

Social media and networks in health and social care



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Introduction

The focus of this course, *Social media and networks in health and social care*, will be on the concept of internet safety and the possible advantages and disadvantages the internet offers you in terms of health and social care.

You will reflect on your own use of online social networks, along with the ethical and professional issues associated with these when working in health and social care settings. You will be given the opportunity to consider the wide range of health technologies available, and you will also explore the advantages and disadvantages of the internet for vulnerable children and young people with developmental and intellectual disability. The course begins by exploring the theme of 'the internet'.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K102 Introducing health and social care](#).

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- identify the advantages and disadvantages of using the internet in health and social care
- evaluate your own use of online social networks and the implications of these for workers in health and social care
- evaluate the impact of the internet on the experiences of users of health and social care services.

1 The internet

The internet is:

a global network of computers that works much like the postal system, only at sub-second speeds. Just as the postal service enables people to send one another envelopes containing messages, the internet enables computers to send one another small packets of digital data.

(BBC, 2014)

Almost all adults (91%) in the UK use the internet and adults with disabilities are increasing their use of the internet too (78% of those with reported disability use the internet). Adults aged 65 years or over who report using the internet is also increasing year-on-year (Office of National Statistics (ONS), 2019a). Email is one of the most common uses of the internet used by adults in Great Britain (86%) and 63% of adults report using the internet to search for health-related information. Other popular uses of the internet include internet banking, reading news, making calls and using social media (ONS, 2019b). Over 84% of adults use the internet via a mobile or smartphone (ONS, 2019a).

Activity 1 Top five uses of the internet

Drag and drop these uses of the internet in order of popularity.

Sending and receiving emails

Finding information about goods or services

Internet banking

Reading the news

Making video or voice calls

Match each of the items above to an item below.

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Discussion

The top five uses of the internet by percentage of adults over 16 years of age are:

1. Sending and receiving emails (86%)
2. Finding information about goods or services (78%)
3. Internet banking (73%)
4. Reading online news (66%)
5. Making video or voice calls (50%)

Figure 1 shows the top five uses of the internet between 2009 and 2019 (ONS, 2019b). The maroon lines show the figures for the year 2019 and the blue are from 2009. You will see that over the course of the decade the use of the internet dramatically increased.

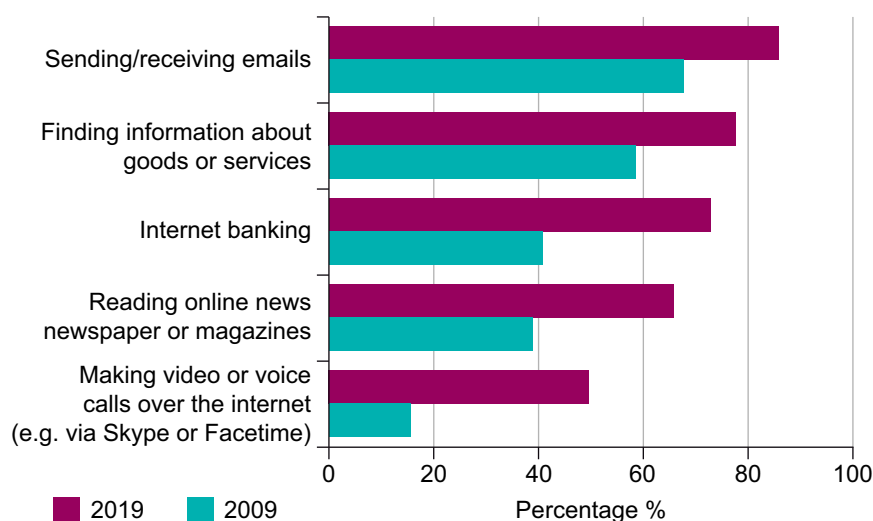


Figure 1 Internet activities within the last three months, Great Britain, 2009 and 2019.

1.1 Advantages and disadvantages

The internet provides a wealth of health and care related information. The majority of health and care organisations now have an online presence, providing information such as their staff, missions, values and services. Websites such as NHS Choices and patient info provide a range of information about signs, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment of conditions. In addition, National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) has a variety of knowledge sheets and provides guidance on the recommended diagnosis, treatment and care for lots of different conditions such as diabetes, obesity, high blood pressure and heart disease. NICE guidance in particular is good quality evidence to use in your academic work.

Other websites can be run by charitable organisations that provide information for service users, sources of advice and support. Many have discussion forums and/or social media pages where people can talk with others in the same or similar circumstances, e.g. AgeUK, the British Heart Foundation and Cancer Research UK. Pharmacies, GP consultations and private care services are also often available online.

Activity 2 What are the advantages and disadvantages of the internet?

Using the drop down choices below, identify whether you think each of the following statements is an advantage or disadvantage of the internet for health and care, or both.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

You might have come to different conclusions about whether each of these was an advantage or disadvantage. There are no right or wrong answers. Here are some example answers.

1. Fast and efficient communication – Advantage

The internet makes it easy to correspond with people in any geographic location and this is often viewed as an advantage. Professionals are able to network easily with others across the world.

2. Information can be lost easily – Disadvantage

Hackers, computer viruses and problems with hardware can often cause information to be lost or stolen very easily. Information lost this way is often irretrievable.

3. The internet is global – Both

The ability to network with people from around the world is a wonderful opportunity, especially if you have friends or relatives living overseas. However, health and care information, recommended guidance, services and policies vary greatly from country to country and might not be relevant or accurate for your particular location.

4. Privacy and security, spam and viruses – Disadvantage

The risk to privacy, the security of information and risk of computer viruses wiping or stealing information from your computer is frequently of concern for many. It is not always possible to know what data you are sharing or leaving behind every time you use the internet. Emails can easily be lost or sent to the wrong person.

5. Information can be shared easily – Both

Electronic health records are a great opportunity for professionals and organisations to share information about care and optimise care delivery. However, sometimes information is shared too freely and it is not always possible to know that you are sharing the right information with the right person at the right time.

6. Social networking: access to advice and other people in similar circumstances – Both

Social networks and access to online discussion forums can be a valuable source of support. This means that service users can obtain information from others in similar circumstances or ask questions and get responses very quickly. However, it is not always possible to confirm whether the person you are speaking with is who they say they are, or if they are providing the correct advice and information. There are also risks associated with sharing personal information in these platforms.

7. Finding information about professionals and organisations who provide care – Advantage

You can now find lots of information about NHS trusts, care homes and organisations who provide care. This helps you to understand what services they provide. For example, staff profiles let you see what qualifications and experience the professionals who care for you have. Online public reviews of these organisations also means you can provide and see others' feedback about their performance.

8. Finding information about health, signs, symptoms and diagnosis – Both

Information about health and what to expect from treatments are very useful. It can also help you to make decisions about what service you need and in what circumstance, e.g. whether to go to your GP or urgent care centre. However, not all websites are created equally and the information available online is not always credible or accurate; it might be that it is only relevant to certain geographic locations too. Service users can also be deterred from seeking help when they actually need to and vice versa.

1.2 Health and care on the internet

In the previous activity you will have identified a range of advantages and disadvantages of the internet for health and care. The motivation or reason for someone using the internet can play a role in whether it is seen as an advantage or disadvantage. Some of the most common uses of the internet for health and care include: seeking information about signs, symptoms, diagnosis and treatment; connecting with other patients or carers; linking with health and care providers; information about diet and nutrition. Many people use the internet as a primary source of information, over and above more traditional 'printed' information, talking to friends, family, colleagues and even health and care professionals (Jacobs *et al.*, 2017).

The next activity gets you to think about how you might have used the internet for health and care.



Activity 3 Using the internet for health information

Think about how you might use or have used the internet for the purpose of health and care. In the box below, type in three things that describe how you have used the internet for these purposes.

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Jaks *et al.* (2019) and Moreland *et al.* (2015) suggest some reasons why people use the internet for health and care information:

- finding information to take to an appointment or consultation to discuss with the professional
- finding information about signs and symptoms to make decisions about seeking face-to-face support and the type of support. For example, whether to take a child with a fever to the GP or urgent care
- seeking information about a service provider
- getting responses to queries and questions quickly, 24 hours a day, particularly through social networks
- seeking emotional support and information from others with the same diagnosis/condition/situation
- to improve knowledge of a diagnosed condition and how to manage it
- finding information to improve health and wellbeing generally e.g. diet advice, weight loss.

As you have seen, there are plenty of benefits and reasons to use the internet for health and care purposes. However, the internet also brings with it a wide range of disadvantages and risks.

The next section will explore potential disadvantages and risks of the internet relevant to a particular group of vulnerable children and young people.

1.3 Children, young people and the internet

While the internet can offer a wealth of advantages, some of which you have explored in previous sections, there are a range of risks and challenges when using it, particularly for children and young people. Conversely, children and young people with developmental and intellectual disability or mental health conditions are particularly vulnerable to the risks of the internet.

Online abuse can reflect that which occurs in the offline world, such as emotional abuse, grooming, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation and radicalisation, but some is predominantly online only, such as cyberbullying and sexting (NSPCC, 2019). There might also be many others that you will come across in the next activity. Online abuse can occur through a range of platforms and can potentially lead to offline abuse, as you will see below.

Cyberbullying: This is bullying that occurs online. This type of bullying can follow the child wherever they use the internet or mobile technology.

Emotional abuse: This is the continuous emotional mistreatment of a child. This can happen both online and offline.

Grooming: This can happen online or offline and involves another person, typically an adult, building a relationship with a child with the intent to abuse or exploit them.

Sexting: This is the online use of messaging technology in a range of platforms with the purpose of sharing sexual or naked images or messages. Children can be coerced into sending these images.

Sexual abuse: This involves forcing a child into sexual activities, e.g. viewing or sharing sexual related content either online or offline.

Sexual exploitation: Being forced to create and/or share explicit content. This can happen online or offline.

Radicalisation: The process of persuading or coercing a child or young person to adopt extreme political, religious or social views.

1.4 Working with vulnerable young people online

While it is recognised that all children and young people are vulnerable to the risks of the internet, there are, as indicated in the previous section, particular groups of children and young people who are especially vulnerable. Some research suggests that children and young people with intellectual disability, such as autistic spectrum disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, are at risk of 'being left behind' with regards to internet access (Agren *et al.*, 2018). It is known that this particular group can be more at risk of the dangers associated with the internet: they might have poor insight and judgement about the dangers, have a desire to make friends and be 'included' and as a result of difficulties with peer-to-peer social skills they might feel more comfortable engaging with people online (Chiner *et al.*, 2017; Buijs *et al.*, 2017; Normand and Sallafranque-St-Louis, 2016).

The following activity explores the challenges when working with children and young people with intellectual disability, those who have experienced potentially traumatic events or frequent and significant life events, may live in foster care, with a special care order in place or in a specialist residential setting. It uses the real life experiences of a family support worker who works with children and young people from this group.

Activity 4 Discussions with a family support worker

Please note: you are advised to undertake this activity on a desktop computer as the crossword may not appear correctly on smaller screens.

Note that the audios use pseudonyms to respect the confidentiality of the people and service users associated with the organisation in which the family support worker is employed.

Listen to each audio and then complete the crossword clues for each one.

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 1](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 2](#)

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Audio 3](#)

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

You will have heard the family support worker talking about a range of challenges faced by children and young people in this vulnerable group. Children and young people who have experienced trauma, have developmental or intellectual disability or who are in a residential setting for these reasons are more vulnerable to the risks of the internet than those in mainstream education. They struggle more to understand and form appropriate relationships, find face-to-face social interaction challenging and lack awareness of the risks of sharing personal information.

You will have heard about a case where a young person used a parent's credit card to gamble online, ran up a large bill and became obsessed with the activity. You have also heard about 'Jess', who was groomed online by someone she believed was a woman who she thought was her friend, eventually asking her to share inappropriate sexual images and was able to find her home address. This also raised the issues of sharing personal information online and leaving on 'location service' functions in online social networks such as Facebook or WhatsApp.

The family support worker manages online risks for this vulnerable group by:

- education of staff, children, young people, parents and carers
This education should be embedded into the curriculum and wherever information technology is being used. Staff in this setting are trained three times per year to make sure they are up to date with this rapidly changing technology. Parents and carers should be educated about privacy settings, monitoring these settings and also supervision of children while they are using the internet.
- carrying out individual or group work with those most at risk or where an incident has been reported
The group work allows for an honest and open conversation about information on the internet, e.g. that sites showing pornography are not 'reality'.
- having a safeguarding policy that is regularly reviewed and updated
- referring to credible and reliable resources on the topic of internet safety
An example of these resources are those from [Child Exploitation and Online Protection Command](#) (CEOPs).
- being open and honest with the young people without the need to remove technology completely.

This encourages them to report any concerns they have, ask any questions and teach them how to use technology safely in day-to-day life, as they will have to when they are an adult.

2 The internet, social media and me

In the digital age, almost all of us have a 'digital footprint'. Your digital footprint is the data that you leave behind when you engage with the internet; this can be social media 'likes', posts, pictures or email. In other words, we have some information about us on the internet; this could be something as simple as email, online purchases or social media accounts.

Health and social care professionals have to make sure that they are able to justify their actions and decisions, work for the best interests of their service users and work within the confines of their employer policy. This is part of being 'responsible' and 'accountable' for actions and decisions.



Healthcare Professional Targeted Googling (HCPTG) is a relatively new concept emerging in research literature. This is when patients or service users search for organisations or individual health and social care workers using the internet. Ryan *et al.* (2019) discussed this concept with some members of the public and there is evidence to suggest that it can have both a positive and negative affect on the perceptions of an individual or organisation. For example, certain 'star' systems and 'reviews' can tell us how a service is performing from the user perspective or, alternatively, it can give us professional information about health and social care workers through organisational online profiles.

However, if too much of our personal information is made to be public this could provide a negative view of the person, e.g. evidence of profane language, strong political/religious views, comments about the workplace, etc. In addition, some service users might try to contact professionals through platforms such as Facebook which could cross important boundaries between the patient/service user and professional/employee.

It is important that you have an awareness of your digital footprint and what types of information are publicly accessible.

The next section encourages you to explore this in the context of online social networks and social media.

2.1 Defining online social networks

The term 'Online Social Network (OSN)' refers to people connecting through a range of platforms, enabling users to share personal or professional information on a profile (Ryan, 2019). 'Online Social Media (OSM)' places its emphasis on social relationships, but is better used to describe the media by which those relationships exist (e.g. video, photos, blogs) (Ryan, 2019). Hence, OSNs represent the platform for the online presence and the relationships within it while OSM is a facilitator and method of communication that links the online presence (Ryan, 2019). The world of social media is constantly changing with new sites and apps being added to the offering. In 2019, the most popular social networks worldwide were Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger and WeChat (Statista, 2019).



You might have heard of the following types of platform:

- wikis such as Wikipedia
- blogs such as WordPress and Tumblr
- microblogs such as Twitter
- video and media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram and Snapchat
- social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn.

The next activity encourages you to think about different types of OSN and OSM and the purpose for which they are used.

Activity 5 Making the most of social networking

Complete the following activities on the topic of social networks.

1. [Social networking: is it for me?](#)
2. [Keeping up-to-date using online networking](#)

Discussion

These activities enabled you to explore the different types of social networks and the different platforms appropriate for different purposes: general, professional and special interest. You might already use some or all of these types of social networks or you might have chosen not to engage with social networks at all. You will have considered the benefits of social networks and developed knowledge about how to select an appropriate platform for different purposes.

The next section further explores your interaction with OSN and OSM.

2.2 Reflecting on your digital footprint

Research has shown that many professionals and students training to be a professional have 'awareness' of their digital footprint but when they actually examine what they share online they are surprised by the amount of information that is available (Ryan, 2017a, b). The next activity will ask you to reflect on the type of information you share with the public in social media.

Activity 6 Assessing your own use of social media

Note: if you do *not* have a social media account then you should complete the 'alternative' activity which follows this one.

Choose one of your personal social media profiles to focus on as part of this activity:

- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram

Once you have chosen one of these answer the questions in the following interactive.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Now, put yourself in the position of someone visiting your profile who doesn't know you. Answer the same questions from their perspective, and at the end of the activity you'll see how their perspective differs from yours.

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Discussion

You might have been surprised by the things that you thought would be available to the public, compared with those that were (i.e. what you thought you shared versus what you actually share and what information about you is actually available to the public). You might now decide to change your privacy settings or behaviour online as a result of this activity. You should check and update your privacy settings frequently, especially if platforms have made amendments or updates to these policies. You can revisit this tool at anytime in the future to help you think about what you 'think' you share compared to what you 'actually' share.

Alternative Activity 6

Undertake this activity if you cannot complete the activity above.

1. Identify at least two health and social care organisations in your region, this could be an NHS trust, charity, care home or private organisation such as BUPA.
2. In your web browser, search for the name of the organisation.
3. Note down any social media profiles the organisation uses and have a look at some of the 'user reviews' if there are any available.
4. Open at least one of the social media pages for this organisation and look at some of the recent posts, then complete the table below. If user reviews are available for the organisation, have a look at some of the most recent.
5. Complete stages 1–4 for the second organisation you selected.

Make some notes in answering these questions.

Question	Organisation 1	Organisation 2
What types of information are available? (e.g. is it promoting its service, success stories, health information?)	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
What are your immediate thoughts about this information and has it changed your opinion of the organisation?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
Do you feel that they reflect positively or negatively on the organisation?		
Why do you think you feel this way?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
How would this make you feel about using the services of this organisation?		
If you were to make three recommendations to this organisation about their online presence what would they be?	<i>Provide your answer...</i>	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

Discussion

You might have noticed the range of information available – many organisations share information about their services, staff and promote different areas of health and social care. You will find that there are lots of organisations who use Twitter and that they link with different people and other organisations using # and @ in their posts. Some organisations also have staff profiles; for example, you will find that some Open University academics have staff profiles that give some background information, research activity and academic work.

If you found user reviews about your chosen organisation, you will most likely have found a 'mixed bag' with some positive and some negative. You should think carefully about the reviews you read on such platforms as it is not always possible to determine the accuracy and integrity of the content. However, this type of social media is becoming increasingly popular and can give an oversight of the performance of the organisation.

2.3 The ethical debate: Googling service users and patients?

Patient (or service user) targeted Googling (PTG) is an emerging topic for debate in health and social care and involves a health and social care professional using an internet search engine to find information (such as a social media profile) about a patient in their care. In 2019, the research into this topic was mainly focused on medicine and psychiatry but it is likely this will expand into other care professions. PTG can be defined as:

[the] practice of searching the internet for information about patients. Googling is used as the general term to describe internet searches using the popular search engine, Google.

(Gershengoren, 2019)



There are a range of arguments for and against such activities. Some research suggests that there are certain circumstances where searching for patients or service users on the internet is justified (Gershengoren, 2019; Thabrew *et al.*, 2018; Chester *et al.*, 2017); for example, when you believe someone to be a risk to themselves or others and service user safety is of concern. On the other hand though, it could be deemed to be an invasion of privacy.

Activity 7 Should you Google a service user?

Do you think that it is acceptable for health and social care workers to Google service users in their care?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

Your response was likely to be informed by your background, experience and own attitudes (Ryan *et al.*, 2019).

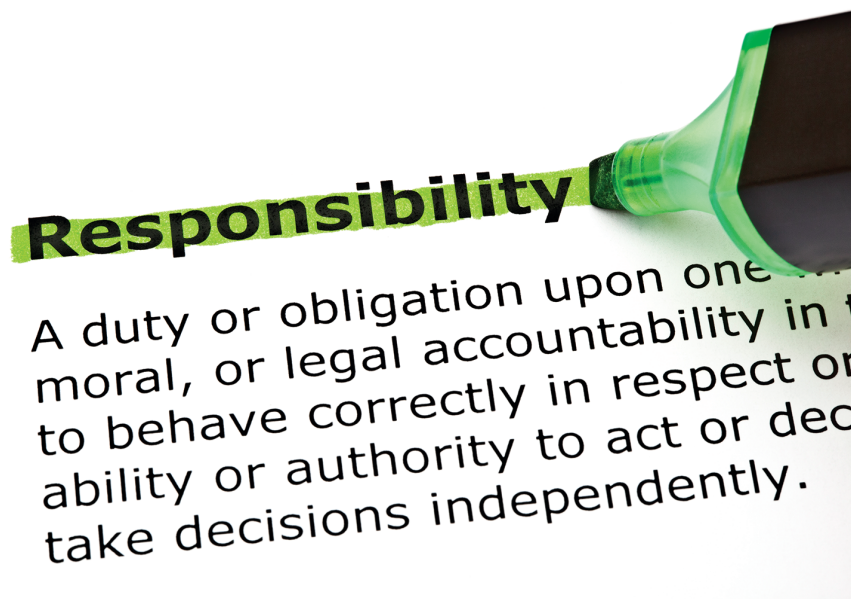
The next section will discuss this further.

2.4 The ethical debate on PTG

You will have seen that there are a range of different perspectives about using internet search engines to find publicly accessible information about people. When working in health and social care it is important to put the service user at the centre of what you do and so the decisions you make about care need to be justified. In order to use the internet or social media responsibly in relation to service users, a study by Ryan *et al.* (2019) found members of the public felt that:

- the act needs to be in the best interests of the patient/service user
- curiosity is not enough to justify searching for a service user's information
- wherever possible, consent should be sought and documented
- justification for the 'search' needs to be documented
- ethical principles need to be considered (i.e. beneficence, maleficence, autonomy and justice).

Ryan and Cornock (2019) and Ryan (2019) suggest a framework by which to consider the professional, employer, ethical and legal implications of PTG so that you can most effectively make and justify your decisions.



The next activity guides you to think more carefully about the searching the internet for information about service users.

Activity 8 Making an internet search on a service user for the purpose of protection

The following video describes the findings of a research project that examined how social workers should or should not use Facebook profiles as part of their practices in child protection. You are advised to watch this video on a full-sized monitor or laptop rather than a mobile device if possible.

This is a relatively challenging video, so don't worry too much if you find it difficult to follow all of it. Focus on the main message, which is around the ethics of using information from social media as part of child protection assessments. As you watch this video, consider whether you think that professionals in health and social care should use social media to find information about their patients or service users.

How would you feel as a patient or service user if a professional did this to you? Make some notes about the circumstances when you think this would be appropriate.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Video 1 Facebook: An unethical practice or effective tool in child protection?](#)

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Revisiting the activity in the previous section, has your opinion changed?

Do you think that it is acceptable for health and social care workers to use social media to find out information about service users in their care?

Provide your answer...

Discussion

This is a relatively new area of debate and there are a range of ethical, legal and professional issues associated with using the internet to find information about service users. You might agree with such activity because anything you might find through an internet search is publicly accessible, or it might be that you feel there needs to be more awareness about what people share and how they share it.

Either way, it is important to make sure that anything you do as a professional or employee in health and social care is clearly justifiable and in the best interests of the people in your care. You should consider Beauchamp and Childress's (1989) four components of ethics and make sure you are operating within current professional guidance, policy and procedure.

Conclusion

This free course, *Social media and networks in health and social care*, has invited you to explore some of the advantages and disadvantages of the internet. It discussed the risks of the internet for children and young people with developmental and intellectual disability and how this group is particularly vulnerable to certain types of online abuse such as sexual exploitation, sexual grooming, cybercrime and unhealthy relationships. This concluded with some top tips and recommendations about education of children, young people, parents, carers and professionals in this context.

You have explored the role of OSNs and OSM, how to use these effectively and considered your own digital footprint in relation to these, especially in the current climate where patients and service users are able to search for health and social care professionals. The later part of this course discussed the implications of patient-targeted Googling (PTG) and the ethical debate surrounding this concept.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [K102 Introducing health and social care](#).

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