. International Public Relations presents issues related to cultural, social and economic factors that must be considered. The cultural differences among societies must affect public relations practices by peoples of different societies. This paper presents a comprehensive discussion of the structures for international public relations from a global perspective putting into cognizance the approaches.

Keywords: International Public Relations; Culture; Globalization

1. Introduction

Public relations have come of age around the world. In the 20th century, the United States took the lead in defining its practice and formalizing its structure. But in the new millennium, public relations is blossoming from a U.S.-based industry into a global industrial phenomenon spanning countries with vastly different cultures, economic and political systems, and levels of development. The number of public relations agencies and organizations that have sprung up around the world in the past few decades are proof that public relations is recognized and formalized around the world, from the United States to sub-Saharan Africa to Asia (Curtin, 2006). With the rise of globalisation and international business expansion, being fluent in diverse business practices, understanding global economic conditions and engaging an array of cultural norms of an international society are high priorities for today's organisations.

2. Theory

2.1. International Public Relations: A Litany of Definitions

Scores of definitions of the term International Public Relations have been offered over the past decades. But while definitions of Public Relations may vary greatly according to the orientation of who is defining it, most authors and scholars on the subject matter seem to agree on the definition of International Public Relations. International Public Relations (IPR) according to Ikechukwu Nwosu (1990), *is the deliberately planned systematic and researched based activities of an individual or marketing organization or nation which are aimed at maintaining sound productive and international relations with international publics, such as customers, agents, governments, business organizations and others.* Ekeanyanwu (2008), sees International Public Relations as effective, proactive and productive Public Relations in multinational organizations and nations, which are deliberately aimed at sustaining the confidence of their international publics in an attempt to enhance international relations and corporate reputation. The above definitions

* Corresponding author: Jeremiah Iko Paul

suggest that International Public Relations is aimed at winning friends, getting support or sympathy of international relations through evaluation of their opinion concerning one's actions. It also aims at achieving common interest; corporate, government and other public approval and understanding.

According to Culbertson (1996), International Public Relations involves Public Relations practices in at least four different realms:

- International organizations, e.g. UN, World Bank, IMF
- Intergovernmental relations e.g. diplomatic recognition, alliance formation/disintegration, and sanctions/embargoes.
- Transnational economic transaction e.g. investment trading, financing of multinational corporations.
- Interactions among citizens of different national e.g. through sports, tourism, arts, films, entertainment etc.

3. The Objectives of International Public Relations

Obviously, the world is growing smaller and smaller everyday due largely to the advancement in Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs). Beyond becoming what I call "Villagization of the Globe", ICTs have also made the world flat. The flattening process has made it possible that the traditional boundaries that distinguished one nation from the other are gradually disappearing. And so, events in faraway countries now have significance in other nations that may not really be connected to such a nation in terms of formal relationships (Ekeanyanwu, 2008). This is where IPR comes in and here lies its major role and objectives as a discipline. The roles and objectives of International Public Relations cannot be overemphasized.

- The objectives of International Public Relations involve effective communication and persuasion towards winning support for our actions and policies in the global committee of nations.
- One other major objective of International Public Relations is the winning and sustaining of loyalty, good citizenship and respect for governments and leadership of independent nations.
- International Public Relations helps to build patriotism amongst citizens in the country and in those in Diaspora.
- International Public Relations also aims at combating and upsetting false propaganda against one's government and state.
- International Public Relations ensures a steady two-way flow of communication between one nation and the other.
- Another unique objective of International Public Relations is that of achieving and sustaining media understanding and cooperation amongst players and stakeholders in the global arena.
- International Public Relations also aims to identify more or less universal problems that challenge many or all nations, and to search for generic principles that apply widely.
- International Public Relations helps to build new relationships that address upcoming and emergent situations as well as help to maintain greater cooperation, tolerance, and mutual understanding among people with different basic beliefs, values and ways of thinking.
- International Public Relations aids us in making or winning friends for our nation as well as maintaining and sustaining such friendships and relationships.
- Winning positive legislation, attitudes, and images for your country, institutions or organizations is another strategic objective of International Public Relations.
- International Public Relations also helps in attracting new businesses, institutions and organizations for your nation.
- International Public Relations helps in balancing the global and the local in multinational business relations.

4. Three Approaches to International Public Relations

The concept of International Public Relations has continued to attract the attention of Public Relations practitioners and scholars all over the world (Wakefield, 1996). Bolan (1992) has also noted that the growth of IPR is both phenomenal and haphazard. Joseph (1990) is, however, of the view that more and more countries are adopting American or European PR principles and building a profession along their own cultural lines. He also noted that other nations relegate PR to mere technical tasks, and some other business leaders in countries like Japan still think the practice is all hype. There is also no consensus on what the field entails. Common and available literature in this field has been anecdotal or descriptive. These issues make it imperative to discuss the theoretical foundations for IPR so as to properly focus on the practice because anything that cannot be explained by theory does not really exist.

The first and earliest approach to international PR research was led by Grunig and his colleagues as they conducted their **Excellence Study** to investigate best practices of public relations in three countries including USA, UK, and Canada (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002). In general, this theory advocates the elevation of public relations roles in organizational decision making and strategic planning since PR managers take on the boundary spanning role, the function that helps organizations gather inputs from external stakeholders. In this sense, organizations that demonstrate excellent PR practices would work symmetrically with their publics. Their idea of symmetrical public relations has been tested in various parts of the world (Grunig J. E., Grunig, Sriramesh, Huang, & Lyra, 1995). While this approach to international PR research seems solid with strong empirical evidence in many countries, several scholars caution that this generic approach may lead to ethnocentricity (see, for example, Choi & Cameron, 2005; Wakefield, 2010).

The **second** trend in international PR research appearing in the literature is **the political economy approach** (Sriramesh & Duhe, 2009). Pioneered by Sriramesh and his colleagues, who to a certain extent also believe in the generic principles of international PR, this political economy approach identifies environmental factors that affect the implementation of PR principles in a given context. These environmental factors include culture, political system, economic system, political economy, media system, activism, and public diplomacy (Sriramesh, 2010). Even though Sriramesh and his colleagues who propose this approach have worked closely with Grunig and his team, this paper would consider Sriramesh's approach a distinct one given that the consideration of environmental factors makes the model unique and more sophisticated in its own right. However, as the model itself suggests, there are several environmental factors in a given case. It might be difficult for practitioners and researchers to discern them in a given case.

The **third** (final) approach to international PR is based on **critical/cultural theory** (Curtin & Gaither, 2006). Central to this approach is the process of identity negotiation between the PR practitioners/organizations and the target publics. In order to understand the process of international PR in a given case, this approach explains that we need to analyze how meanings are produced, consumed, represented, and regulated to form identities. The main argument of this approach is for international PR practitioners and researchers to avoid ethnocentrism in applying a set model (or Western thoughts for the most part) in a given case and perpetuate the cultural imperialism on the targeted stakeholders. While the ideology grounding this approach makes sense and should be actually used to guide international PR practices and research, the analytical framework seems loose and subjective.

5. Opportunities of International Public Relations for the 21st Century

There are many opportunities following the adoption of International Public Relations in Multinational Organizations as well as other smaller industries that get involve in international trade or business. However, based on Maureen Taylor (2001), three of such opportunities are identified while Ekeanyanwu (2008) adds a fourth one. These opportunities are discussed below:

- Because of research skills in Public Relations, PR serves as the eyes, ears and voice of the organizations (Taylor, 2001). With Public Relations, organizations are able to follow up on societal perceptions as it concerns the organization. This also helps such organization to remain competitive as it regularly monitors public opinion on the activities and policies of the organization.
- Astute Public Relations practitioners are valuable resources for their organizations because of their ability to save such organizations intimes of transitions and uncertainties (Taylor, 2001). Public relations experts are better leaders during transitions and uncertainties and do help their organizations to maintain sanity and operational capacity during this period.
- According to Maureen Taylor (2001), Public Relations also has opportunity to positively affect the developing nations of the world through participation in development communication, nation building and avoiding war between states and amongst different actors on the global political scene.
- International Public Relations according to Ekeanyanwu (2008) could also be applied by nations and their nationals even in the Diaspora, which are on the brink of image collapse to remedy such a situation.

6. Challenges of International Public Relations

Because of the varying forms of public relations in much of the world, the field is fraught with inconsistency and varied international views of its purpose and practice. There is still no overarching definition of public relations, and there is little consistency among practitioners for describing their profession. In Asia, public relations professionals commonly see their work as tantamount to sales and marketing, in Latin America event planning might be viewed as public

relations, and in the United States it is often called a strategic management function. The gap between these forms of public relations is evident in the lack of a truly international public relations theory that addresses disparate nations, varying economic and sociopolitical systems, and different cultures. Recent scholarship has made progress toward addressing some of these needs. Still, the practice of public relations is far more progressive than its scholarship. As a caveat, you'll find that public relations resist easy categorizations. It's too new and its practice too uneven to generate a uniform and logical narrative. Instead, you might find the discussion of international public relations in this work unpredictable, complex, and even illogical at times. This is the peril of studying public relations around the globe; it rarely makes sense, even less so when terms such as *international* and *culture* are applied. The range of publics in the public relations arena is one of the factors that complicate efforts to provide a functional definition of the field, tilting it toward normative approaches. Skeptics of normative approaches and theories contend that there is a difference between how things should be and how things are, and that's where normative theories fall short. Among the challenges any communication apparatus faces in some developing countries are geographic size, ethnic and religious diversity, and linguistic barriers. The African continent comprises more than 50 countries and more than 1,000 different languages (African Cultural Center, n.d.) and as uneven a level of development as one might imagine. In the Sudan alone, for example, there are an assumed 400 languages and dialects (Federal Research Division, n.d.). Ponder how a public relations practitioner might launch a public relations campaign to promote national unity in the Sudan, where the number of languages is overshadowed by development statistics that would preclude many Western public relations tactics. According to the CIA (2006) *World Fact book* statistics for Sudan from 2003, 40% of the population was illiterate, 40% lived below the poverty line, 0.9% of its citizens had Internet access, and average income was 115,328.90 Sudan dinars (US\$460). U.S. scholars have noted that "there is little opportunity for practicing public relations in the Western sense of the term" in African countries such as Sudan (Van Leuven & Pratt, 1996, p. 95). When Harare, Zimbabwe, embarked on a major public relations campaign to improve the city's image, one resident said, "No amount of public relations would stop sewer lines from blocking and roads from developing potholes" ("Harare Embarks," 2002.), demonstrating that public relations is far less important than basic human needs.

The complexities of international public relations are also reflected by a cultural emphasis on social relations, notably in parts of the Middle East and Asia. In the former, it's important to take into account the historical and ideological context of the region, often based on the Qur'an in Islamic countries. Cultural differences give rise to distinctly different communication traditions between most Arabic nations and the United States. In Arab nations, "a press release, for example, may read more like a political proclamation than a news announcement" (Zaharna, 1995, p. 255). United Arab Emirates practitioners view public relations not as a communication function but as a social relations one, placing a great deal of emphasis on receiving delegations (Creedon, Al-Khaja, & Kruckeberg, 1995). Most Egyptian universities don't differentiate between sales, marketing, and public relations, and practitioners consequently often view public relations as a hospitality-related function (Keenan, 2003). In the Middle East, hospitality functions for dignitaries have constituted public relations (Ayish & Kruckeberg, 1999). Guest relations and translation services were similarly early forms of public relations in China (Culbertson & Chen, 2003). In Singapore, public relations often is seen as a sales and marketing function and is used heavily by the government (Chay-Németh, 2003).

7. The Development of Public Relations in Nigeria

A variety of books and authors define public relations differently, but the most comprehensive definition is that offered by the "Public Relations News" (the weekly newsletter of the industry). PR News says PR is: "The management function, which evaluates public attitudes, identifies the policies and procedures of an organization with the public interest, and executes a program of action (and communicates) to earn public understanding and acceptance." The history of Public Relations in Nigeria is a good story of a discipline that meant nothing from the beginning and later took its pride of place in business and governmental affairs. And so, after 27 years of struggling, the Public Relations industry in Nigeria had a settled case when the Federal Military Government of Nigeria enacted Decree No. 16 of June 1, 1990, which established the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations as a full-fledged professional body for the regulation of the Public Relations industry in Nigeria.

7.1. The History of Public Relations in Nigeria and the Government Sector

Nwosu (1990), one of the gifted scholars of the discipline, credited the British with introducing Public Relations in Nigeria in the 1940s. According to him, organized Public Relations in Nigeria began within Government agencies on January 1, 1944, when the British colonial administrators set up the first Public Relations office in Lagos. By 1948, as reported by Alozie (2004): *The Colonial Administration established Public Relations outlets in the regional capitals of Ibadan, Enugu, and Kaduna. At independence, the government established a full-fledged Federal Ministry of Information and an in-house Public Relations Department at each ministry. At present Nigeria has thirty-six states. Each has its own ministry of information, headquartered in the state capital. Every federal and state ministry, as well as most government*

department and parastatals, maintains an in-house Public Relations component. The state governments have information officers posted outside their capitals. The officers of the federal and state ministries of information and departments are responsible for informing the public of government activities and policies. They also analyze feedback in order to refine their messages to further promote government policies and to attract favourable responses from the public.

Ajai (2005) also notes that “During the War II in 1942, the Colonial Office established the first Information Centre in Lagos and other cities to handle information between troops at the war fronts and their families back home. Mr. Harold Cooper worked tirelessly to set up these Information Centres. It was from this humble beginning the Information Department grew as a government ministry.” In summary, scholars and historians all agree that the Public Relations industry in Nigeria started in government business and affairs before spreading to the private sector where it blossomed.

8. The Growth of Public Relations in the United States

According to Seitel (2007), the US Public Relations experience dates back to the founding of the American union. Public Relations at this level was basically used to influence public opinion, manage communications, and persuade individuals to follow a course of action and support the American Revolution. The efforts leading to the creation of the American Constitution also owed part of its success story to the history of Public Relations in America. The founding fathers of the American Constitution used the powers inherent in public relations to win support or persuade others to see reasons with their own point of view. The practice of the discipline continued to percolate in the 19th Century although with evidences of negativism as demonstrated in the “Press agency”, and “let the public be damned” philosophies that came up during this period.

We shall consider the development of Public Relations in the United States using the Four-stage Model of PR development as captured by J. Grunig and Hunt (1984) thus:

8.1. First Stage: The Manipulation Stage

This is the stage of initial development of Public Relations whereby former journalists acted as press agents with an emphasis on one-way communication and too often an emphasis on unethical media manipulation, propaganda and persuasion. It is usually regarded that this stage was the antecedent to the modern Public Relations that took hold in the 1880s. Notorious in the use of this First Stage were names like Amos Kendall and Phineas T. Barnum.

8.2. Second Stage: The Upsurge and “Take Off” Stage

This stage was less manipulative but hyperbole and exaggerated claims were part of the tools used by PR practitioners as the practice of Public Relations spread in the US. These problems created the unrealistic expectations by investors leading to the stock market crash in 1929 (Cutlip, 1994).

8.3. Third Stage: The Rethinking Stage

At this stage, members of the dominant coalition about the roles and functions of PR started having a rethink of some of their earlier positions on issues related to Public Relations. This stage also saw the rise of professionalism in the practice of PR. Also, at this stage more managers began placing more emphasis on research and two way symmetric communications. In-house specialists also began to displace outside consultants in dealing with Public Relations matters.

8.4. Latest Stage: The Stage of Sustained Growth and Increasing Emphasis on Two-Way Communication

In the United States, this stage has brought about Integrated communication which is more than IMC because of the emphasis that the former (IC) places on internal organizational communication (Caywood, 1997). Because two way communication activities are associated with the growth of free markets and democracy, PR has continued to grow in the US. Seitel (2007) argues that Public Relations has a humble beginnings about 100 years ago in the US but the practice today is big business with the following facts:

- The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), formed in 1947, boasts a Growing membership of 20,000 in 116 chapters worldwide (Seitel, 2007).
- The Public Relations Student Society of America, formed in 1968 to facilitate communications between students interested in the discipline, has about 8,500 Student members at 270 College Chapters (Seitel, 2007).
- More than 5,300 U.S. companies, 2,100 trade associations, 187 foreign Embassies, and 130 Federal Government Departments, bureaus, agencies, and commissions have Public Relations departments (Seitel, 2007).

- More than 3,000 Public Relations agencies exist in the United States, with more than 700 Public Relations firms residing in 80 foreign countries (Seitel, 2007:37).

Seitel (2007) also continues to argue that the scope of modern Public Relations practice is very big and that this may have resulted in the various labels associated with PR such as external Affairs, Corporate Communications, Public Affairs, Corporate Relations and a variety of confusing euphemisms (Seitel, 2007:37).

9. European Public Relations: An Evolving Paradigm

According to Hazleton and Kruckeberg (1996) cited in Culbertson and Chen (1996), Public Relations in the European Union is an evolving paradigm that lacks a definite Shape and structure. What we find in place is Public Relations heavily tainted by Britain's philosophy of the practice. We shall take an overview of this by considering the following points below that define the evolving nature of the European Public relations:

- The most sophisticated Public Relations in the European Union is practiced by the British probably because of its close association with the United States. Literature supports the assertion that there are clear similarities between Public Relations in the UK and the US and what is largely found in operation in the European Unionized the UK's idea of Public Relations. Second the linguistic and cultural ties between the United States and the United Kingdom have also contributed immensely in the diffusion of US Public Relations practice to the UK and consequently the EU. All the above implies that the content of European Public Relations is largely United States based. In other words, European Public Relations is "imported" from the United States through Britain.
- The continuing dynamics and formalization of the European Union will strongly influence, if not dictate, how Pan-European Public Relations will evolve because of movements and other socio-cultural issues that cut across Europe's boundaries. So, industry watchers are waiting to see how this plays out.
- Third, as European member nations continue to evolve, there will be increase in the complexity and turbulence of the environment of Public Relations practice. This turbulence and complexity is reflected in an increasing demand for Public Relations in Europe and a corresponding growth in the number of Public Relations practitioners there.
- The EU will place greater economic strain on the existing European Public Relations firms, especially mid-sized ones that do not have resources to invest in the new Pan-European marketplace.
- The emergent joint venture arrangements in the EU will create a need for PR in the areas of institutional identity, employee relations and community relations.
- Increase in goods and services, and the organizations that produce them will also result in communication goals related to marketing and community acceptance which will invariably increase demand for Public Relations because of the expected competition that comes from increased market.
- The EU's new "Euro-brands" will require that PR contracts be awarded centrally because European companies will want global PR strategies that can provide sub strategies tailored to national markets (Stoltz, 1991).
- Increased business competition will also demand a new wave of financial Public Relations specialists and strategies for both established and emerging organizations.
- The facilitation of technology transfer throughout Europe is another factor impacting the development of Public Relations in the EU member nations.
- The EU will ultimately define and unify European Public Relations into a "Pan-European" practice – at least at the strategic macro level. This may result into something substantially different from what is currently in UK and the US.
- No one should assume that other EU member nations will copy and practice British and US dominated kind of PR as it is now. There are enough room for them to play around brands, trends and thus evolve a unique structure to reflect their situation and environment.
- European Public Relations may not develop fully until a common European culture concurrently develops. This may look impossible considering the cracks that are already manifesting in the political and economic structures of the EU.
- Many Public Relations scholars and practitioners conclude that Public Relations practice is socially, as well as culturally and geopolitically specific. Thus, Public Relations practice and theory can be pan-European or (pan-global) only in so far as a concomitant social, cultural and geopolitical commonality evolves throughout Europe (or worldwide).

The Public Relations industry in Europe is unevenly developed amongst the nations that constitute the European Union. Part of the explanation for this is the sociopolitical cum cultural differences that exist in these member nations. Currently, United States and British Public Relations firms dominate the industry in Europe and so the Public Relations

practised in America is glaring visible in parts of Europe. However, lobbying and Public Relations in the European Union have dramatically expanded during the past decade and in the 21st Century. Billions of dollars have been spent on this too. This is also partly the reason for the survival or the success story of the PR industry in Europe. The Middle East has remained a hot bed of crises for decades now. The much desired peace between Israel and its neighbours has remained elusive owing to stringent and uncompromising standpoints from both parties. The other nations who are not directly engaged in war are not at peace either. There have been many roadmaps to peace but

none seem to have worked or likely to work because it does appear that the main actors do not really wish to see the roadmaps work. In the midst of all these, how does PR play up? According to Alanazi (1996), cited in Culbertson and Chen (1996), "Public Relations have entered a new era in the Arab world.

In the minds of many, Arab nations use Public Relations as a 'weapon' to achieve political goals. The 1991 Gulf War, pitting the United States and its allies against Iraq, provided many examples." Alanazi (1996) also observes that the western model of Public Relations has a short history in the Middle East. He notes for example, that systematic Public Relations came into Saudi Arabia with the arrival of international oil companies to exploit the rich oil resources of the oil rich nation. This goes to support our earlier thesis that International Public Relations finds best and practical expression in Multinational Corporations, hence our argument that IPR is Multinational Public Relations.

10. Middle East Public Relations

The Middle East Public Relations currently focuses on engaging dialogue and bringing peace between Israel and Palestine. It also focuses on ethno-religious dialogues in the region. Public Relations practitioners in the Middle East could implement their skills by assuming the role of educating and re-educating the United States public on the Middle East (Samra, 2001). The need for peace in the Middle East obviously drives the Public Relations practices there. This has given rise to a lot of peace conferences, religious dialogue, ethnic round tables etc. These are put together by Public Relations practitioners to engage the public in finding lasting solutions to the Middle East problems or at least ameliorate the adverse effects on the economy and people in those regions. However, some scholars have observed that planning and organizing for the peace

conferences etc could present challenging scenarios for the western trained Public Relations specialist. It gives such specialists the opportunity to explore new trends and frontiers in dealing with similar issues. The United States plays a major role in the Middle East conflict as an interested mediator. Therefore, the resolution of the situation is to the US national interest. This is the major reason every US Government spends millions of dollars in the region to protect its immediate and future interests.

However, the average US citizen knows very little of anything else outside of the US. Geography and traveling are not peculiar hobbies for US citizens. Therefore, Public Relations practitioners should implement their skills beginning at the local level. To begin, as noted by Samra (2001:689), cited in Heath (Ed.) (2001), they could assume the role of educating and reeducating the American public about the real issues involved in the Middle East conflicts and the best practical way to tackle such issues. According to Samra (2001), the mutual benefits to this include:

10.1. A Deeper Appreciation of Middle Eastern History and its Contribution to Western Civilization

1. Such massive reorientation of the US public by PR practitioners will obviously result in a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Middle Eastern history, culture and people. It will also help to understand and evaluate their aspirations better within the context of the region. The Middle East's contribution to modern civilization especially in the West will be further explored through such platforms.

10.2. A Better Understanding of the Behaviours of its People and Culture

Culture is the touchstone that defines a people and their aspirations. Until you understand a man, you cannot predict him. Until we have a proper understanding of the people of the Middle East and their values, every roadmap to the so-called peace will continue to hit the detour or the rocks.

10.3. Ongoing Religious and Political Dialogue

PR activities towards making ongoing religious and political dialogue more effective will go a long way in redefining the Middle East peace process.

10.4. Leadership and Participation in the Peace Process

A proper education or reeducation of the American public on the Middle East conflicts will help offer participatory and enlightened leadership on the critical issues on the conflicts.

10.5. Financial Gains to Arabs and Israelis by Expanding Economic Ties

Financial gains could also be a result of these efforts if well managed. Thus, the successful completion of the peace process could add to the stability of the region in a multifaceted way (Samra, 2001).

11. Conclusion

As a comparative review, the intention of this paper is of multi-dimensional: first, this paper discusses the nature and objectives of international public relations from a global perspective. Second, it reviewed studies conducted by other renowned scholars across the globe. Thirdly, it unravels challenges of global public relations practice. Fourthly, it unravels the opportunities in international public relations. Fifthly, the study comparatively reviewed the interconnectedness of international public relations practice in Nigeria (Africa), Europe, America and the Middle east.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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