

Change must come: Mixing methods, evidencing effects, measuring impact

Djamila Boulil & Roy Hanney

University of Groningen & Solent University

Djamila Boulil

djamilaboulil@gmail.com

BIOGRAPHY: Djamila Boulil (Groningen, 1994) comes from a Dutch and Algerian background. She has a bachelor in sociology and a master in cultural leadership. Her research focusses on organisational networks in the arts, with a focus on peripheral areas. A firm believer of the benefits of mixed methods, she uses quantitative, qualitative, and social network methods of analysis in her work. She teaches part-time at the University of Groningen, helping a new generation of art professionals acquire technical skills. The other parts of the year she runs her own impact agency, helping current art professionals prove the wonderful effects their projects have on their surrounding social environment.

Dr Roy Hanney

roy.hanney@solent.ac.uk

ORCID: 0000-0001-7374-0032

Twitter: twitter.com/RoyHanney

BIOGRAPHY: Roy Hanney is employed as an Associate Professor at Solent University and Course Leader for their Media Production programme. With over twenty years higher education teaching experience he specialises in story, documentary, drama and transmedia production. His research interests include project-based learning and live projects which has formed the basis for a PhD at Portsmouth University. He works collaboratively with other organisations within the Solent area to promote opportunities for engagement with media practice, talent development and creative industries networking.

Correspondence Address

c/o Dr Roy Hanney
School of Media Arts & Technology
Solent University
East Park Terrace
Southampton
SO14 0YN

Abstract

In recent years, *impact* has become an important evaluation metric for the creative practice of researchers. It is no longer enough to claim that creative practice has intrinsic rewards, and there is an assumption that it will also affect change in some form or another. Yet, the means for evidencing impact are poorly understood, while the relatively short lifespan of a creative project can mean that there is often little opportunity to evaluate the long-term effect (or impact) of creative practice. To explore this gap, a case study of DeClick, a participatory arts project in the Netherlands, was employed. This study shows that by adopting a 'theory of change' approach, not only does it set out clear intentions for the project, but an analysis of underlying assumptions that link activities to impact leads to effective activity design and provides evidential methodology for evaluating project success. Subsequently, a mixed-methods approach is shown to evaluate impact in a way that values participation in creative practice as a meaningful experience. The approach explored through the case study acknowledges the challenges of evidencing long term impact. But also shows it is possible to evidence 'pathways to impact' using a social return on investment model for impact evaluation.

Keywords: impact; social; investment; pathways; creative; practice; research

Introduction

National assessment exercises like the REF in the UK, alongside requirements by funding bodies, are increasingly focused on impact evaluation as a measure of a project's value. The neoliberal agenda looks for evidence of public value as the main argument for grant funding (Raunig 2013). It is no longer enough for creative practitioners working within the academy to claim that their practice has intrinsic rewards for producers and consumers alike. There is now a requirement that arts-led creative practice should effect change in some form or another, while research-led creative practitioners are required to do more than just generate new knowledge and shape the academic debate. They both now need to be able to measure the impact their practice has on the world, yet the university as a neoliberal institution is very ill-equipped for such tasks (Raunig 2013). Arguably, universities have the system and tools that can assist with the evidencing of impact, defined broadly as effecting a change in the world (Raunig 2013). However, it seems the means for evidencing impact are poorly understood, ephemeral and just out of reach for both arts-led and research-led creative practitioners alike. Furthermore, the current debate around impact and creative practice throws up additional challenges (Belfiore 2021) since focusing on quantifiable data as evidence fails to acknowledge the importance of the seemingly ineffable and hard to define experiential quality of creative practice (Belfiore 2021; Raunig 2013). Additionally, the relatively short lifespan of a creative project can often mean little opportunity to evaluate the long-term social or cultural effect (impact) of a project (Belfiore 2021).

The aim here is not to define arts-led and research-led creative practice in relation to their differences but to see them as overlapping and interchangeable. While acknowledging they have differing intentions, methods and outcomes, there is a shared need to identify means for evidencing impact. What is illustrated in this case study is perhaps one solution – the

adoption of a Theory of Change (ToC) approach to evidencing impact. ToC is a widely documented and well-developed practical method for evidencing impact (Lam 2020). More usefully, it enables creative practice researchers to evidence aspirations or intentions just as well as concrete outcomes. The ToC approach also provides creative practice researchers with a language to narrate their stories and articulate value in terms they understand. It enables them to speak about impact with gatekeepers and evaluators in a way that resonates with not only their own aims and objectives but also with those of the people they work with or represent – their stakeholders (Lam 2020).

Drawing on a case study of DeClick, a participatory art project in the Netherlands, this study aims to clarify that measuring impact and evidencing a social return on investment is possible. The case study shows that initiating a project through the generation of a ToC sets out clear intentions for the project that links activities directly to impact and methods for the evidential evaluation of the experience. Subsequently, deductive reasoning is used to ground the evidence in a larger body of theory and test any assumptions made (Bryman et al. 2012). A mixed-methods approach using both quantitative data and narrative evidence was employed in this case study to highlight the rationale underpinning the practice. The approach explored through the case study acknowledges the challenges of evidencing long-term impact and shows it is possible to evidence 'pathways to impact' through the interlinking of project objectives, inputs and outputs.

Modelling activities, outputs and impacts through a Theory of Change

Lam (2020) provides a useful systematic literature review on the topic of project (program) evaluation and establishes a groundwork for thinking about the how the impact of a creative media or arts-based project might be usefully evaluated. Citing the ToC approach as a well-

established methodology for evaluating impact, Lam (2020) outlines the pros and cons of this approach and offers an insight into how a ToC can articulate how a project might set out to achieve its long-term aims and objectives. A ToC is a logic model that expresses the causal relationships between a project's inputs, activities, outcomes and impacts (Figure 1). This model provides a rationale that links the project's intended impact to its activities, which then ideally evidences the assumptions that link the different elements of a project through referenced research. So, in our case study, the RockSchool on Wheels wanted to (1) stimulate creative talent development among adolescents and (2) aid youth workers in improving the mental and social health of adolescents. This process works backwards, starting with these long-term goals (impact). Then, through the process of consultation with stakeholders, supported by evidence from existing research exploring the preconditions and underlying assumptions, activities and outputs are linked. The project team are then able to identify activities (inputs), define outputs (delivery) and predict impacts (change). Thereby, the team enables the project participants to imagine a series of activities that might initiate effects that lead to impact (McArdle and Murray 2021) and identify the kind of data collected and the terms of reference that will be applied to the analysis of this data. Most importantly, there is a sense that the project team is not only engaged in monitoring and evaluation for later reports also invested in learning reflexively from the experience of delivering a project. The ToC impacts project delivery in the short term, and in the long term, it shows the relation between the activities and the changes the project predicts.

When an organisation or project tells a story in this way, it narrates the journey from resources to impact. Even if the project's impact lies beyond the scope of the project delivery, it is possible to narrativise and provide evidence for why these pathways to impact exist. This is a powerful argument for using a ToC approach since it addresses a major issue with

creative-practice projects that have a limited lifecycle and might otherwise struggle to evidence impact. Lam (2020) explains that organisations can look at sociological research for possible causal relations between behaviour and social phenomena to understand which activities might lead to impact. However, he also warns that organisations should be mindful of the context and complexity of their situation. They should consider the possibility that the research they are using to evidence a causal link between behaviour and impact may not be transferable from other instances, contexts and scenarios to their own situation.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1: Theory of Change model

Lam (2020) usefully identifies several further issues that not only serve to illustrate the process of developing ToC for a project but also provide insight into the nature of the concept. According to him, the process of stakeholder consultation is of utmost importance. During the initial stages of developing a ToC, the consultation process is crucial to developing a project's intended long-term aims and objectives. Consequently, this process will inform the strategies and tactics adopted by the project to achieve these long-term goals. The ability of a project team to develop a plan that is detail-rich, specific to the context and pragmatic is constrained mainly by the quality of stakeholder engagement. Which stakeholders need to be engaged and how to go about this is probably the topic of another paper and widely written about elsewhere (cf. Thibodeau and Ruling [2015]). However, there are two broad approaches to running an initial consultation process. The first brings all the stakeholders together to develop a ToC through a consultation that aims to give voice to a broad range of contributors. This might include local partners, NGOs, businesses, local government, voluntary organisations and, most importantly, the people the project intends to

benefit. Ideally, with this sort of consultation, the project team or organisation will begin with a blank slate, having identified the project's long-term goals, turned these into activities and determined the outputs and means for evaluation. In the case of our hypothetical literacy project, the stakeholder consultation might start with the various voluntary sector organisations and creative practitioners, lead to a discussion with the target community and finally return to the project team. The creative activities for the project will then emerge in direct response to the needs of the project's ToC.

Having developed a ToC, it is not enough to operationalise a plan for a project and hope to deliver the intended impact. There may be assumptions underlying the decisions made when designing project activities that are incorrect and need updating during the project delivery. Moreover, the context for the project may have been overly simplified or the complexity of the project underestimated. The entire basis for the project may change during its lifecycle, which may also entail reconsidering assumptions, contexts and underpinning values.

Furthermore, actions, activities and interventions may have unexpected consequences as they interact with other components within the social ecology of the project and its wider context. The concept of emergence (Lam 2020, 197) is useful here as it embraces the sense that projects aim for social impact are, by their very nature, complex and will need an agile project management methodology (cf. Frohnhoefer 2020) to enable the project team to flex with emergent requirements for change.

What is offered here is a simple model for achieving pathway to impact that starts with a ToC (T), proceeds to assumptions (A), identifies a means for testing these assumptions during the project lifecycle (M), thereby providing evidence of a pathway to impact (P) during the lifecycle of the project (see Figure 2) referred to here as the TAMP model. This kind of ToC-

orientated approach encourages project planning for impact from the outset. It builds strategies for impact into the research project as part of the development process. Ideally, a ToC embraces a reflexive, iterative, learning-oriented approach to project delivery that recognises the propensity to think about how change might come due to project activities. This articulation between a project's elements enables even a short-term project to evaluate success against a theory of how change might come about. Thus, anticipated *pathways to impact* are made explicit as assumptions are tested during the project's lifecycle.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Figure 2: Theories, Assumptions, Measurement, Pathways (TAMP) model

DeClick participatory arts project

Case study: Context

The case study takes place in the province of Groningen, a region in the north of the Netherlands. This rural part of Europe has a unique spatial feature – in an area of almost 3000 square kilometres, there is only one (small) city agglomerate (Groningen City). The rest of the region is characterised by small villages and poor public infrastructure. There is a high poverty rate in the region, with the average income in the highest-ranking municipalities being almost 15% lower than the national average and more than 20% lower than the national average income in most others (CBS 2021). In the Netherlands, most cultural and creative education is organised only in larger cities (van Meerkerk and van den Hoogen 2019). So, if they are looking for creative talent development, the citizens of Groningen must go to the City, but most are unable to do so due to financial constraints and the lack of public transport. The RockSchool on Wheels¹ has contributed to solving this challenge for over ten years by

¹ De Rijdende Popschool (DRP) in Dutch.

providing popular music education to children (and adults) in the whole of Groningen (DRP 2021). Rather than their participants making the costly journey into the City, the RockSchool on Wheels brought professional music teachers and instruments to them in a van and for free. They now organise music education in most villages and primary schools in the north of the Netherlands.

In 2019, after receiving feedback from their participants and partners, the RockSchool on Wheels decided to experiment with a new form of cultural education. Moving beyond their regular pop and rock music education programme, they wanted to offer something closer to the needs and wants of the local youth. Thus, DeClick was born. In this new programme, they offer not only pop and rock music education, but also other music genres and even other disciplines. For this project, the RockSchool on Wheels works exclusively with local youth workers to make a real impact on the local cultural environment and the lives of their participants (aged +12). After a few short pilot experiments undertaken as part of another cultural participation project 'Gronings Vuur' in 2019, DeClick set out to initiate the project in about half of the municipalities of Groningen in 2020. However, progress was partially halted by the outbreak of the pandemic. Nevertheless, because COVID-19 rules in the Netherlands allowed (social) care to continue as usual, youth work locations largely stayed open. Thus, the organisation continued the programme where possible, starting 13 of the original 20 so-called *Clicks* in six months. They also took the time to evaluate their project in 2021, which led them to undertake further research into its impact.

Case study: Theory of Change

Lam (2020) explains that to establish a ToC, one needs to start by establishing the impact goals. Together with an independent research agency, the RockSchool on Wheels formulated

two social *impact* goals based on their original project plan: (1) stimulate creative talent development among adolescents and (2) aid youth workers in improving the mental and social health of adolescents. They aimed to achieve these impact goals by connecting young creative professionals to groups of local youth work clients and having them collaborate on a project responding to the cultural preferences of the participants. The creative end products of each *Click* are then presented to the rest of the town at the end of each summer. Thus, the project's main *activities* were regular meetings between creative professionals and local youth. The output of a *Click* was an artwork (in the broadest sense) for a set of towns in the province of Groningen. Their *outcome*, the direct effect of the project, was increased social cohesion between all parties involved. The challenge for the team was to identify a means to evidence that this was really happening throughout the project and thereby claim a pathway to impact.

Case study: Assumptions (TAMP model)

In order to design activities that might stimulate creative development among young adults (the first impact goal), one must first (a) understand the nature and diversity of existing creative talent among young adults and (b) identify how it might be stimulated. Little is known about creativity among adolescents in the region of Groningen, with previous research suggesting that they had limited if any connection to 'culture' at all. This research asked 815 local adolescents about their leisure activities and what they thought needed to be addressed in the province, and none of their answers was related to the cultural or creative industries (Stelpstra 2020). One of the more commonly identified reasons people say they have no connection to the cultural industries is that the barriers of our sector are simply too high for that particular audience (Hadley 2021). The process of lowering these barriers is called the *democratisation of culture* (Evrard 1997; Hadley 2021). Research into lowering barriers to

participation among young people in the UK showed that there are three types of barriers that adolescents might experience, confirmed by recent research in one of the municipalities of Groningen that identified similar barriers (Ivanov et al. 2021).

The first barriers are *attitudinal barriers*; many adolescents believe that Culture with a capital 'c' (i.e., the more traditional forms of art such as the performing arts, visual arts and heritage institutions) are not intended for them. If this barrier can be surpassed, *functional barriers* emerge. These hurdles prevent individuals from participating because they are not aware of opportunities, no matter how much they would like to go to a performance or exhibition. It is about adolescents simply not knowing that Culture is happening because relevant promotion channels do not reach them. This simply limits the opportunity for many individuals or groups to participate in Culture. They are also hindered by *practical barriers* or the inability to participate because the price, time or location of a performance or exhibition is not accessible to some (Tait et al. 2019).

While the RockSchool on Wheels primarily focuses on lowering practical and functional barriers, DeClick is trying to lower attitudinal barriers by looking at the preferences of their participants. The project rejects the outdated idea that cultural participation can be stimulated in non-typical audiences by simply lowering prices or giving away free tickets. If the concept of *cultural democracy* is to be truly inclusive, then it is crucial to uphold the notion that culture is everywhere and can be made by anyone (Evrard 1997; Hadley 2021; Wilson, Gross, and Bull 2017). Then, following Wilson, Gross, and Bull, rather than dictating what culture is for someone, policymakers should enable every individual to be able to express their own culture (Wilson, Gross, and Bull 2017). Understanding this underpinned the first

impact goal of the project; *the creation of spaces where adolescents could express their own culture.*

However, this says little about the kinds of creative potential already present among the participants; it only speaks stimulating this potential. Creativity is a concept that is hard to define and thus hard to measure. Usefully, a recent study by a team of pedagogic experts led to the development of an instrument for measuring creativity among young children (Stubbé et al. 2015). Their approach focuses on the capability of *creative thinking* as established by Guilford (1967), which evaluates a combination of divergent and convergent creativity. *Divergent creativity* refers to a child's capability to be innovative, such as their ability to brainstorm new ideas, while *convergent creativity* is more about the capability to find solutions, thus applying their ideas in practice (Stubbé et al. 2015). So, any tool designed to test the project's assumptions must evaluate the effectiveness and usefulness of the spaces created by the project. Additionally, following Ma (2009), who tells us creativity requires both divergent and convergent capabilities, there is a need to evaluate whether or not the *participants have increased their capacity for divergent and convergent creativity as a consequence of their participation in project activities.*

A similar approach to testing of assumptions can be taken with the second impact goal – to aid youth workers in doing their job. According to the Netherlands Youth Institute website (NJI 2021), youth work focuses on 'the personal development of youth [providing] opportunities to develop their talents, with an emphasis on what they can do, rather than on what goes wrong'. The general aims and objectives of youth work are to stimulate talent development, provide a role model, help build social networks, address personal or social problems, direct young people towards finding positive forms of leisure, promote active

participation in society and contribute to the development of a future perspective among their clients. Thus, the second assumption our ToC leads to is that participation in the project activities generates evidence of an orientation towards an increased capability for *prosocial behaviour* among participants.

This is not as far-fetched a claim as it might seem. Previous research into the value of culture shows that cultural participation, especially making music, can contribute to the kind of social outcomes sought by the project (Gielen et al. 2014). Music is known to reduce aggression (Greitemeyer 2011), stimulate *prosocial behaviour* in children (Kirschner and Tomasello 2010) and positively influence our cognition (Preminger 2012). So, the literature clearly supports the assumption that access to culture leads to the development of social capital for young adults (Robson 2009). Cultural participation can also play a significant role in community building (Sardu et al. 2012) and improve tolerance for diversity (van den Broek 2010), especially when professional artists are involved (Burnell 2013). The research shows that cultural participation projects like DeClick can also function as social interventions that align with similar objectives to those sought by youth workers. Thus, these projects support the assumption that by participating in the project's activities, participants will show an *increase in prosocial behaviour, typified by having more friends, being more connected to their community, an increase in psychological well-being and a sense of being happier and less lonely.*

Case study: Means for testing (TAMP model)

Now that a better understanding of the impact goals and their underlying assumptions has been presented, the question remains: how can these claims be evidenced? The ToC needs to be tested and shown to be realistic and feasible or, at the very least, plausible. In social

science, when evaluating whether a theory such as the statement 'DeClick has an impact on local adolescents' holds true, a process of deduction is used (Bryman 2012). This process is as follows: (1) constructing a theory, such as a ToC; (2) formulating hypotheses and clarifying assumptions; (3) testing these assumptions through data collection; (4) reporting findings and confirming pathways to impact; (5) confirming or adjusting the ToC and, if necessary, going through further iterations of the process (Bryman 2012).

When testing a ToC, it is first essential to understand the level of analysis at which the impact of the assumptions exists. Usually, the levels of analysis in social sciences are on the individual (micro), societal (meso) and global level (macro; Bryman 2012). Although a ToC is on a meso level, understanding the assumptions can show that the impact of a project is on the individual level, and such is the case in our case study. DeClick expects the most change to happen to the individual participant of the project, with them personally being more creative, less lonely and happier. However, some assumptions look at a level that supersedes the individual. DeClick also claims that their impact creates physical spaces for local youths to meet and that the project stimulates relations between the local youths themselves and with other adolescents and their local community at large. Although these last two assumptions can be looked at as simply being on the meso level, impacting the community rather than just the individual, there is something more going on as they also address interpersonal relations. This is a fourth level of analysis, usually known as social network analysis (Robins 2012).

Understanding the level of analysis assists with understanding how the first question might be answered when selecting means for testing. This is because it helps researchers understand where to look for the evidence of the ToC. With DeClick, the evidence for the individual assumptions is found by asking the participants, while the societal assumptions are found in

the larger community. The spaces to express youth culture are not found among the project participants but exist outside them. The same goes for the social relations within the group and between other adolescents and people in their village. When using social network analysis, one maps the interpersonal relations between individuals to capture this community (Robins 2012). The relationships themselves are then the level of analysis and where the evidence for the ToC can be found.

This still leaves out how the evidence can be found, for which a better understanding of the definition of impact is needed. ToC implies that impact relates to a project's long-term effects (Lam 2020). The word 'effect' hints that the area of interest, whether it is the individual participants or their social relations, changes over the course of the project. For instance, the level of happiness of the participants of DeClick was lower before participation, or the adolescents had more friends after the project. To evidence this impact, there needs to be an understanding of the situation before the start of the project and after. The best way to get this understanding is a pretest–posttest design, which entails testing using a survey, such as a questionnaire or an interview, and administering this instrument before and after a project (Bryman 2012). Developing a good survey takes a lot of steps and years of research (Bryman 2012); fortunately, surveys already exist for most things that a creative project might want to impact. This holds for the case study, where the survey developed by Stubbé et al. (2015) could be administered among the project participants to test if they showed an increase in creativity. Similarly, when measuring happiness, there are several existing lists of questions (Kashdan 2003). One of the most common instruments to measure happiness is the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire. This instrument found that happiness can be measured by looking at self-esteem, sense of purpose and extraversion (Hills and Argyle 2002). Because this scale was made for adults, a simplification of the questions that focussed on these three aspects was

used in the survey of DeClick. It is important to consider these types of contexts when selecting an instrument (Bryman 2012).

Case study: Pathways to impact (TAMP model)

Comparing the survey results can heavily inform an evaluation of the potential the impact of a project. For instance, in the case of DeClick, there was somewhat of an increase in happiness among the participants, with more extraversion, similar levels of self-esteem and no new sense of purpose, hinting that they might indeed become happier through participation. However, these are only hints. To claim that DeClick affected the participants' happiness requires proving a causal relation, which requires three aspects. First, there needs to be a correlation between two events, such as the adolescents being happy and being participants of DeClick. Second, a temporal aspect, such as pre-test happiness levels being lower than the post-test, must be present. Finally, there must be no other explanation for the increase in happiness other than DeClick. The current means of testing can only prove the first two requirements, but there are a lot of other factors that could have led to the increase of happiness among the participants.

Moreover, impact is a long-term effect; ideally, to prove impact, a survey or another instrument will be readministered over an extended period. However, these *longitudinal studies* are costly and do not produce results quickly (Bryman 2012). As explained in the introduction, rapid evidencing is something that is demanded by policymakers and other funders of the arts (Belfiore 2021). With longitudinal evidence and controlling outside influences on happiness out of the question, a little trick that can be used is to simply ask for confirmation of the assumptions in the post-test. DeClick asked their participants what they took away from the project. The fourth popular response (10% of the sample [n = 23]) was

'I feel better about myself/ I became happier'. In this way, a pathway to impact can be constructed through post-test analysis.

However, a pretest–posttest design does not say much unless it is clear what happens between the moments of testing. This gap calls for an explanation of what the *intervention* of DeClick entails (Bryman 2012). The question here is what does DeClick do that leads to the impact that DRP desires. This boils down to the second step of a ToC – the activities (Lam 2020). Combining them with the results of the assumption testing allows the organisation to establish a complete narrative describing their pathways to impact.

An example of a pathway to impact of the case study can be as follows. The participants of DeClick work on a creative end product that is presented in the summer to the whole town. The hope is that this presentation will help the adolescents see themselves in a more positive light and realise the positive effect they can have on their environment. As such, projects like DeClick are useful tools in community building (Sardu et al. 2012). The post-test showed that the participants in the sample thought that their environment thought better of them than they had indicated in the pre-test. This finding was further confirmed by the fact that the project participants' second-most reported takeaway (by 15% of the 23) was the wish to become a more active citizen in their local communities.

Conclusion and recommendations

The case study above set out to explore the tension between the need to evidence long-term impact and the challenges creative practitioners face, who find themselves constrained by the time-delineated nature of project funding. This research also sought to explore opportunities for evidencing impact that moved beyond the purely quantifiable and embraced qualitative,

value-based data that speaks to the experience of cultural participation. One among many others, the ToC model is a powerful tool to study these issues since it addresses the challenge of evidencing long-term impact through a project evaluation methodology, establishing a strong narrative for pathways to impact and embracing the qualitative and experiential qualities of cultural participation. The aim of the case study was not to offer rigorous training or to commit to a detailed meta-analysis of the field. Instead, it aimed to introduce the ToC model that might inform future work or initiate further dialogue and discussion among the community of creative practice researchers working in media and related fields. It is often the case that challenges faced by one community of practice may already have been widely researched and perhaps even resolved in others as we are siloed in our subject disciplines and not always aware of existing good practice in other areas. Perhaps that is the case for creative practitioners, and it is the hope that this case study illuminates the challenges they face and offers a possibility for thinking about practice, research and impact in a holistic way. In closing, it is worth noting that creative practitioners would do well to consider bringing a sociologist on board as a partner if adopting the ToC approach. Since the ToC approach requires the conceptual reconfiguration of creative practice as a set of situated social actions, the specialist skills, knowledge and understanding that a sociologist would bring to a project would provide additional opportunities for evaluation, reporting and, most importantly, enabling the project team to flex with emergent requirements for change in response to live contextual data.

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