

Communication Ethics in Journalism and Social Media: A Narrative Review of Contemporary Challenges and Regional Practices

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ABSTRACT: In the digital age, journalism faces a multitude of ethical challenges that demand critical reassessment of traditional media ethics. This narrative review investigates how communication ethics in journalism and social media have evolved, focusing on themes such as misinformation, transparency, media accountability, and cultural interpretations of ethical standards. Drawing on over fifty peer-reviewed studies sourced from Scopus, Google Scholar, and other databases, the review synthesizes empirical data and theoretical insights to evaluate the current state and future direction of media ethics. The methodology involved targeted keyword searches and thematic categorization of literature from 2010 to 2024, encompassing global perspectives with particular attention to Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. The findings reveal that adherence to journalistic codes of ethics correlates strongly with public trust and media credibility. Furthermore, fact-checking initiatives, media literacy programs, and ethical journalism training have demonstrated effectiveness in countering misinformation and enhancing ethical engagement. Discussion highlights the systemic influence of political regimes, market forces, and cultural values in shaping journalistic practice. While regulatory and educational interventions show promise, structural barriers and digital disruption remain significant obstacles. The review concludes by recommending adaptive, context-sensitive ethical frameworks and greater international collaboration to strengthen journalistic integrity and combat misinformation in a rapidly changing media environment.

Keywords: Journalism Ethics, Social Media, Misinformation, Media Accountability, Communication Transparency, Media Literacy, Digital Journalism.



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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the ethical landscape of journalism has undergone a profound transformation, particularly within the context of digital and social media. Journalism, once firmly anchored in professional norms emphasizing accuracy, fairness, and objectivity, now operates in a dynamic information ecosystem shaped by technological innovation and a rapidly evolving media consumption culture. Central to this shift are issues such as misinformation, privacy, and the increasing involvement of non-professional content creators in shaping public discourse (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022). As digital platforms allow information to spread with

unprecedented speed, the ethical burden on journalists has intensified, often placing professional standards in direct conflict with the demands of real-time reporting and market-driven incentives (Fisher, 2022).

The growing pervasiveness of social media has introduced new dilemmas and blurred the boundaries between traditional journalism and citizen reporting. Unlike legacy media institutions, social media platforms offer few structural safeguards to ensure information quality or adherence to journalistic ethics. Consequently, the ethical responsibilities of journalism professionals have expanded, requiring a recalibration of ethical codes to address the unique pressures of the digital era (Christians, 2010). In many cases, these responsibilities are further complicated by external pressures from interest groups, political actors, and commercial imperatives that attempt to shape or manipulate the news agenda (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Rice & Taylor, 2020).

Statistical evidence further underscores the urgency of these ethical concerns. A recent Pew Research Center study indicated that only 41% of the public trusts traditional media sources, marking a significant decline compared to a decade ago (Fisher, 2022). The rise of social media platforms as primary news sources—frequently outpacing newspapers and television in audience reach—has exacerbated this trust deficit. A parallel study by the Reuters Institute revealed that journalists increasingly perceive themselves as being viewed with suspicion or outright hostility by the public, which has led to a widening credibility gap between the press and its audience (Figdor, 2023).

This transformation is not merely perceptual; it is also grounded in data illustrating how digital consumption habits have altered information access and evaluation. Users now increasingly rely on social media networks as their primary gateway to information, often favoring emotionally charged or algorithmically promoted content over thoroughly vetted journalism (Fisher, 2022). The erosion of public trust poses a critical challenge to democratic societies, which rely on informed citizenry and credible journalism to function effectively. Thus, there is a pressing need to reinforce core journalistic principles, including truthfulness, transparency, and accountability (Melnik et al., 2016; Rice & Taylor, 2020).

Beneath these surface challenges lie deeper systemic issues that perpetuate unethical communication practices. Foremost among these is the structural demand for speed in digital journalism, which incentivizes rapid content production over comprehensive fact-checking and contextualization (Lurie et al., 2022; Macnamara, 2021). Media concentration and commercial interests also skew editorial priorities, as conglomerates and advertisers influence what is reported and how (Semilet et al., 2021). This often forces journalists to compromise ethical standards in favor of sensational content designed to maximize engagement and ad revenue (Iranzo-Cabrera & Pérez, 2021). These systemic pressures are further compounded by gaps in professional training and ethical literacy among both journalists and the general public (Fisher, 2022).

The lack of an integrated theoretical framework tailored to the complexities of digital journalism further highlights the limitations of existing approaches. Studies in media ethics frequently operate in disciplinary silos, examining public relations, advertising, or journalism in isolation despite their shared challenges in the information ecosystem (Chua, 2023; Semilet et al., 2021). Cultural differences and localized ethical norms add additional layers of complexity, often clashing with

standardized global principles (Barber, 2024; Birnbaum et al., 2015). Consequently, there remains a critical need to harmonize ethical models across diverse cultural contexts while preserving the integrity of local communication practices.

Given these overlapping challenges, this review seeks to evaluate the ethical dimensions of journalism in the age of digital and social media. The primary objective is to examine the interplay between traditional journalistic ethics and emerging communication norms within the digital landscape. This includes an analysis of issues such as misinformation, privacy, editorial independence, and media accountability. Through a synthesis of empirical studies and theoretical frameworks, the review aims to illuminate the ways in which journalistic ethics are being tested, reshaped, or eroded by contemporary communication practices.

The scope of this review is both thematic and geographic. Thematically, it explores the ethical implications of journalistic decision-making in digital contexts, the influence of media ownership, and the responsibilities of journalists in combating misinformation. Geographically, the review places particular emphasis on Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, two regions undergoing rapid media transitions. These areas serve as critical case studies due to their unique socio-political dynamics, emerging media landscapes, and pressing ethical challenges. The inclusion of multiple geographic perspectives provides a more comprehensive understanding of how communication ethics are applied and interpreted globally.

By drawing from diverse literatures and contextual insights, this review contributes to a deeper understanding of the evolving ethical paradigms in journalism and social media. It underscores the necessity of revisiting ethical standards in light of digital transformation and encourages the development of adaptive frameworks that respond to both global and local communication challenges. The review also highlights the role of education and public awareness in cultivating a media-literate society capable of discerning credible information in an increasingly fragmented media environment.

Given these dynamics, this review is particularly relevant in an era where communication boundaries are increasingly fluid and ethical norms are under constant negotiation. This review addresses the following question: *How are ethical standards in journalism and social media evolving under global and digital pressures?*

METHOD

The methodology of this narrative review is designed to ensure a systematic and comprehensive approach in identifying, selecting, and analyzing peer-reviewed literature that addresses the intersection of journalism ethics and social media communication. To construct a well-grounded synthesis of the existing knowledge, multiple internationally recognized academic databases were utilized, relevant keyword combinations were carefully applied, and clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to guide the literature selection process.

The primary databases used in this review included Scopus, PubMed, Google Scholar, JSTOR, Web of Science, and ProQuest. Scopus was prioritized due to its extensive coverage of

interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journals, particularly those pertaining to communication studies, journalism, and media ethics. Scopus also provides citation analysis tools that enabled the researchers to evaluate the scholarly impact of retrieved articles (Iranzo-Cabrera & Pérez, 2021). PubMed, while traditionally focused on health sciences, offered valuable insights into ethical communication during health crises, particularly relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic when the role of journalism in disseminating accurate public health information became crucial (Rubio et al., 2021).

Google Scholar served as a supplementary tool for capturing grey literature, including theses, dissertations, and institutional reports, which often contain emerging perspectives not yet indexed in paid databases (Pande, 2017). JSTOR and Web of Science contributed archival access to historical texts and rigorous analyses of ethical trends in journalism, offering both temporal depth and thematic relevance (Antunovic & Bundon, 2022). Meanwhile, ProQuest expanded the pool of accessible research by offering a rich collection of dissertations and research papers across diverse subject areas, enhancing the exploration of ethical dynamics in journalism and social media (Suing et al., 2022).

Keyword strategy was crucial in retrieving the most relevant and focused body of literature. The search employed Boolean logic to refine results using conjunctions such as AND, OR, and NOT. Effective keyword pairings included "journalism ethics" AND "social media," which yielded studies on ethical challenges at the intersection of traditional media practices and digital communication platforms (Shimek, 2015). The combination of "communication transparency" AND "digital media" facilitated the identification of sources addressing ethical dilemmas in the dissemination of online content (Chua, 2023).

Other significant keyword pairings included "disinformation" AND "journalism," highlighting literature focused on misinformation challenges and the responsibility of journalists in combating fake news (Figdor, 2023). The pairing of "media accountability" AND "ethics" was used to locate sources examining the frameworks and norms through which media organizations uphold ethical standards (Lurie et al., 2022). For understanding citizen-led content creation, "citizen journalism" AND "ethics" proved instrumental in identifying works discussing the responsibilities and limitations of non-professional news creators (Hickerson & Kothari, 2016). Finally, "social media credibility" AND "journalism standards," as well as "ethical communication" AND "public health," captured the dual role of ethics in media integrity and public welfare, particularly under crisis conditions such as pandemics (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Macnamara, 2021).

Articles were selected through a multi-step screening process designed to filter out irrelevant, outdated, or non-scholarly works. The first phase involved initial searches based on the keyword combinations across the selected databases. Search results were then filtered by publication year (limiting to literature published between 2010 and 2024), language (English only), and document type (peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, conference papers, theses, and reports). Titles and abstracts were reviewed for relevance, and duplicates were removed.

The inclusion criteria encompassed studies that: (1) explicitly addressed ethical frameworks or issues related to journalism or social media communication, (2) presented empirical data or theoretical models, (3) focused on either global or region-specific contexts such as Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, and (4) were published in scholarly sources with recognized editorial standards. Studies were excluded if they: (1) focused solely on technological aspects without ethical analysis, (2) lacked peer review or academic credibility, or (3) were written in non-English languages without accessible translations.

A total of 178 studies were initially retrieved. After the removal of duplicates and irrelevant items based on title and abstract screening, 96 full-text articles were assessed. Ultimately, 58 publications met all inclusion criteria and were incorporated into the narrative review. These articles were subjected to thematic analysis, whereby recurring themes, patterns, and concepts were identified, categorized, and synthesized to inform the results and discussion sections.

The included literature encompassed diverse research designs, such as case studies on news coverage during health crises, content analyses of social media interactions, surveys on journalistic perceptions of ethical challenges, and theoretical treatises on communication ethics. Although randomized controlled trials are rare in communication ethics research, several studies employed robust qualitative and mixed-method approaches, offering valuable contextual insights and contributing to the reliability of the synthesized findings.

In summary, the methodological approach employed in this review reflects a rigorous and systematic process, combining comprehensive database searches, precise keyword strategies, and structured selection criteria to capture the most relevant and credible literature on journalism ethics and social media communication. This approach ensures that the review is both exhaustive and analytically sound, providing a solid foundation for subsequent thematic interpretation and scholarly discussion.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this narrative review are organized thematically across four primary sub-sections to explore the ethical landscape of journalism and social media communication. Drawing from empirical studies and comparative analyses, the review examines how journalism ethics are practiced and interpreted in various contexts, while highlighting global trends, systemic challenges, and the impact of digital transformation on ethical communication.

In the first thematic cluster concerning journalistic codes of ethics and standards, transparency in reporting processes emerges as a core theme in contemporary scholarship. Transparency is increasingly viewed as a mechanism for building trust between journalists and audiences, especially within the complex dynamics of digital journalism (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Barber, 2024). Several authors argue that traditional ethical codes must evolve to accommodate the realities of the digital and social media age, particularly the proliferation of disinformation (Lurie et al., 2022; Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022). The pressure to publish rapidly often challenges the balance

between speed and accuracy, prompting calls for stricter enforcement of ethical codes across the industry (Figdor, 2023; Barber, 2024). Furthermore, journalists are increasingly framed as agents of societal change with a responsibility not only to inform but also to engage and educate the public on critical issues, thereby contributing to social accountability and democratic discourse (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Figdor, 2023).

Empirical data supports a strong correlation between adherence to ethical journalism standards and public trust. Studies show that audiences exhibit higher levels of trust toward media organizations that maintain visible ethical practices, such as transparency and accountability (Chua, 2023; Lurie et al., 2022). According to findings from Pew Research Center, media outlets known for their ethical reporting are perceived more favorably by the public (Barber, 2024). This relationship is further reinforced when news content is presented in an unbiased and professional manner, aligning with audience expectations for ethical journalism (Rubio et al., 2021; Semilet et al., 2021). Importantly, higher media literacy among audiences correlates with increased skepticism toward unethical reporting and greater demand for ethical media conduct (Haman, 2024).

The second thematic cluster examines the role of journalists in addressing misinformation on social media platforms. Journalists are increasingly seen as critical actors in filtering and correcting disinformation. Studies emphasize their responsibility to actively participate in digital platforms by educating audiences, contextualizing news content, and directly countering false information (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Barber, 2024). Collaboration with fact-checking organizations is vital in this regard. Journalists must champion accuracy and avoid sensationalism to help curb the societal impact of false narratives (Fisher, 2022; Mureşan, 2023). Research also stresses the importance of equipping journalists with specialized training in digital platform dynamics and ethical challenges to enhance their capacity for responsible reporting in the online environment (Pande, 2017).

Evidence also points to the measurable effectiveness of fact-checking initiatives on platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Several studies demonstrate that labeling and moderation by third-party fact-checkers reduce the likelihood of users sharing inaccurate information (Antunovic & Bundon, 2022; Hickerson & Kothari, 2016). For example, Lurie et al. (2022) reported that during the COVID-19 pandemic, exposure to fact-check labels significantly decreased the spread of misinformation. Moreover, users subjected to fact-checking labels were more cautious in resharing questionable content, indicating that these interventions influence online behavior (Figdor, 2023; Mureşan, 2023). Nonetheless, persistent ideological biases and echo chambers can limit the reach of these interventions, underscoring the need for broader public education on misinformation detection (Santas, 2016; Rubio et al., 2021).

The third thematic cluster addresses media literacy and audience responsibility. Research confirms a positive correlation between media literacy education and the public's ability to evaluate information credibility. Individuals trained in media literacy exhibit greater competence in assessing sources, distinguishing between fact and opinion, and identifying bias in news coverage (Fisher, 2022; Gómez, 2020). For instance, education on fact-checking strategies improves public ability to independently verify content, contributing to a decline in the spread of misinformation

(Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022). Conversely, the absence of such training leaves audiences vulnerable to persuasive falsehoods, particularly during moments of public panic or crisis (Haman, 2024). These findings underscore the role of media literacy as both a preventive and corrective strategy in promoting ethical communication.

Cultural and demographic variables also influence digital literacy and ethical media engagement. Studies show that diverse cultural backgrounds shape different understandings of media ethics, and limited access to education and technology in developing regions exacerbates digital literacy gaps (Suing et al., 2022; Santas, 2016). Populations with limited exposure to digital tools often lack familiarity with fact-checking mechanisms and ethical communication principles, increasing their susceptibility to misinformation (Macnamara, 2021; Chua, 2023). Age and education level further affect ethical media behavior. While younger audiences are more digitally adept, they may be less aware of ethical implications, whereas older users prioritize accuracy but may struggle with digital navigation (Lurie et al., 2022). These findings highlight the necessity of context-specific media literacy programs tailored to diverse demographic and cultural profiles.

In the fourth thematic cluster, comparative analyses reveal striking differences in communication ethics across high- and low-income countries. High-income countries tend to enforce stricter ethical regulations and support press freedom and open information environments. These conditions foster stronger ethical adherence and greater public trust in media (Antunovic & Bundon, 2022; Miladi, 2021; Christians, 2010). In contrast, journalism in low-income countries is often hindered by political interference, economic instability, and security threats, which compromise ethical standards (Lipschultz, 2021; Rubio et al., 2021). Journalists in these settings may face coercion or censorship, creating ethical dilemmas that limit their ability to report truthfully (Lipschultz, 2023). Despite these barriers, emerging efforts in resource-constrained settings aim to implement ethical frameworks inspired by global norms, though challenges remain in capacity and enforcement (Baker & Blaagaard, 2016).

Comparative studies on regulatory frameworks also illustrate a wide variance in ethical oversight. Nordic countries exemplify a collaborative, transparent approach to media regulation, reinforcing public accountability and ethical journalism (Gómez, 2020; Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022). In contrast, media regulation in parts of Eastern Europe and Asia tends to be more politically controlled, which complicates the enforcement of ethical standards (Lipschultz, 2023; Oso et al., 2024). Where governments actively engage in media regulation with transparency and democratic intent, ethical journalism can flourish, albeit under scrutiny (Fortner & Fackler, 2011). Some developing nations are establishing legal frameworks for media ethics, yet these are often constrained by corruption, weak institutions, and limited training resources (Patching & Hirst, 2013; Prystupenko, 2020). Nonetheless, targeted interventions in media ethics have shown potential in reducing misinformation and improving public trust in information sources (Roberts & Black, 2021).

These comparative insights underscore the importance of international cooperation and contextual adaptation in developing effective ethical media practices. By aligning global standards with local

realities, media organizations and policymakers can foster a more trustworthy and ethically responsible media landscape (Krüger, 2016; Mureşan, 2023).

The findings of this review reveal both alignment and divergence between contemporary communication ethics themes and foundational media ethics theories. Classic ethical frameworks, such as those proposed by Gómez (2020), emphasize honesty, transparency, and the moral responsibility of giving voice to marginalized communities. These values remain relevant in today's digital landscape, particularly as journalists navigate their dual roles as information providers and agents of democratic accountability (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Barber, 2024). The enduring emphasis on public welfare and journalistic integrity underscores a foundational continuity across ethical paradigms. Yet, the digital era introduces challenges that demand reinterpretation and expansion of these theoretical models.

Unlike earlier eras where information dissemination followed a one-way trajectory from media to audience, modern digital platforms function as participatory arenas for social dialogue (Gómez, 2020). Here, ethical communication must be understood as a dynamic, interactive process that accounts for real-time engagement, audience feedback, and user-generated content. Theoretical constructs grounded in linear information flows and institutional control no longer fully capture the complexities of this environment. Contemporary literature, therefore, advocates for a more responsive and adaptive ethical framework that accommodates the speed, interactivity, and volatility of social media communication (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Figdor, 2023). This shift underscores the importance of ethical flexibility, especially in addressing phenomena such as disinformation, digital surveillance, and algorithmic bias.

Systemic political, economic, and cultural factors significantly influence the implementation of ethical journalism across different regions. In politically repressive regimes, journalists often operate under the threat of censorship or retribution, which constrains their capacity to adhere to ethical standards (Semilet et al., 2021). The curtailment of press freedom not only undermines truth-telling and accountability but also exacerbates self-censorship, thereby diminishing journalistic autonomy and ethical integrity (Rubio et al., 2021). Conversely, in politically open societies with strong institutional safeguards, journalists are more likely to uphold ethical norms, benefiting from greater editorial independence and public support (Christians, 2010; Antunovic & Bundon, 2022).

Economic pressures also play a crucial role in shaping media practices. In highly commercialized media environments, revenue generation often takes precedence over public interest reporting. The dependence on advertising and audience metrics drives content strategies that prioritize sensationalism, speed, and entertainment value, frequently at the expense of factual accuracy and ethical scrutiny (Iranzo-Cabrera & Pérez, 2021). These conditions incentivize risk-taking and discourage ethical restraint, particularly when journalistic success is measured by click-through rates rather than informational quality (Lurie et al., 2022).

Cultural variables further complicate the ethical equation. In collectivist societies, for instance, the value placed on social harmony can conflict with the journalistic imperative to expose wrongdoing

or challenge authority (Semilet et al., 2021). This cultural tension can result in divergent interpretations of core ethical principles such as truth, fairness, and accountability. What is perceived as ethical in one context may be regarded as intrusive or destabilizing in another, indicating the need for localized adaptations of ethical codes that resonate with community values while maintaining universal standards (Chua, 2023).

In response to these systemic constraints, several policy interventions have shown promise in reinforcing ethical media practices. Education and training remain foundational. Countries that have embedded ethics modules within journalism curricula report stronger professional standards and greater awareness of digital-era challenges among emerging journalists (Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022; Gómez, 2020). Such programs often incorporate case-based learning, simulations, and discussions of dilemmas unique to the digital sphere, equipping journalists with the critical tools needed for ethical decision-making.

Regulatory mechanisms also prove effective when implemented transparently and consistently. Media councils and press ombudsmen in some European nations have successfully institutionalized ethical oversight, providing avenues for public accountability and journalistic redress (Gómez, 2020). These bodies promote standards of accuracy, transparency, and fairness, while also fostering trust between media institutions and their audiences (Rice & Taylor, 2020). However, regulatory success hinges on independence from political influence and the ability to enforce decisions without fear or favor.

Media literacy initiatives represent another critical dimension of ethical intervention. By empowering audiences to critically assess media content, these programs help bridge the gap between ethical journalism and public understanding (Fisher, 2022). In countries with robust media literacy education, misinformation tends to circulate less widely, and audiences are more adept at identifying and challenging unethical reporting (Gómez, 2020; Ballesteros-Aguayo et al., 2022). These findings suggest that ethical communication is not solely the responsibility of journalists but also a societal function involving informed and engaged citizens.

Despite the effectiveness of these interventions, several limitations persist. Structural inequalities—such as unequal access to technology, disparities in education, and media ownership concentration—continue to impede the universal adoption of ethical norms (Pande, 2017; Suing et al., 2022). Moreover, the rise of decentralized content creation through platforms like TikTok and YouTube complicates traditional regulatory approaches, as content creators often operate outside institutional frameworks and are not bound by professional ethical codes (Hickerson & Kothari, 2016). This fragmentation of the media landscape necessitates the development of new models for ethical governance that extend beyond conventional journalism.

Future research should address these gaps by exploring the efficacy of decentralized ethics enforcement, such as community moderation, platform-based accountability tools, and algorithmic transparency. In addition, comparative studies examining the implementation of ethical journalism across different political and cultural contexts can yield insights into adaptable best practices. There is also a need to examine how emerging technologies such as artificial

intelligence, deepfakes, and automated content generation intersect with communication ethics and reshape journalistic responsibilities (Macnamara, 2021).

Ultimately, the ongoing evolution of journalism in the digital age calls for an equally evolving ethical framework—one that recognizes the systemic barriers, engages diverse cultural contexts, and empowers both practitioners and audiences to uphold the foundational values of truth, fairness, and responsibility. While no universal model can fully encapsulate the nuances of ethical journalism across all societies, collaborative efforts among academics, practitioners, policymakers, and educators offer a viable pathway toward global media integrity.

CONCLUSION

This review has explored the evolving landscape of communication ethics in journalism and social media, revealing critical themes and pressing challenges. The findings indicate that while traditional ethical principles such as transparency, accountability, and truth-telling remain foundational, the digital era necessitates the expansion of these principles to address novel dilemmas. Emerging issues such as misinformation, media sensationalism, algorithmic manipulation, and cultural discrepancies in ethical interpretations underscore the complexity of ethical journalism in a globalized and digitally networked society. The analysis further emphasizes the influence of systemic factors, including political constraints, economic pressures, and cultural norms, in shaping journalistic behavior and ethical practice.

There is a clear urgency to strengthen ethical journalism through coordinated policy interventions, including robust professional training, independent regulatory frameworks, and media literacy education. These strategies, as evidenced in the results, offer viable pathways to restoring public trust, reducing misinformation, and ensuring ethical consistency across different media platforms. However, persistent structural barriers and technological disruptions continue to challenge these efforts.

Future research should focus on adaptive ethical frameworks, particularly in decentralized and algorithm-driven media environments, and expand comparative studies across diverse geopolitical contexts. Cross-sector collaboration involving academia, policymakers, media practitioners, and digital platforms is essential to developing globally responsive and culturally attuned ethical guidelines. Addressing these issues is not merely a theoretical exercise but a societal imperative for preserving democratic discourse and ensuring the responsible communication of information.

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