

EXPLORING THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN PROMOTING WOMEN POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: PLATEAU STATE WOMEN POLITICIANS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Women make up about half of the world population, but in terms of political leadership they are glaringly under represented. Amongst several obstacles to women political participation is media representation. The media misrepresent women by sexualizing, undermining and portraying them as victims. This manner of representation affects perceptions on women's ability to engage in leadership. The media are socializing agents, and can be said to be influential to some extent. The aim of this study is to find out from the point of view of women politicians how media can be engaged positively to enhance ample representation of women in leadership. This work is premised on the Agenda Setting theory and Feminist Media theory. This research is purely qualitative with the interview guide as instrument of data collection. Data was analyzed using Nvivo software and by engaging a thematic analysis, data was interpreted and conclusions were drawn from the themes that emerged from the analyzed data. Findings reveal that the media is perceived to be powerful and its representation of women adversely affects perceptions on women's ability to engage in leadership. Since the media was seen to be powerful it was suggested that the media should portray women positively which will in turn lead to positive perceptions about women and belief in the woman politician to engage in leadership invariably leading to increased representation of women. It was recommended that media should portray women positively in advertisements, television and radio programs and in films.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Media Effects, Media Portrayal, Political Leadership, Misrepresentation, Under representation

Introduction

Women have a lot to contribute to leadership, and specifically political leadership. According to the National Democratic Institute (NDI), qualities of women in leadership include: Promoting honest governments leading to low levels of corruption; commitment to peace building and inherently reconstruction and reconciliation efforts; mitigating and stopping conflicts before they arise. Women in leadership also promote equality and gender justice leading to more opportunities for girls and women (Women Deliver). In an interview with Big Think Newsletter, Former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson describes women's leadership style as being modern, collaborative, problem solving, enabling and consultative (Big Think, 2010). Coupled with these qualities, women characteristically possess excellent organizational skills, ability to prioritize workload, and ability to multi task and delegate (Sheleadsafrica) and women cooperate across party lines (UNWOMEN). Guanah (2024) asserts that, "women have always played noteworthy roles in the socio-economic development of both their immediate environments and in their nations at large" (p. 1).

In spite of these skills women possess and efforts put in place by various instruments to encourage women's involvement in leadership, women are marginalized and relegated to the background (Pew Research Centre, 2015). In Nigeria, a 2019 report by the Centre for Democracy and Development (CDD) of the 8th and 9th assembly indicates a gross under representation of women in political

leadership. CDD's analysis of results from the 2015 elections reflect that out of 469 legislators in the National Assembly, 109 in the Senate and 360 in the House of Representatives, seven women were elected in the senate while 22 women were elected in the House of Representatives. In summary female law makers constituted 6.2% of lawmakers while male law makers constituted 93.8%.

No woman has ever been elected into the office of governor in any state in Nigeria (Daily Trust 2024). However Virginia Etiba became governor of Anambra State in November 2006 when Peter Obi, governor of Anambra state was impeached. It is evident from the facts and figures above that women have been side-lined in Nigeria with regard to leadership in politics. According to the Policy and Legal Advice Centre (PLAC), in the 10th assembly women hold 3 seats out of 109 in the senate and 17 out of 360 in the House of Representatives. The percentage of women in the two chambers of the 10th Assembly is below 5% with no woman elected in 15 states out of 36 state Houses of assembly following state level general elections in March 2023. The current figures of the 10th Assembly put Nigeria at the bottom of the list of ranking for women in African parliaments. (PLAC 2023). This pattern of marginalization is not restricted to Nigeria, but is reflected in different degrees globally, as evident in the Global Gender Gap Index (Global Gender Gap Report, 2023).

In relation to political representation of women, patriarchal thinking has relegated potential women leaders to the background for centuries since it was considered that women should operate behind the scenes in the private sphere. Much progress has been made in political representation of women considering the fact that women were once denied the right to vote. The fact that women have been granted franchise, opportunity to be involved in politics and gradually political leadership is a great milestone. Women however still suffer marginalization in political leadership globally as they have been grossly under-represented since their representation stands at 26.5% (UN Women, 2023).

Several factors serve as a hindrance to women representation in political leadership in Nigeria such as a patriarchal system, sociocultural and religious norms, financial constraints, violence in politics and media representation of women. Discriminatory media treatment of women, sexism and gender bias hinder women political representation (Trebisi, 2023), Santoniccolo, Trombetta, Paradiso and Rolle (2023).

Statement of the Problem

Women form about 50 per cent of the world population but in terms of political representation, they are underrepresented, consequently they do not have the opportunity to be involved in decision making. Nations around the world could benefit from the contributions and talents of women if given the opportunity to engage in decision making and consequently policy formulation. Madeleine Albright cited in Adeleke (2014) states:

Every nation deserves to have the best possible leader and that means that women have to be given a chance to compete. If they are never allowed to compete in the electoral process, then the countries are really robbing themselves of a great deal of talent(p.226).

Women need to be involved in the decision making process so that nations can benefit from contributions of women to political leadership. One of the ways this can be achieved is through media agenda setting by positively projecting the woman politician.

Research Questions

The following research questions were addressed:

1. What factors are responsible for the under representation of women in political leadership?
2. To what extent is media representation responsible for the under representation of women in leadership?
3. How can the media be engaged to promote ample representation of women in leadership?

Literature Review

Obstacles to Women Representation in Political Leadership

Several obstacles stand in the way of women's participation in politics. The major obstacles include education, patriarchal thinking, financial constraints, cultural and religious norms and the media. These obstacles are reviewed one after the other.

Education: The educational system in Nigeria has from inception served as a major obstacle to women's development generally. This system has prioritized education of the male gender over the female gender. In 1920 for example, out of 25 secondary schools in existence, 22 of these schools were for boys and three for girls. By 1949 out of 57 schools 49 were for boys and 8 for girls (Ogunyemi, 2015). Apart from the inception of education in Nigeria, education is still a preserve of the male gender over females.

Patriarchy: Patriarchy is basically a system of male dominance. Men dominate women in political, economic and social structures. In this system women are relegated to the private sphere playing supportive roles and they are not given a chance to be involved in the decision-making process. Patriarchal thinking does a great disservice to a woman's leadership aspiration because in this line of thinking a woman has absolutely no place in leadership and will not be given a chance to be involved in decision making. In the unlikely event that she is given the privileged opportunity, it is to play a supportive role but not involvement in decision making. She is to do as instructed and should be seen but not heard.

Financial Constraints: In most countries of the world, funding of a campaign is extremely high for both men and women. In a 2008 survey of parliamentarians around the world, it was discovered that female MPs viewed lack of funds as a significant deterrent to political participation more than their male counterparts. It is difficult for women to gain political support and secure campaign funding (www.demofinland, 2021).

Religious and Socio-Cultural Obstacles: Socio cultural expectations exist within society which dictate behaviour and expectations considered acceptable or not acceptable. This is usually intertwined with religious expectations and patriarchal thinking. Women politicians fall short of these expectations considered appropriate for women. These obstacles have contributed to the under representation of women in politics.

The Media: Women generally are portrayed as sex objects, assigned gender stereotypical roles, trivialized or portrayed as weak or victims. Media coverage of women politicians is usually negative. Women are either portrayed as sex objects or unattractive whether in print, television or social media and the focus is usually not on their abilities. The woman politician is also portrayed as deviant or immoral (Adeniyi-Ogunyakin, 2014). This negative portrayal is discouraging for the woman politician (iknowpolitics, 2022). Driedger (2013, p. 14) explains that "women tend to be put under the microscope more-so than men are." This implies that when a woman fails, it receives more attention

than when a man fails.

The media play the role of shaping our beliefs and media content has an influence on how we perceive issues. The media reflects society, but it in turn exaggerates societal reality in its representation thereby increasing inequality, women subordination and marginalization of women (Sanni, 2016). The media through its agenda setting role could focus on women's abilities and talents and showcase women achievers who could stand as role models to other women, but unfortunately the focus is usually on the negative image. Since the media shapes public beliefs (Oyewole & Olisa, 2017), the media's negative portrayal of women has done no favours to women's leadership aspirations as women are portrayed as incompetent, dependent and weak, therefore not fit to hold leadership positions.

Media Effects

There have been paradigm shifts on the impact of media on audience perceptions ranging from the direct effects approach of the early 20th century which viewed media as possessing tremendous effect, to the limited effects approach in the 1940s where media was perceived to have minimal influence on an audience and finally the cumulative effects approach in which media effect is as a result of cumulative exposure to similar content.

It is simplistic to assume the media is all powerful. On the other hand, to assume the media has no influence on an audience's perception is untrue. The middle ground to this is that the media has a cumulative effect on an audience's perception. As Littlejohn and Foss (2009) explain, over time audiences begin to accept the media framing of reality as their own representation. Perse (2001) explains the gradual process of media effects stating that the process may be very subtle and the effects are not noticed until media cause an imbalance in the social system.

According to McCombs (as cited in Ardevol-Abrue, 2015, p.436), the effects of the media are limited since "the public is not an automaton passively waiting to be programmed by the media." The power of the media, however, cannot be underestimated or overemphasized; obviously the media is not all powerful, but we must acknowledge that the media have an influence on an audience's perception of issues. Perse and Lambe (2017) explain how media effects could be cognitive, behavioural or affective. Cognitive deals with what people learn and the structuring of beliefs, behavioural deals with observable actions linked to the media exposed, while affective deals with the formation of attitudes towards an issue which could be positive or negative. The crux of this research is the affective aspect of media effects which is related to attitudes/perceptions about women and the cumulative impact of media effects on an audience. This specifically emphasises the media's cumulative misrepresentation of women over several decades and how it inadvertently influences audience perception of women especially entrusting women with leadership, since the media have basically portrayed women as either incompetent or as ornaments. Gerbner, Gross, Morgan and Signorielli (1994) reinforce this by explaining that in research the focus is on implications of accumulated exposure to messages, images and values that underlay and cut across the widest variety of programmes.

The Global Media Monitoring Project (2010) describes the media as the fourth pillar of democracy and its immense power to act as the watchdog of society; it is also a mirror of society that reflects happenings in society. It can influence the masses and the convergence of the media has further enhanced its potential as a tool of creating public opinion and values. According to Sharma (as cited in Nwoalikpe, 2014) from studies carried out in 2012, the media are carriers of information, ideas, thoughts and opinions as well as powerful forces in influencing people's perceptions. Nwoalikpe (2014) describes the media as part of our everyday lives stating that it is a powerful tool for enjoyment, companionship, surveillance and interpretation. Endong and Obonganwan (2015) underscore the power of the media in shaping the perception of its audience because the media are considered potent forces that are very active in shaping popular beliefs and perceptions. Media have spectacular potentials in influencing

social attitudes positively or negatively, one way in which they shape audience perceptions and attitudes is through the institution of representation. This aligns with the view that the media has influence over an audience. In summary the media through representation (framing) creates public opinion and values which people imbibe. This in turn has an influence on people's perceptions, giving the media the potential as a tool for interpretation and influence of social attitudes.

Wood (1994) asserts the power and pervasiveness of media and how it is woven throughout our daily lives and the fact that the media insinuate messages into our consciousness at every turn. The media insinuate images of the sexes which perpetuate unrealistic stereotypical and limiting perceptions. This suggests that the media has the capacity to mislead the public by giving a false representation, in relation to this study, a false representation of women. Baran and Davis (2012) explain how media creates a world view that might be inaccurate but becomes the reality. This world view is seen as reality and we base our judgements on this perceived reality. The media indeed have misrepresented women enhancing the negatives and downplaying the positive. Women's achievements and contributions are down played by the media while portrayals of weakness, dependency and objectification are emphasized (Hasan, 2013; O'Neill, Savigny & Cann, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

This work is premised on the Agenda Setting theory and Feminist Media theory. The Agenda setting theory, propounded by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw states that the more attention is given to an issue, the more importance an audience attaches to it. McQuail (2005) states that by giving an issue prominence and importance, the audience in turn consider these issues important since the media have attached importance to it (Dalhatu and Shehu, 2020). Since ideally the source of information is derived from the news media, who establish the agenda, this affects the importance attached to it. This theory refers to the power the media wields in drawing attention to certain issues by giving them prominence.

Priming refers to the prominence and repetition given to issues which bring the issue to our thoughts and primes our thoughts, meaning it is brought to our memory. As these thoughts are brought to our memory, we form attitudes about these issues through media framing. Based on this theory, women politicians should be consistently made more visible on the media by positively projecting them. If they are positively projected, it should lead to media audiences forming positive attitudes towards women in leadership hopefully culminating in the ample representation of women in politics.

Feminist Media theory

Feminist Media theory examines the representation of women on the media. Notable feminist media theorists include Gaye Tuchman, Judith Mayne, Jane Gaines, Laura Mulvey and bell hooks. This theory examines and challenges media representation of women because media depicts women in limited and objectified roles reinforcing notions of beauty, submission and domesticity. The media misrepresents women by projecting them as sex objects or undermining them through subordinate roles assigned to them (Nwoalikpe, 2014). Media shapes an audience's perception, values and understanding of the world. The media marginalizes women's voices, perpetuates gender inequality and reinforces stereotypes (Tuchman, 1978 cited in Harp, Lope and Bachmann, 2018). Feminist Media theory therefore challenges patriarchal structures and media bias. Central to this theory is the assumption that if women controlled media production, media content would be better and more favourable to women. This theory challenges these representations and encourages empowerment narratives that reflect the reality of women's lives (StudyMass.com). By challenging negative representations of women, the Feminist Media theory could aid in achieving gender equality.

Methodology

This research is purely qualitative with the aim of getting the perceptions of women politicians on the influence of media with regard to women political leadership. The population consists of women

politicians in Plateau State, Nigeria from the two major political parties, PDP and APC totalling 41 with a sample size of 12. Women in Plateau State were purposively selected using the snowball sampling technique. The women politicians were purposively selected based on the fact that they were first and foremost women, secondly that they were politicians and finally because they are from Plateau State. The instrument of data collection for this research is the interview guide and Nvivo software was used to analyse the data.

Data Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Emerging themes

- A patriarchal system, socio-cultural norms, gender stereotypes, financial constraints and media representation were considered as some of the factors responsible for the under representation on women in political leadership.
- Media negatively portray women and this has an adverse influence on public perception of the woman politician by the electorate invariably leading to under representation of women in political leadership.
- Media is perceived to be powerful to various degrees and the power the media wields can be used to positively project and thereby enhance the woman in leadership.

RQ1. What are the Factors Responsible for the Under representation of Women?

Factors considered responsible for the under representation of women in leadership include:

Media Portrayal- Media portrayal of Women is perceived to be negative as women are undermined by the media through domestic and supportive roles in which they project women, they are also portrayed as weak and victims and are stigmatized and sexualized. These representations negate qualities of leadership such as strength, confidence, decisiveness, competence and ambition.

Patriarchal System in Nigeria- Within a patriarchal system, it is expected that men engage in decision making while women work behind the scenes playing supportive roles. This atmosphere is not conducive or favourable for the woman politician who needs to be in the forefront and participate in decision making.

Financial Constraints- Funding for campaigns and publicity is difficult for women and women rarely benefit from support from political elites and godfathers because of their unlikelihood to win elections.

Socio Cultural, Religious Norms and Stereotypes- Culture, religion and stereotypes dictate the place of a woman in society which is to operate behind the scenes playing supportive roles.

Apathy on the part of women- Women shy away from politics out of fear of being perceived as deviants and a lack of self-confidence.

Women not supporting - Women do not support fellow women but prefer to vote for men

RQ2 To what extent is media representation of women responsible for the under representation of women in politics?

According to six respondents, media is very powerful and is responsible for the under representation of women in leadership to a large extent through negative portrayals of women. Similarly, six other respondents find the media responsible to some extent but other factors such as socio-cultural and religious norms, patriarchy are also culpable. It can be concluded that media has influence either to a large extent or some extent through its manner of representation of women.

The media is responsible for the under representation of women in political leadership to a large extent.

A respondent states:

Absolutely, absolutely, the media is very powerful. It shapes the perception of people and it also controls their minds to a greater extent and so when women say they want to run for office people tend to look at them from the point of view of Oh, these people we see in bikinis on television, these women at the family frontline taking care of the family

The media is responsible for the underrepresentation of women to some extent together with other factors

A respondent opines as follows:

Unfortunately the media cannot be divorced from society, people that are working with the media are also part of society so they go into the media with that conception, that perception and its worse in Africa. The African concept of a woman and her role in society is what dominates even the media because the media is mostly dominated by men who grew up with that perception and they transferred it to their jobs.

RQ3 How can media be used to promote the representation of women in political leadership?

Positive portrayal of women by the media will lead to positive perceptions of the woman politician.

My appeal to the media is to portray women in a positive light so that people will be able to vote women into office”.

“I believe if the media takes a turn, if the media now takes deliberate steps to portray women as competent and equal citizens in contributing their quota, then the perceptions that people have and the way they relate with female politicians will change because I will still emphasize, everybody knows the importance of the media.

“So if the media itself, if it flips its sabotage on women or its portrayal of women. It will boost the acceptance of women in politics”.

This can be achieved through:

Films - Women should be represented in leadership positions instead of the usual demeaning positions.

If they are making a film or something, let the woman be president, let them be governors, let them be something other than a cook or housewife. I am not saying that housewives are bad. Other than slinking into the bedroom with lingerie. I think if they stop, we may not see the effect immediately, but with time we will.

Advertising - Participants believe advertising could be used to promote belief in the woman politician by stopping negative portrayals but rather bombarding the public with positivity about women.

“The media should bombard the public with positive things about women through their advertising”

Women Related Programmes- It was felt that the media, by positively placing women on the public agenda will promote acceptance of women in leadership:

“The media should deliberately put out images, deliberately engage in conversations and involve women...we need programmes that keep dialoging positively about women politicians”

Radio and Television Programmes –

“If the media can assist by granting interviews to women that they know have shown interest, that's a major way of publicizing the person. You can grant the women an interview just as we are interacting now in the media probably on television where people will see the woman, and you

know seeing is believing. When they see the woman, they can rate the woman and know that okay, these women will perform".

"The media should grant interviews on the radio so that women can be publicized at the grass root level in villages".

Social Media - Social media is seen as a useful medium of publicizing women. A participant buttresses this point by stating thus:

Luckily for us now, there is social media, so I will make sure I use social media. A lot of women I know now use social media influencers to influence their narrative and push their agenda. You push your narrative through them.

Media Subsidizing Costs for Women

If possible, where women want to advertise themselves in ways like making jingles, if they can assist in subsidizing costs for women because it involves a lot of money. Most women don't have that kind of money to contest.

Discussion of Findings

Factors Responsible for the Under representation of Women in Political Leadership

Media Representation. First and foremost, women are under represented on the media. When they are represented, they are misrepresented, undermined, sexualized and portrayed as victims. These representations are inconsistent with qualities of leadership which include strength, confidence, ambition, competence and decisiveness (Santoniccolo, 2023). Nwaolikpe underscores media's persistent stereotyped portrayal of women which negate women's roles and contribution to societal development. The media undermine women in their representations rather than focus on women's competence and capability in line with patriarchal thinking where men are decision makers and women play supportive roles. Guanah and Nwabueze (2021) note that:

part of democracy is building a sound society that will encourage a good number of women to participate in politics, however it is disheartening and regrettable that the mass media that are supposed to be the "watchdog" of the society and encourage women to take part in politics are culpable in accentuating the misrepresentation of women, and the discrimination against women by under reporting them (p. 2).

Patriarchy – The patriarchal system in which Nigeria operates privileges male leadership over female leadership. It is preferred that women work behind the scenes playing supportive roles while men engage in actual decision making. This is a significant deterrent to women involvement in leadership as the men want to maintain the status quo making it clear that women are not welcome. Hooks (2010), explains in relation to patriarchy, how females are socialized to serve, be weak, take care and nurture others and not to think while males are taught to serve, provide, be strong, strategize, think and plan and refuse to nurture others.

Financial Constraints- Women politicians are constrained financially as political godfathers and political elites do not back women generally since women are unlikely to win elections. A 2008 survey of parliamentarians around the world discovered that female MPs viewed funding challenges as a major obstacle to engaging in politics, it is generally difficult for women to gain political support and secure campaign funding (Inter Parliamentary Union Demofinland, 2021)

Apathy on the part of women - There appears to be apathy on the part of women to engage in leadership. The patriarchal nature of leadership in Nigeria coupled with an unfavourable atmosphere for women in leadership like societal expectations contribute to women shying away from politics. The constant restriction of women in decision making has psychologically shaped women to internalize their own inferiority since their achievements and struggles have not been recognized (Lerner, 1986, Goff, 2018; Endicot, 2022; Santonoccolo et al (2023) also underscore media misrepresentation and how this stifles women's political and career ambitions and fosters organizational discrimination.

Culture and Society – Socio cultural expectations exist within society which dictate behavior and expectations considered acceptable or unacceptable. The woman politician falls short of expectations considered appropriate for women. Women politicians are viewed as honorary men and as a consequence experience gender bias since politics is seen as the exclusive preserve of men and seen as dirty business (Watuka, 2017).

Women not supporting women – Another factor that militates against the representation of women is the fact that women do not support one another. Women do not vote for fellow women according to Geha, (2019) cited in Misbah, Heddy, Shilihan and Arikhah (2023), patriarchal systems insinuate that politics is not a place for women, he explains that this is so ingrained in society that women see this as a norm. Consequently, they do not support fellow women. Secondly, the few women engaged in political leadership do not seem to support or mentor other women, they are anti-female, female leaders termed as the queen bee phenomenon as coined by Michigan University researchers, Staines and Abramson. Hurst (2016) cited in Misbah et al (2023), explain that a queen bee does not want to help fellow women and creates unhealthy competition in order to protect themselves and maintain their power. This attitude is a disservice to gender parity in politics and as a consequence gender equality in political leadership.

The extent to which media representation is responsible for the underrepresentation of women

The media was largely blamed for the underrepresentation of women in politics by some respondents. This implies that the media is powerful as Ashimi cited in Oyewale and Olisa (2017), explains the ability of the media to make or mar the image of women in society. The UN also listed the media as one of the ten obstacles to women's advancement (UN Women), while Carlin and Winfrey 2009 cited in Heraldson and Wangnerud (2018), confirm that media sexism strengthens the glass ceiling for women politicians. Trabeisi (2023), explains the extent of the adverse influence of media on voters, political parties and political elites which impinges on women political representation. Other respondents however blamed the media to a lesser extent rather citing culture, religion, society and patriarchy. Respondent's views and literature covered in this work reveal that media representations do have an influence on the underrepresentation of women in leadership either to a very large extent or at least to some extent.

How the media can be used to promote women political representation

It was felt that the media could better represent women through positive portrayals in films and advertisements and that women could be positively projected through radio and television programmes. According to Patowary (2014), the positive portrayal of women in media is necessary in order to maintain the real dignity and status of women which will minimize the gap and inequality between men and women. The media should make the woman politician visible through its agenda setting role as this will lead to better public perception of the woman in politics, advance their careers, enhance inclusiveness, enhance their credibility, launder the image of the woman politician, project women politicians as positive role models which should lead to public support for women in political leadership. McQuail (2005) cited in Dalhatu and Shehu, (2020) explains that by giving an issue prominence and importance, the audience in turn consider these issues important since the media have attached much importance to it. When women are positively portrayed and made more prominent on the

media, it should gradually lead to the acceptance of women in leadership.

Conclusion

Women are grossly underrepresented in political leadership as a result of various factors. Central to this is media representation which undermines, victimizes and stigmatizes women thereby doing a disservice to perceptions on women's ability to engage in political leadership. This suggests that the media has the ability to influence public perception, in line with the Agenda Setting theory which deals with media drawing attention to certain issues which makes it prominent thereby making an audience attach importance to it. Feminist Media theory challenges negative media representations of women. The Agenda Setting theory and Feminist Media theory both underscore the influence of media which is in tandem with the views of respondents in this research. The aim of this research was to discover how media influence could be used to promote women political representation in Nigeria. This was achieved by soliciting for the views of women politicians in Plateau State through an in-depth interview.

The underrepresentation of women in government according to respondents is as a result of a combination of different factors from societal expectations, to financial constraints, a poor self-concept on the part of women to their lack of support from fellow women. Media, from the findings was found to be a potent factor in the underrepresentation of women in political leadership with regard to its negative manner of representation of women. Since media is powerful, it was suggested that this energy can be flipped where media power should be used positively in its representations of women which should eventually lead to positive perceptions of women in leadership by the women politicians themselves, fellow women and the general populace hopefully leading to ample representation of women in political leadership.

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