3 Digital Labour Is Emotional Labour

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> I have been overwhelmed by how much 'emotions' have been a 'sticking point' for philosophers, cultural theorists, psychologists, sociologists, as well as scholars from a range of disciplines. This is not surprising: what is relegated to the margins is often, as we know from deconstruction, right at the centre of thought itself.
>
> (Ahmed, 2014, p. 4)

Introduction

This chapter argues that only by articulating the affective, emotional dimensions of digital work in museums and heritage organisations is it possible to develop a richer understanding of the role and importance of technology within sites of cultural history, cultural production, and cultural consumption.

To date, scholarship focused upon technology in museums and heritage workplaces has examined digital skills, digital participation, digital-first collecting, digital collections management, multi-media content development, digital interactives, the role of AI, VR, and AR, as well as the ethics of social media and Big Data. However, there has only been minimal attention given to the affective and emotional dimensions of digital work within these settings. Indeed, the emotional aspects of digital work have been largely overlooked, noticeable only in the margins of daily activity and, on occasion, understood as a more "feminine" characteristic of digital work (and thus less worthy of explication). The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a critical juncture in exposing the role of emotional labour within digital practice in the cultural sector. As will be explored shortly,

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this moment surfaced a new vocabulary of emotion and care specifically within digital museum practice. A result of this has been an increasing acknowledgement in policy literature of the link between emotional labour and digital work: the UK's Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre (PEC) has reported how the lockdown "amplified existing challenges faced by the workforce in digital roles", claiming that "digital workers…can often feel unsupported and under pressure" (Kidd et al., 2021, p. 21).

The story told here focuses on the transformative possibilities of emotional work undertaken by digital staff working for museums across a range of international settings. It maintains that people, technology, and museums – these three dimensions – are a constitutive tripartite, in which each component part is as necessary as the other in the effort to create truly progressive cultural institutions. Such an emphasis on *people* demands a fresh reading of the emotional nature of working with technology in these settings. In 1963, Everett M. Rogers defined an "innovation champion" as someone who is the "broker and arranger for innovation" (2003, p. 415). For Rogers, these champions occupy a key linking position in their organisation, possess analytical and intuitive skills in their understanding of different individual aspirations, and demonstrate well-honed interpersonal and negotiating skills when working with other people (2003, ibid). This chapter shows how digital staff in museums are also innovation champions, required to undertake emotional labour whilst promoting digital transformation and change.

Such a reading is aligned with feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway when she states:

> Feminist accountability requires a knowledge tuned to resonance, not to dichotomy…Feminist embodiment, then, is not about a fixed location in a reified body, female or otherwise, but about nodes in fields, inflections in orientations, and responsibility for difference in material-semiotic fields of meaning.
>
> (1988, p. 588)

In seeking to better understand the emotional labour involved in digital labour, this chapter draws on theories of *affect* by searching for, according to Haraway's understanding, the resonances; the "nodes in fields" and "inflections in orientations" to be found within personal testimonies of digital work (1988, p. 587).

The Origins of Emotional Labour

Understanding the intellectual underpinnings of emotional labour can help us better understand how it can be effectively applied to studies of work in museums and, more specifically, digital museum work. In her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild defined emotional labour as a kind of labour that "calls for a coordination of mind and feeling" and which "sometimes draws on a source of self that we honour as deep and integral to our individuality" (1983, p. 7). In her original study, Hochschild explored the emotional labour of people (predominantly women) working in service professions, undertaking primary research of flight attendants at Delta Airlines for example, where she understood the term as applying to a form of work which is sold for a wage, and therefore having an exchange value. Hochschild describes how emotional labour operates through the pervasiveness of "feeling rules":

> Acts of emotion management are not simply private acts; they are used in exchanges under the guidance of feeling rules. Feeling rules are standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is rightly owed and owing the currency of feeling. Through them, we tell what is "due" in each relation, each role. We pay tribute to each other in the currency of the managing act. In interaction we pay, overpay, underpay, play with paying, acknowledge our dues, pretend to pay, or acknowledge what is emotionally due another person. In these ways…we make our try at sincere civility. (1983, p. 18)

These "feeling rules" become an overarching yet unspoken doctrine through which organisations manage their staff and clients. Later, we will explore how such rules operate within recent lived experiences of museum digital workers. For Hochschild, the cultivation of "feeling rules" has meant that social exchange in some workplaces has been "forced into narrow channels; there may be hiding places along shore, but there is much less room for individual navigation of the emotional waters" (1983, p. 119). In other words: organisational expectations placed on one's emotions at work compromise the ways that workers can connect with one another, as well as with their own emotional wellbeing.

Later, Hochschild extended her research to the emotional labour of those working in care provision in both paid and unpaid settings, including nursing homes, childcare centres, hospitals, as well as

within the family (1989; 2003; 2012; 2013). Throughout, she remains clear that emotional labour need not be a negative phenomenon, but rather "implies directionality, intention, and effort" (2013, p. 31). She continues: "just as a professional singer takes pride in her highly trained voice or an actor in a moving performance on stage, so the care worker often takes pride in cultivating warm, trusting, and resilient relationships with clients" (2013, ibid). By Hochschild's own admission the term emotional labour has in recent years become "blurry and overapplied" (Beck, 2018). It has been adopted as a catch-all phrase in myriad analyses of reproductive labour, affiliated with a multitude of domestic duties commonly determined as women's work and "other Cinderella-y stuff that often falls to women – along with the admin that goes with it" (Wilkinson, 2018). The task for us, therefore, is to accept emotional labour as a blunt but valuable concept with which "to be more precise and careful in our ideas and to bring this conversation into families and to the office in a helpful way" (Beck, 2018).

Emotional Labour in Cultural Work

Emotional labour is not a new concept within critiques of work in the creative and cultural sectors, or across the so-called "knowledge economy" more widely.[1] Over the past two decades emotional labour has come to be seen by social scientists as a fraught and over-used concept when considering lived experiences of work in the creative, cultural, and media industries.[2] Studies since the early 2000s have noted how a "vocabulary of love is repeatedly evinced" across these sectors "with work imbued with the features of the Romantic tradition of the artist, suffused with positive emotional qualities" (von Osten, 2007, as cited in Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 15). Feminist scholars such as Angela McRobbie have taken to task the unacknowledged costs of what she terms "passionate work" in the cultural and creative sectors (1998; 2015).

For such scholars, the dawning of this kind of work in the late 1990s came with a form of creative entrepreneurialism that was distinctively *affective* by nature. Cultural and creative work was mythologised as demanding emotional labour – the cultivation of mind and feeling; a process of drawing on a sense of self – in its call for workers to possess a "professional robustness to keep going and not be thrown off course, like a form of strength training" (McRobbie, 2015a). Theorists sceptically perceived promises of self-expression, self-actualisation, and freedom linked to work in these industries as problematic when cast through the lens of precarity, informality, and demands for flexibility.

Cultural workers, whilst "highly enthusiastic and uncomplaining" were seen to have "to perform a more creative version of what Arlie Hochschild called 'emotional labour' when writing about the training of airline cabin crew in 1984" (McRobbie, 2015a). In the US context, Andrew Ross's 2003 study of the "new industrial type" of "no collar" workers in New York's "Silicon Alley" and San Francisco's "Multimedia Gulch" similarly located emotional labour at its heart:

> On the landscape of modern work, the demand for emotional labour has risen in proportion to the decline in physical toil. *More of the self is engaged, and there is an element of theatricality in the way we are expected to perform our jobs.* For creatives in knowledge industries, this was especially true, and Silicon Alley had more than its share of people who came from the performing arts.
>
> (2003, p. 32) [*my italics*]

As Ros Gill and Andy Pratt state, the "loud affirmation of the potentially transformative and transgressive nature of affect" within cultural work misses "the anxiety, insecurity and individualised shame that are endemic features of fields in which you are judged on what you produce" and when "your whole life and sense of self is bound up with your work" (Blair, 2001, as cited in Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 16). Eleanora Belfiore has similarly highlighted the "invisible subsidy" of creative professionals engaged in publically subsidised participatory arts projects (2022, p. 73). She explains how the "hidden costs" of this work – which include personal and psychological costs as well as ethical dilemmas – "have an effect on cultural workers' well-being alongside financial implications" and that they "take working practices in these areas far away from notions of 'good work'" (2022, ibid).

Emotional Labour in Museum Technology

Taken together, cultural work and knowledge work bear tangible similarities to digital work in museums and heritage organisations. Digital workforces in these settings can be productively considered a hybrid phenomenon of these two forms of work, at once knowledge workers – using, managing, understanding, and creating with digital technology and innovation – as well as cultural workers, that is to say: custodians of cultural historical collections, using digital to fulfil institutional commitments to cultural preservation and social justice. Being aware

of the myriad ways that emotional labour has been analysed within studies of cultural work and knowledge work – as the romantic aspect of cultural work; as the inevitable collateral of having a creative job; as involving the self and soul at work; as the justification for exhaustion, poor emotional wellbeing, and financial insecurity; as involving performativity and resilience – can help us better understand and reflect upon the role of emotion in digital work in museums.

Emotion and Digital Work in Museums

The following is an "affective" reading of digital work in museums during a two-month period in Autumn 2020 while much of the world was struggling to cope with the second wave of COVID-19. Action-centred ethnographic research was conducted with staff working on digital projects in a range of museums and cultural institutions across the UK, the USA, Canada, and New Zealand. The fieldwork culminated in the creation of *People. Change. Museums*. (2020, p. 21), a six-part podcast series which explored the relationship between museums and technology at a time of intersecting global crisis. As will be explained, this research evidenced the emergence of a new vocabulary of emotional labour – a lexicon of emotionality and care – at the heart of digital work. What does it mean to undertake an "affective" reading and why is it necessary here? The study of affect "is about infusing social analysis with what could be called psychosocial 'texture'", which consequently "opens up new thinking about nebulous and subtle emotions" (Wetherell, 2012, p. 2). To understand the interplay of emotion, emotionality, and digital transformation in museum work, we must attend to the undertones of more formal conversation and attempt to pinpoint what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing terms the "rush of troubled stories" and "interwoven rhythms" that make up daily digital work in such settings (2015, p. 34). An affective reading of the museum space, therefore, demands an alertness to subtle alterations in "feeling rules", and that is where we will begin.

A Shift in "Feeling Rules"

At the time of data collection, "feeling rules" – the standards used in emotional conversation to determine what is owed and what is owing in the prevailing currency of feeling (Hochschild, 1983) – had substantially shifted and evolved across the cultural sector, notably

within museum digital work. Sara Snyder, Chief of External Affairs and Digital Strategies at the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Renwick Gallery (USA) described how "chronic anxiety is pretty widespread", with staff "just not getting the sleep they need" (interview with Sophie Frost, October 30, 2020). She continued:

> I'm muddling through, and I'm going to go ahead and admit it, mentally and emotionally, most parents I know are not really OK right now. We keep saying it's impossible to do this again, but the next day we wake up, if we ever went to sleep in the first place and do it all again.

Emotional vulnerability and honesty became paramount during this period as both a coping mechanism and a means of survival. A dialogue centred around care emerged when acknowledging that museum work had blurred exponentially with personal lives and caring commitments at home. Particularly in the US context, this was coupled with feelings of grave responsibility regarding civil rights and equity issues:

> My biggest worry is for my staff. I care about them not just as workers, but as people. And I know they've been going through major life challenges during this lockdown. Many of them have young children at home or elderly parents, and the caregiving burden is just tremendous. Some are dealing with illness or death in their families. Some have partners or spouses who've lost their jobs. The social and political climate is really adding extra layers of worry. And the fact that we still must march to make the point that Black Lives Matter means that the country has a long way to go before we reach equality for all people. And that's…weighing on my staff and on me.
>
> (Snyder, Sara. Interview with Sophie Frost, October 30, 2020)

Scholars of reproductive labour have argued that prior to the pandemic "the 'care deficit' had been less visible and rarely recognised as a crisis in popular discourse and the media" (Htun, 2021, p. 635). Studies within this field have observed a "greater alignment in women's perspectives" (2021, ibid) with the "growing tendency to work from home and other changes in work styles" likely to "induce shifts in gender roles" (2021, p. 640). Mala Htun has suggested that, in the US context at least, "the pandemic *revealed* but did not *induce*

the caregiving crisis: for most people it was already a major ordeal to provide reproductive labour" (2021, p. 635). Encouragingly, theories of care within museums have proliferated (see Woodham et. al., 2020; Morse, 2022) but their application in the study of digital museum work remains insubstantial. Considering emotional labour within the context of digital museum work provides a fresh entry point to reflect on care and museum work more broadly.

Another shift in "feeling rules" within the museum has resulted in greater acknowledgement that emotional labour is crucially an intersectional phenomenon. Racialised emotional labour – the uncompensated emotional labour that results in "racial battle fatigue" (Williams et al., 2019) – can be seen as common and continuous within cultural and creative work, as well as within digital work where virtual forums tend to be, by default, White, racialised spaces (ibid). For museums during this time, there was increased concern that virtual museum spaces were mirroring the intimidation and unfriendliness of physical museum buildings. This was acutely felt by some digital leaders, as Effie Kapsalis, Senior Digital Program Officer at the Smithsonian Institution (USA), commented:

> If we are to be an embedded resource in schools and people's homes, *we need to become* much more sophisticated about how we reach people. And there's *a fair amount of convincing* that we have to do with leadership about the urgent need to staff that. I think we're used to a traditional menu of output in the cultural sector, which involves publications and involves exhibits and programmes in our buildings. So, *we are going to have to make some hard choices* about what we fund and resource in the future. And that's going to be complicated [emphasis added].
>
> (Kapsalis, Effie. Interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020)

Studying the emotional labour of digital work can expose a more complex set of connections between gender, museums, and technology – a set of connections that demand dedicated research if we are to evolve an equitable future for the sector. At this juncture, what can be said with clarity is that, amongst digital museum leaders at least, there was a sincere desire to support the inevitable and complex emotional labour in both work and home lives during this time, and this surfaced a vocabulary of emotion within working practices.

A Lexicon of Emotional Labour

As we have just seen, emphatic phrases such as "we need to become'', "fair amount of convincing", and the call "to make some hard choices" began to expose a new, more emotional discourse at the core of the digital agenda in museums. As institutional demand for virtual content grew (and subsequently fluctuated) throughout the pandemic, anxiety amongst digital museum leaders about the ability of museums to cope increased. Kapsalis stated: "The greatest professional struggle for me after the need to support my staff is the stark mismatch that I'm seeing between expectations of what's possible and the capabilities that the museum has to actually execute on our ambitions" (interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020).

Jack Yates, Communications Officer at the Royal Armouries (UK), described the emotional toll of these expectations and capabilities:

> …a lot of my role at the moment *is really trying to keep that momentum going* and keep the people that were very active when they were locked down at home, now they're back in the museum, is *keeping them involved, keeping them excited* about it… People that have now bought into it, are bought in. I think *it's just about winning everyone else over* [emphasis added].
>
> *I'm trying really hard* to get curators and get people to engage when there are questions on our social media channels or people are questioning our objects, that sort of thing, instead of replying institutionally [emphasis added].
>
> (Interview with Sophie Frost, December 16, 2020)

What we see here, in practice, is Rogers' conceptualisation of the innovation champion – someone deploying analytical and intuitive skills by "trying to keep momentum going", seeking to understand various individual aspirations, "winning everyone else over", and "trying really hard" through well-honed interpersonal and negotiating skills to broker digital change across the museum (2003, p. 3). There was growing anxiety about how digital teams were going "to continue the sense of urgency around digital capacity" once the pandemic was over, coupled with the fear that "we are not doing enough" (Kapsalis, Effie. Interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020). Kapsalis continued:

> …it's going to take resources and people that we don't already have, simply those who know how to understand audiences, to

> analyse data, build strategy out of data. Those are things that are going to be extremely important to our future relevance.

There was not only concern about how to maintain momentum around digital, but an increased awareness that digital activity was closely linked to an institution's ability to be attuned to certain communities. Strategies of emotional labour were seen as vital for promoting digital activity, and therefore necessary for future-proofing the museum, as Kapsalis stated: "We need to be much more *thoughtful and comprehensive and focused* in our approach. I think that's going to take education with staff who are involved in traditional roles" [emphasis added] (interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020).

Words such as "thoughtful", "comprehensive", and "focused" constituted a new vocabulary of emotional labour for digital work. For many years, a significant area of struggle for digital teams has been their relatively low and siloed positioning within established hierarchies of museum expertise. If working in a museum digital team, it has long been necessary to coerce, explain, and support others in the institutional hierarchy of the importance of digital technology for audience engagement. As Snyder stated: "if you want to know how a museum functions, digital folks have to work with all the teams" (interview with Sophie Frost, October 30, 2020). What we saw during the pandemic was a fresh coordination of mind and feeling fostered through new digital activity; a coordination that could fundamentally challenge former structures of power. Jude Holland, Learning Manager at Barnsley Museums (UK) explained:

> It feels like, I suppose, the activist museum, which was emerging as a concept, is becoming much more possible through digital…there's something really encouraging about potentially old hierarchies being broken down within museums and that that's something that people, at whatever their level, can get involved with.
>
> (Interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020)

As Hochschild might put it, what we see here in action is the substantial exchange value of emotional labour for museums and heritage organisations, cultivated through digital work. For Snyder, the key issue remained that digital museum work – and indeed all museum work – continued to be misaligned with outdated, more analogue working practices:

> And so what the problem [is] I think, actually, is that we've structured a workday 36 hours a week or 40 hours a week based on a machine. It's like people working with machines, the old kind of machines. The digital workforce is like bits and drabs, like video editing. It takes a long time to get it right and then an even longer time to watch the machine render it. And so if we create the new systems, we're going to have to change how we think about work and all the ways, including the emotional stuff that comes outside.
>
> (Interview with Sophie Frost, October 30, 2020)

Digital leaders were using changes in cultural production and consumption to advocate for the increased value of "emotional stuff" in work, in tandem with calling for more iterative, agile, and fluid approaches to the management of time and tasks:

> We still see people who try to do everything by Zoom meeting when in fact just having more meetings doesn't actually take the place of a truly distributed, remote, asynchronous approach to managing projects and getting work done.
>
> (Snyder, Sara. Interview with Sophie Frost, October 30, 2020)

The emotional labour undertaken and absorbed by digital teams during this period not only provided fresh resolve to better integrate digital within broader museum infrastructure but provided a new rationale to encourage museum workforces to experiment and play.

Emotion Work, Solidarity, and Digital Experimentation

As the pandemic exacerbated imbalances in caring responsibilities, acknowledgement of vulnerability enabled new forms of solidarity through virtual collaboration to emerge. For many, digital activity expanded possibilities for more person-centred, activist practices, propelling discussions around emotional labour to take place in virtual spaces. Holland remarked: "so I think on Twitter, there's been quite a lot of chat about emotional labour in terms of community engagement. And so it's been quite helpful to look at that and engage with that". She shared the following:

> …one of my team has taken it upon herself, working with another colleague, to send out a weekly wellbeing prompt to the whole of

> the museum team with kind of suggested mindfulness activities. The other week it was just kind of some suggestion of some good stuff that was on Netflix. And I think that has been really nice and really helpful. I suppose digital technology does enable us to come together more as teams and across teams.
>
> (Holland, Jude. Interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020)

While digital was expanding and pushing at boundary lines in museum expertise, it was also challenging the role of the museum within society more broadly. As Holland, in discussion on her work with digital at Barnsley Museums, described:

> I think digital is enabling us to really shift from a kind of... museums are didactic institutions that kind of transmit facts down to people, which we've been moving away from for a long time. But I think we were still quite a long way off, as a sector, from being truly... we were doing a lot of work with community groups, but there wasn't much that was by community groups within the work that we were doing. So I think it will enable the shift to much more truly participatory institutions. And I think there's going to be much more opportunities for mass participation.

She continued:

> [Digital] means that, you know, hopefully we are able to kind of break down barriers. What I hope will come out of this is that we will become much more participatory and will react much more quickly to the kind of the current climate and current social, political and economic trends.
>
> (Holland, Jude. Interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020)

Consequently, the desire for digital experimentation and internal upskilling during the pandemic increased. Staff working within digital teams described how greater institutional appetite had enabled new possibilities for experimentation with digital. Andrea Ledesma, Digital Product Specialist for the Web and Digital Engagement Team at the Field Museum in Chicago (USA), explained:

> …I perpetually feel that there is always so much to learn, so much to do to better your practice. Is what we're doing right? Am I doing

> this correctly? Is this going to work? I think that goes back to like, you know, are we going to take this risk? Are you brave enough to take that risk? Like, I sort of play that in my head all the time. And cautious optimism comes into play here, and it's just like you never know, there's one way to find out, keep on making it and see what sticks.
>
> (Ledesma, Andrea. Interview with Sophie Frost, December 1, 2020)

Comments that focused on feelings, on learning, bravery, risk-taking, and "cautious optimism", were again indicative of a new vocabulary of emotional labour, positioning it as a blueprint glossary for the museum to come.

Conclusion: The Future is Emotional

In museums, digital work is emotion work: it gives rise to new, virtual, and hybrid opportunities for emotionally connected and supportive dialogue, it pushes at existing institutional boundary lines, it propels play and experimentation, and – most significantly – it invites more people to the conversation. As Steven Franklin, Digital Engagement Officer at Egham Museum, described:

> …I think, despite the challenges, [the pandemic] did provide a real opportunity. We were able to really accelerate the mechanisms through which we can now talk to the public online. Before COVID, we didn't have those mechanisms in place.
>
> (Interview with Sophie Frost, November 13, 2020)

Digital workers in museums are "innovation champions", brokering and arranging new ways of thinking, and helping new innovations fit into organisational contexts (Rogers, 2003). During the pandemic, it was through the intentional, purposeful, and effort-based actions of digital teams – through their emotional labour – that adroitly, and at speed, museums and heritage organisations were repurposed for survival.

While emotional labour can enter museum technology discourse in productive ways, it is important to remember that digital technology does not discriminate when it comes to the potential toll of emotional labour. In digital museum work, emotional labour continues to be the

source of exhausting and exploitative practices as much as the starting point for new forms of world building. Let us not forget that emotional labour is a blunt concept, neither good or bad; rather, it is a concept that helps us see more clearly *who* is required to undertake emotion management in their work and to grasp *why* this is necessary.

The emotional labour of digital work imbues it with a unique power; a power intrinsically linked to the practice of "caring with", whereby "caring", according to Joan C. Tronto, can be viewed as:

> …a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web.
>
> (Fisher & Tronto, 1990, p. 40 cited in Tronto, 1998, p. 16)

In other words, digital work is, and should continue to be, a practice of radical care. What must we do about the inevitability of emotional labour in digital work in museums and cultural organisations moving forward? We have explored how emotional labour is intrinsically connected to digital transformation work. Now let us value it, integrate it, place it at every level of the museum, and appreciate that a digital-first agenda is a community-first agenda. Let us acknowledge that this may require an overhaul not just of the structure of the museum, as well as its recruitment and wellbeing practices, and how we do diversity and equity work, but an overhaul of work itself too – of *how* we work, in terms of time, remuneration, intellectual space, and how we make space to play.

Culture is technological and technology is cultural. And both culture and technology – if the aim is for them to be created, delivered, and consumed equitably – require emotional labour. Hochschild puts it best: "one can enjoy emotional labour immensely, I think, provided one has an affinity for it and a workplace that supports that affinity" (2013, p. 2).

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Notes

1 By "knowledge work", I refer to jobs that involve the production of new knowledge, which have evolved since the emergence of the "knowledge economy", which by the end of the last century was largely connected with research-intensive and innovation industries.
2 Definitions of cultural, creative, and media industries are wide ranging. I draw upon the original Creative Industries Mapping Document put together by the British government in 1998, which included advertising, antiques, architecture, crafts, design, fashion, film, leisure software, music, performing arts, publishing, software, and TV and radio within its definition.

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