



**FAKE NEWS, MEDIA CREDIBILITY  
AND TRUST IN INSTITUTIONS**

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When the General Manager of Al Jazeera, Dr. Mostafa Souag spoke to a group of academics and students at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) on 9 October 2019, he mentioned three challenges facing global news corporations. One was oppressive governments hindering press to go about doing their assignments. Number two was the growth of technology posing challenges to the daily work of global corporations. But the third challenge was relevant to us: he instanced the challenge faced by the phenomenon called fake news.

Audience members, he said, may get different or wrong information as fake news and would start challenging the information provided by the global news agencies. The fake news phenomenon has affected the credibility of the global news corporations. The fake news can be fast and may appear to be genuine but they nevertheless undermine the credibility of the global news agencies.

Fake news is a worldwide phenomenon that is affecting societies, both in the developing and in the developed world. Fake news is an issue faced by many societies, governments and individuals. It is also an issue among public relations, advertisements and news people and in many occupations like politics, law and medicine. Hence the discussion today is indeed timely as it calls upon public relations practitioners to take a closer look at the impact of fake news on news credibility, corporate reputation and trust in social institutions.

Governments have reacted to overcome the effects of fake news in various ways. Thailand announced that it is setting up an Anti-Fake News Center to monitor the issuance of news so that Thais will not be confused. Singapore is to introduce laws so that there would be higher penalty on spreading fake news. Malaysia is the only one country to repeal fake news but would allow existing laws to combat the dissemination of fake news.

The United States itself is battling against fake news although its President, Donald Trump, is credited for being the president who had nurtured the growth of fake news through his various statements and utterances.

The objective of this paper is to look at the phenomenon called fake news and relate it to trust. We would like to relate to trust in two areas, namely in trusting the mass media and also in social institutions. The relationship could be direct or the effect of fake news could be indirect.

### **An idea on fake news**

An understanding of fake news would provide us with a clearer picture of the problems that we are facing. Fake news is not just news. Fake news as a concept has is known in ancient

governments when information is manipulated. For some basic purpose, it is ancient transmission of wrong information with the evil intention to bring down the reputation of others. Such rumour mongering is as devilish as they are today. Fake news is actually nothing new. Forms of fake news have existed several decades or centuries before. They are given a new coating because of the new technology. Forms of misinformation, disinformation and mal-information have been part of human vocabulary in all these years.

But the idea of fake news has taken other dimensions with the advent of the social media, and the rise of politicians and greedy manipulators bent on using fake news to promote themselves or their own organisation at the expense of their adversaries. In fact, to be crude, spreading of rumour is part of the features of fake news. Rumours spread on false pretences, but in the years of old, they are conveyed and played about by word of mouth. Perhaps propaganda could be used in certain circumstances when discussing fake news as words used for propaganda are lies, manipulation, brainwashing (Jowett & O'Donnell, 1999; Ellul, 1973).

### **Different kinds of fake news**

There exists many kinds of fake or false news and many different reasons why they are produced. In a 2018 UNESCO report titled “Journalism, 'Fake News' and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training”, the editors identified three specific types they called misinformation, disinformation and mal-information. Four types were identified with increasing levels of wrongdoing:

#### *Genuine errors*

One form of fake news is due to errors or mistakes, at times from transcribing an event or miscalculating an issue, and it could be due to carelessness, and genuine misunderstanding. This type of “fake news” has always existed and those responsible are only forgiven as “only human.”

#### *Satire*

Another form of news presented is satire – or satire presented as news being presented to readers and viewers as not true, or just a joke. Usually no harm appears done and the media organisation commonly identifies the story afterwards or leaves clues within the story showing it is made up. But not everybody sees satire as harmless and people can be very offended when they think they are being fooled or made fun off. Calling or mispronouncing

names say like calling Mat Sabu (now Minister of Defence) as Mat Sapu or former Deputy Prime Minister, Zahid Hamidi as Zahid Komedi are satirical or “memperkecilkan” or belittling others.

### *Half-truths*

Thirdly there is the kind of disinformation with some facts and twists, usually by selectively quoting some parts and omitting others. People usually do this to support their own belief system or a specific argument with the aim of suppressing the facts that would be to their disadvantage.

### *Manufactured news*

The most harmful kind of “fake news” is made up or manufactured with the aim to deceive, by presenting lies or by bending the truth. The aim is intentional. They may appear to be real news and is the most damaging kind of false news. Repeated often and long enough, this manufactured “fake news” damages rational discussion necessary for the functioning of democracy, and leaves readers, listeners and viewers wondering just what they hear or read or believe.

It is very rare for such stories to be produced by most reputable traditional media outlets, partly because journalists are trained to be cynical and to verify facts. News outlets in the mainstream media undergo a process in accepting and in editing news. Publishers and broadcasters know that their readership and audience numbers would return to them for news if they can continue to maintain trust. And they would continue to maintain this trust if the news items that they put out is really credible.

There are many definitions on fake news, among them are “news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017). Another definition of fake news is it is either wholly false or contain deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context. A core feature of contemporary fake news is that it is widely circulated online (Bakir & McStay, 2018).

In reviewing the literature on fake news, there are certain characteristics constituting fake news, such as:

1. Intentional;
2. False;
3. Deceptive;

4. Inaccurate;
5. Exaggerated;
6. Biased; and
7. Unacceptable.

(Idid, 2019)

Having understood the concept of fake news, we would like to come to our second concern, namely the linkage of fake news and trust in the media. Recall that fake news is contrary to news that are professed as credible by journalists. The premise is that the audience members buy and use the media to obtain credible news or information. They would trust the channel, the sources and the journalists to provide them with news that are verified and well written.

### **Media credibility**

Loss of readership is a central concern of the media industry. Newspapers thrive when there is public support but several causes account for this decline, one being the credibility issue faced by the media. When newspapers are hit hard at the sales, and when circulation begins to tumble, management would identify several main factors, such as loss of confidence, partisanship and the credibility issues.

Loss of confidence was cited as a major reason for news viewership decline in news viewership. In 2005, six broadcast networks, suffered a 13 percent decline in their viewership. In 2010, cable news viewership for CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News also continued to fall precipitously. One cause for the decline in audience viewership is that the news media has failed to meet the expectations and needs of the younger audience (Mersey, 2010).

A recent Gallup study notes that 54 percent of Americans doubted the accuracy of the mass media in 2013, one of the lowest levels since the 1990s. The recent Reuters Institute blamed fake news for the low credibility.

Audience loss of trust in the media and many have stopped buying them. The Eighth Annual Digital News Report from the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford based on YouGov research among 75,000 people in 38 countries studied public confidence in the media. Public concern about misinformation remains extremely high, reaching a 55 percent average across 38 countries, and has grown significantly over the last years in some countries despite attempts by governments and platforms to contain it. Across all countries, the average level of trust in the news has

declined, with 42 percent, and less than half (49%) trust the news media they use cross all countries. Let us briefly look at the findings on the credibility of news.

Credibility research has been the main focus of communication scholarship since the early days of mass communication field. Generally, the credibility concept has been studied in two main areas: source and medium credibility. Source credibility has been studied in organisational, interpersonal, and mass-mediated contexts while medium credibility has focused on the delivery channel of content more than sender/s of the content (Kiouisis, 2001).

The findings on source credibility have been varied. With one study showing traditional media, especially the printed one, being more credible than the new media due to their way and approach of processing the issues (Tanta, Barić-Šelmić & Levak, 2017).

Older journalists have expressed scepticism about the credibility of online information since disseminating false and incorrect information still have a presence on the Internet despite the attempts of online sites to counter-attack these fake news (Vergeer, 2018).

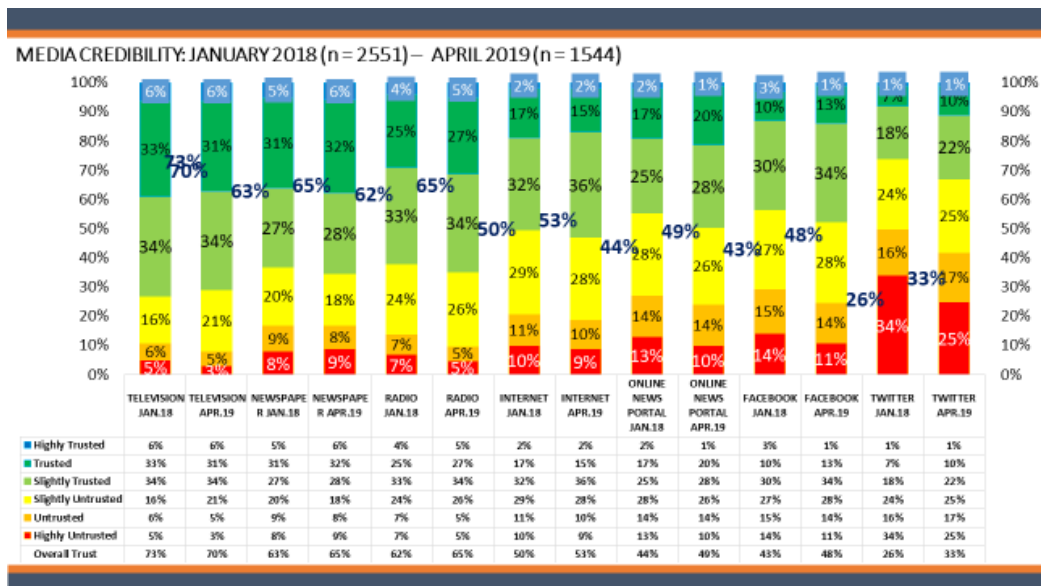
Let us look at the issue of credibility in Malaysia.

### ***Credibility of media among Malaysians***

A nation-wide survey involving two time period, one in September 2018 (before the 14th General Election) and another was conducted after the General Election. The idea was to find out whether there would changes in media credibility among the adult Malaysians. A total of 2,551 respondents were involved in the first study and another 1,544 in the second study. The respondents were asked how much they trust the media, like the traditional media (television, radio, and newspapers) and the social media (online, Internet, Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter). Trust was measured on a five-point likert scale, 1 being least trusted to 5 being the most trusted).

Figure 1 shows that the trust is higher on the traditional media than on the social media, somewhat along the line of findings by Tanta, Barić-Šelmić and Levak (2017). Other studies have come out with similar findings.

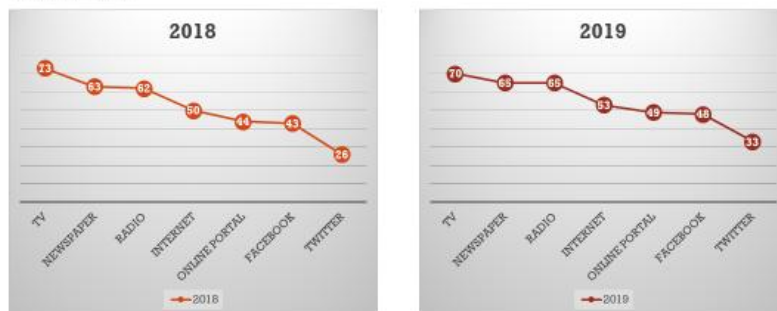
Figure 1



Television was the medium highly trusted by 73 percent of Malaysians, followed by newspaper and radio. The medium least trusted was Twitter, and Facebook, meaning that Malaysians would trust the traditional media higher than the social media.

Figure 2

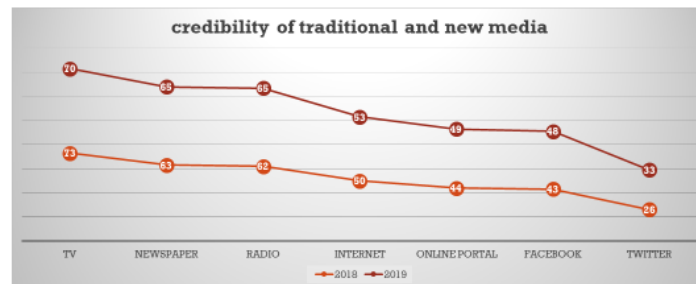
## CREDIBILITY OF TRADITIONAL AND NEW MEDIA



Credibility of media credibility did not show significant changes. Trust was highest on television among 73 in 2018 but it declined to 70 percent in 2019. The profile appears the same with the traditional media being held high in esteem in 2018 and also in 2019 while the social media were at the low trust end, with Twitter being the lowest held in trust (Figure 2).

Figure 3

## RESULTS



The high credibility of traditional media might refer to gatekeeping process. Perceiving the new media as less credible than traditional media might be related disseminating false and incorrect information by new media.

### Fake News

Readers demand accuracy, objectivity and fairness from the coverage of events in the media. When news is wrongly reported or covered without due regard to accuracy, readers tend to stop buying the media. Media tend at times to be more partisan in their news reportage when they deny the support of the other side who do not favour the slanted news. Fake news and the issue of credibility and declining sales are issues of concern. In Malaysia the low circulation and the “demise” of Utusan Melayu/Malaysia was said to be its partisanship (Gayathry Venkiteswaran, 2019).

Do Malaysians know or are they able to differentiate fake from real news? Research findings from other countries are relevant. Dani Madrid-Morales, assistant professor of journalism at the UH Jack J. Valenti School of Communication and Herman Wasserman at the University of Cape Town, found that in sub-Saharan Africa perceived exposure to disinformation is high and trust in national media and social media is low.

The researchers polled nearly 1,900 people in Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa who were highly educated, urbanites, middle class areas and had access to social media. As many as 90 percent of Kenyans, 93 percent of Nigerians and 76 percent of South Africans believed they were exposed to false news about politics on a fairly regular basis.

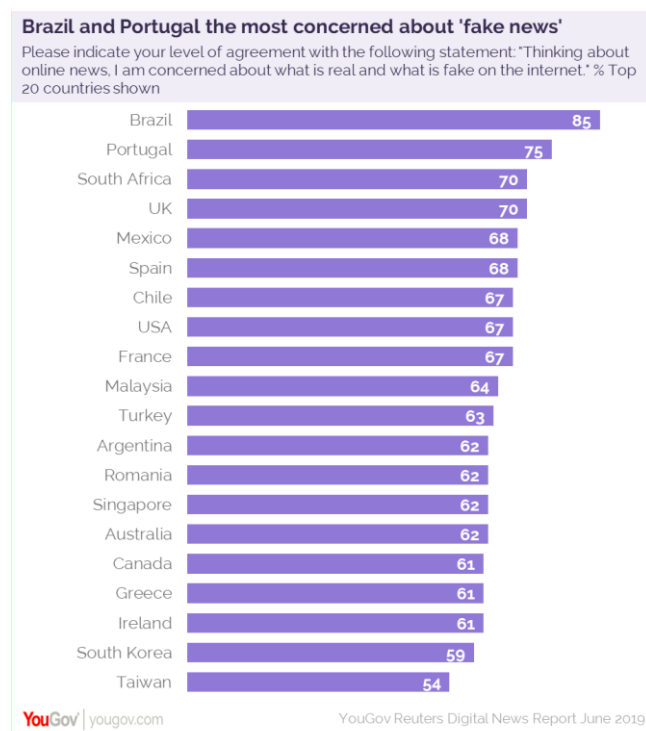
"We found that people in sub-Saharan Africa particularly distrust information on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp because that's where they find 'fake



news' most often," Madrid-Morales said about the findings published in the *African Journalism Studies*. "Governments are already using this as an excuse to put restrictions on the media by saying that too much freedom of speech on these American platforms poses a 'danger' to national security" (Madrid-Morales, 2019).

Figure 4 which is adopted from the Digital News Report, respondents across 20 countries had varying feeling on fake news on the Internet. Brazil, Portuguese and South Africa were among the top countries that were very concerned with real and fake news on the Internet. South Korea and Taiwan were the two countries least concerned.

Figure 4



How do Malaysians perceive fake news? Are they able to distinguish fake from real news? For that we refer to the findings we obtained recently. A total of 1,960 Malaysians selected country-wide were asked on a variety of issues related to fake news.

The respondents were asked to react to fake news on online. A total of 64 percent Malaysians expressed concern about real or fake news on the Internet. This compares to the higher percentage given by respondents in Brazil where 85 percent were worried and only 54 percent were similarly worried in Taiwan.

People are concerned with fake news, some being more concerned than others. In the course of studying fake news we found Malaysians were also in total agreement with the

statement that they were prepared to have nothing to do with fake news. So much for Malaysians when we asked them to react to fake news. A total of 95 percent said if the news item was fake, they would reject it. It was a similar percentage when we analysed by race. A total of 96 percent Malays, 93 percent Chinese and 98 percent Indians would reject fake news.

Could Malaysians differentiate between fake and factual news? A majority disagreed with the statement indicating that fake news were different from factual news. The lowest percentage came from the youngest group. A total of 38 percent said it was not true that fake and factual news were the same.

Why are Malaysians concerned? The negative effect on society was the main answer. The percentage being concerned did not differ much among the age groups. A total of 96 percent of the young were concerned with fake news. In all the age groups, Malaysians were concerned and were calling for some form of control.

This seems logical. If Malaysians are really concerned over fake news then they would logically call for some action to be made.

Would the media situation have any effect on trust in institutions?

### **Social institutions**

It is said that media have fundamentally changed the social interaction of the community, affecting trust in institutions. They are various functions, but generally these social institutions provide a sense of purpose and offer support in providing expectations from different social settings. There are various social institutions that include the family, education, religion, work, law and politics.

Among the various social institutions are the mass media as mass media provide guidance in how societal members should behave and think. Media assist in shaping and guiding family members and friends, giving them online information (websites, chat room), thus affecting their education, socialisation and faiths. Mass media help give meaning to the world around community members and provide guidance on how they should behave within their own context. Social institutions such as family, education, government, religion and work are critical for reproducing the values in society. They fulfil the need for learning, provide social order, give a purpose and offer basic support. As the society has become more complicated, new social institutions have arisen to help maintain social order. One such social institution is the new media. The new media are so pervasive that traditional social institutions such as family, education, religion, government and work are both shaped by and

are dependent on communication technology to fulfil their functions. Take politics as an example. Politicians use media to influence the public. They spend millions on the media to reach out to the voters. But the actions of politicians are also affected by what happens in the mass media. New media play a critical role in making society understand politics. Studies have also indicated that the new media played a critical role in influencing the votes of Malaysians during the General Elections (Samsuddin A. Rahim, 2019).

Members of society uphold the norms and behaviours set out by social institutions to accomplish specific and general goals. Individuals and groups form commitments to one another to have more to them. These relationships involve trust (Rohlinger, 2019: p. 15).

Trust is implicit as a basis for any interactions or arrangements between members of a given community whether these members engage in social, economic or political activities. The factors that affect the levels of trust within a society towards its various institutions are numerous, ranging from the political and macroeconomics to the personal and subjective.

As a hindsight, the Pew Research Center survey among 30,133 people in 27 countries from May 14 to August 12, 2018 found a median of 51 percent were dissatisfied with the government in their country; just 45 percent are satisfied. A total of 61 percent said elected officials did not care what the ordinary people were thinking.

Several international organisations often conduct studies to understand confidence and trust in their government and other social institutions (see Table 1).

Table 1: International surveys measuring trust or confidence in government

<b>Name of survey</b>	<b>Number of OECD countries covered</b>	<b>Years covered and frequency</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Answer scale</b>
World Gallup Poll	34	2005-12 (annually)	Confidence in national government	2: yes/no
World Values Survey	25	4 waves: 1989-93; 1994-98; 1999-2004; 2005-08	Confidence in the government	4: a great deal/quite a lot/not very much/not at all
Eurobarometer	23	2003-13 (biannually)	Trust in government	2: tend to trust/tend not to trust
Edelman Trust Barometer	15	2001-13 (annually)	Trust in government	9-point scale: 1 means "do not trust at all" and 9 means

				“trust them a great deal”
Latinobarómetro	3	1995-2012 (annually)	Trust in government	4: a lot/some/a little/no trust

*Note.* From (“Trust in government, policy effectiveness and the governance agenda,” 2013, p. 23).

A study was carried out on 1,544 respondents across Malaysia from March 8<sup>th</sup> until April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2019 that asked respondents about their levels of trust in local institutions. These participants were interviewed face-to-face based on quota sampling, resulting in 789 Bumiputra/Malays, 601 Chinese and 154 Indians. Several institutions were covered (social, public and governmental institutions, i.e., parents, siblings, relatives, spiritual/religious leaders, community leaders, friends, neighbours, teachers, the military, the civil service, the legal and judiciary system, the police, local big companies, mass media, the parliament, the federal government, political leaders, and political parties).

## Findings

We divided social trusts into particularised and generalised trust. Trust was asked on a total of 18 institutions, encompassing particularised, generalised and political institutions. An example of particularised items would be the parents, siblings, relatives, while generalised items would include religious leaders, community leaders, friends and neighbours. Political institutions were also divided into two, between the neutral or implementation institutions (military, teachers, civil service, legal, police, big companies) and the politically affected or representative institutions (government, political parties, political leaders, parliament). The mass media was made a group of its own.

The respondents were asked to provide their answers to the 18 institutions listed, as to whether they had *1. No Trust At All; 2. No Trust; 3. Slightly No Trust; 4. Low Trust, 5. Trust; or 6. High Trust.* For the purpose of this study, the answers from 4 to 6 were grouped to have Trust of the Institution provided, while those providing answer from 1 to 3 were deemed to have no trust in the Institution. The study also rearranged the answers by the Trust Groupings. The Overall Trust was captured by the Particularised Trust Group (parents and siblings), while the Political Trust Institutions (political parties, political leaders) gained the low scores (see Table 2).

Table 2: Overall trust in institutions

Parents	91%
Siblings	90%
Relatives	83%
Spiritual/ religious leaders	86%
Community leaders	74%
Friends	73%
Neighbours	72%
Teachers	79%
Military	76%
Civil service	67%
Legal and judiciary	66%
Police	65%
Malaysian big companies	62%
Mass media	61%
Parliament	64%
Malaysian government	61%
Political leaders	57%
Political parties	54%

Malaysians hold high trust of their parents and their siblings, but beyond the family, the religious leaders, their relatives, friends and the neighbours. Going beyond that circle were the teachers who were held in high regard. The list of social institutions become less trusted further down the line. Falling toward the end of the ladder are the political leaders, political parties and the mass media.

We then grouped the institutions into particularised social institution, the generalised institutions. Our findings had some resemblance with the findings of other studies (see Table 3).

Table 3: Present findings with the World Values Study (WVS)

<b>Malaysian</b>	<b>WVS (2010-2014)</b>
Parents (91)	Family members (96.6)
Siblings (90)	-
Relatives (83)	-
Friends (73)	Known personally (77.5)
Neighbours (72)	Neighbours (67.3)
Religious leaders (86)	-
Community leaders (74)	-
Teacher (79)	-
Military (76)	-
Civil Service (67)	Civil Service (41.4)
Police (65)	Police (58.1)
Judiciary (66)	Courts (50.1)
Parliament (64)	Parliament (32.1)
Mass Media (61)	-
Government (61)	Government (38.2)
Political leaders (57)	-
Political parties (54)	Political parties (22.3)

Parents and own siblings recorded the highest, with political leaders and political parties dropped at the end of the ladder. It would appear that Malaysians would be willing to place their trust on people who were close to them and be sceptical of distant institutions and players. Institutions that are personally close to oneself will be trusted more. These are the institutions that provide personal stability and meaning to the respondents. They are not expected to bring in conflict. This is totally different from political leaders and political parties, two entities that are not in personal contact with the respondents on a continued basis. The two entities do not bring in stability but by their nature bring in conflict. But these are the institutions that the media do not have a big influence to cause conflict.

### **Conclusion**

We discussed the concept of fake news acknowledging the notion that fake news is often tied to various dimensions, to which lies, misinformation, disinformation and mal-information are part of them. Politicians and media users fall victim to the fake news. Fake news has affected the reputation of media organisations. It has affected the credibility of the news media and in several studies, the low credibility suffered by the media have caused poor circulation and low demand. Audience members become sceptical to use the media. We also find that mass media is one of the social institutions in society. In terms of ranking, the mass media is not well regarded when comparison is made with the family as an institution. Malaysians

accept their neighbours, teachers, the military to have a higher social standing than the other social institutions (political party leaders, political party and also the mass media). We are back to basics. The family values are able to isolate the ecological influence of the media. It is family values that would overcome the onslaught of the fake news syndrome in society.

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Extended reading

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