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SHIFTING MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF UKRAINE AFTER SEPTEMBER 18, 2019

By

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Abstract

In August of 2019, a whistleblower complaint stated that former President Trump attempted to coerce President Zelensky of Ukraine into interfering with the 2020 Presidential Election. This story surfaced via the Washington Post on September 19, 2019, creating a media frenzy. American media was saturated with news about the Trump-Ukraine scandal and Ukraine made headlines daily after spending five years in the peripheral vision of public consciousness. Suddenly, there were a lot of politically charged opinions about Ukraine being exchanged and proliferated. I am interested in observing how the language the media used to talk about Ukraine changed from before September 18, to after. What words were news outlets using, and how were those choices conveying an opinion of Ukraine? Did opinions and word choices differ between publications with opposite political leanings? Answering these questions will lead to a better understanding of biases in American media and will contribute to the growing field of research that studies news content to draw conclusions about changing in media representation. To answer these questions, I collected 50 articles from before September 19, 2019, and 50 after from the New York Times and the New York Post for a total of 200 articles. I conducted a word occurrence analysis for each article, and created graphics to illustrate word frequency, patterns, and change over time. I came to the conclusion that while Ukraine garnered a lot of media attention, it primarily acted as a background character in an American political event: Trump's first impeachment.

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Introduction

Ukraine rarely captures the attention of Americans. When most Americans think about Ukraine, a few major political events, such as the Orange Revolution in 2004 and the annexation of Crimea in 2014, come to mind. Perhaps they think about Ukraine as a former part of the Soviet Union, or as the victim of modern-day Russia's attempts to gain more political power. According to an article published in 2014, 84% of Americans could not even locate Ukraine on a map (Dropp et al. 2014). This lack of awareness ended on September 18, 2019, when the Washington Post reported a whistleblower complaint received on August 12, 2019. The complaint alleged that former President Donald Trump had pressured a foreign country to interfere in the upcoming 2020 presidential election by investigating one of Trump's political adversaries. It later came to light that the foreign country was Ukraine, and the political adversary was now-President Joe Biden. This series of political events and scandals ultimately resulted in Trump's first impeachment.

Starting September 18 and continuing throughout the impeachment trial, news coverage of what came to be known as the Trump-Ukraine scandal snowballed into a media avalanche. Ukraine headlined countless articles when previously the nation had been of minimal importance to the media for half a decade. Suddenly, there were a lot of politically charged opinions about Ukraine being proliferated and read by Americans with little to no familiarity with the country. I am interested in observing how the language the media used to talk about Ukraine changed from before September 18, to after. What semantic and vocabulary choices were news outlets making, and how were those choices conveying an opinion or perception of Ukraine? How did the narrative and word usage differ between media outlets with different political leanings?

Background

Trump's relationship with Ukraine has been developing in ways relevant to the Trump-Ukraine scandal since the first few months of his presidency, but for this paper, the timeline starts in June of 2019. On June 18, the US Defense Department put out a release announcing its plans to supply Ukraine with \$250 million in "security cooperation funds," which were meant to be spent bolstering the Ukrainian military (DOD, 2019). Exactly one month later, former President Trump placed a hold on almost \$400 million worth of military aid for Ukraine. While Trump officials later claimed that this hold was not related to Trump's attempt to coerce Zelensky into investigating the Bidens, diplomats in Ukraine believed these claims were false (Keith, 2019). A week later, on July 25, the infamous phone call between Trump and Zelensky occurred. During this call, Trump asked Zelensky to investigate the CrowdStrike conspiracy and the Biden conspiracy in exchange for allowing Zelensky to purchase anti-tank missiles from the US (Keith, 2019).

In summary, CrowdStrike conspiracy theorists believed that Ukraine hacked the Democratic National Convention's servers to benefit Hilary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election. Supporters of this conspiracy also believed that this was covered up by CrowdStrike, the cybersecurity company tasked with investigating the hack. The conspiracy further spiraled to include claims that CrowdStrike was actually owned by Ukrainian oligarchs (Shane, 2019). The Biden conspiracy claimed that then-Vice President Joe Biden attempted to pressure Ukraine into terminating an investigation into the gas company Burisma to protect his son, Hunter Biden, who worked there (Mayer, 2019). Both of these theories have been debunked, but were proliferated

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for years thanks to the efforts of right-wing groups, ultra-conservative news outlets like Breitbart, and former President Trump.

The snowball effect really began on August 12, the day the whistleblower complaint was received. The complaint incriminated former President Trump, his personal lawyer Rudy Giuliani, and Attorney General Barr for their attempts to coerce Ukraine to interfere in the upcoming 2020 election. The whistleblower believed that the call between former President Trump and President Zelensky, and the circumstances leading up to it, were not only subversive, but a threat to national security. The whistleblower detailed how Rudy Giuliani had pressured the Ukrainian government to investigate the Bidens and CrowdStrike for months before the call took place. The whistleblower also described the suspicious measures taken to ensure the subject of discussion during the call remained classified, including deleting the electronic record of the call's transcript (Whistleblower, 2019).

Two weeks later, Politico reported on the hold on Ukraine's military aid, marking the first of several articles that would expose events that contributed to the Trump-Ukraine scandal (Emma and O'Brien, 2019). Come September, things quickly started to unravel. The House and Senate intelligence committees were formally informed of the whistleblower complaint on September 9, and two days later, the White House lifted the hold on Ukraine's military aid and dispersed the funds with no explanation given to Congress or the press (Emma et al. 2019). On September 18, the snowball turned into an avalanche when the Washington Post became the first news outlet to report on the whistleblower complaint, exposing the entire scope of the Trump-Ukraine scandal to the public (Miller et al. 2019). Over three days, from September 24 to the 26, Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi announced a formal impeachment inquiry, the White House

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released the transcript of the Trump-Zelensky call, and the House Intelligence Committee released the whistleblower complaint (McCarthy and Bryant. 2019).

Literature Review

While there is no research on the exact topic of shifting media representation of Ukraine during the Trump-Ukraine scandal, there is a plethora of research that explains how important word choices are in the media and how it shapes the narrative of a political event. There is also research that explores how the media frames politically important events, phenomena, and locations. Marta Dyczok captures how Ukrainian media changed the perception of the country's history in her study titled "History, Memory, and the Media." Dyczok explores how the Ukrainian public's memory of history and politics was altered by the media and how it chose to talk about, or not talk about, historical events like the annexation of Crimea and the Cold War. The United States is also guilty of using the media as a means of altering the public's perception of political events. In his work "Truth and Partisan Media in the USA," French academic Sebastian Mort points to 9/11 and the War on Terrorism that followed as a prime example of the US media manipulating a significant political event. Mort specifically mentions the role that conservative media played in portraying the Middle East, terrorism, and the events of 9/11 in a way that incorrectly connected Saddam Hussein to Al Qaeda. As these studies have shown, the media is not an objective, unbiased actor; it is known to write about political and historical events in ways that fundamentally change the story. American media is no exception, which is why it is important to analyze how the media has represented Ukraine as related to the whistleblower's complaint and the Trump-Ukraine scandal.

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Sociologist Alejandro S. Ibañez investigates how three Philippine news sources portrayed the Bangsamoro Basic Law following the Mamasapano Incident. Ibañez applies critical discourse analysis to examine how the three media sources shaped the discourse surrounding the law, and how that enabled the media to shape public perception and define the politics surrounding the law. Another study conducted by Aimei Yang and Charles Self used multiple analysis methods to examine how a right-wing blog proliferated an anti-Muslim agenda by including publicly popular cultural stereotypes against Islam in their content. Finally, in an article written by Amnon Cavari, Moran Yarchi, and Shira Pindyck, the researchers conducted a content analysis of over 56,000 news articles across three newspapers published between 1981 and 2013 to examine how news coverage of Israel has changed over the years. These are all great examples of media representation analysis and how media coverage of a topic can change over time. I believe that analyzing word usage across two news sources to draw conclusions about how media coverage of Ukraine changed from before to after the Trump-Ukraine scandal can be a valuable contribution to this field of study.

Methods

To paint a complete picture of how US news outlets portrayed Ukraine after the whistleblower story broke, I analyzed two newspapers on opposite ends of the political spectrum. I chose The New York Post (the Post) to represent the right, and The New York Times (the Times) to represent the left (AllSides Media, 2020). To find articles related to or mentioning Ukraine, I typed “Ukraine” into each paper’s search engine, then collected 100 articles from each publication: 50 articles before the whistleblower story broke, and 50 after for a total of 200 articles. The only type of articles excluded were daily or weekly “briefings,” a style of writing an

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article in which one or two sentences are written about the most important stories of the day or week.

To gather the data necessary to analyze the language used by the Post and the Times, I used a word occurrence counter to create word lists by frequency for both the articles' content and title. A word occurrence counter totals the number of times every word in a body of text was used. A word list by frequency is created by taking all of the words counted and categorizing them as stopwords or primary keywords. Stopwords are common words excluded from text analyses such as "the," "and," or "but," and primary keywords are unique words. The list then orders the words from most to least used in both categories.

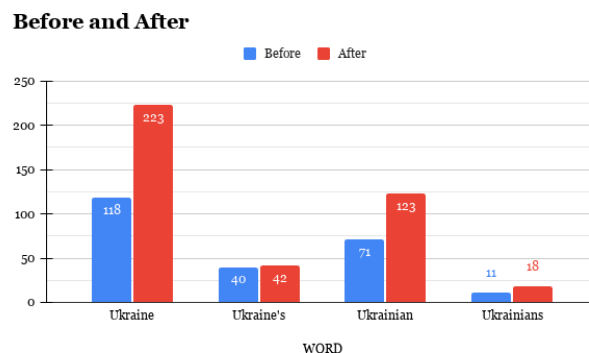
I created a word list by frequency for each article then recorded all the words that were used two or more times, except for the words "Ukraine," "Ukraine's," "Ukrainian," and "Ukrainians," all of which were manually counted even if the words were only used once in an article. I manually excluded photo captions, embedded articles, and the authors' bios from being counted in the word lists.

The next step was to create three types of spreadsheets to organize each publication's data. I made one spreadsheet to record the use of the words "Ukraine," "Ukraine's," "Ukrainian," and "Ukrainians," and two additional spreadsheets to record the top-five primary keywords used in each of the 50 articles written before the whistleblower news broke and for the 50 written after. The spreadsheets for "Ukraine" and the three relating words counted every time each of the four words was used before and after September 18, 2019. The spreadsheets for the top five primary keywords totaled the number of times a top-five word was used across 50 articles.

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used increased after September 18, as illustrated in both figures. In the Times, the word “Trump” was used seven times, and “Ukraine” was used four times before the whistleblower news broke. After September 18, “Trump” was used 31 times, and “Ukraine” was used 11 times. In the Post, “Trump” was used eight times, and “Ukraine” was used five times before the whistleblower news came out. After September 18, “Trump” was used 24 times, and “Ukraine” was used 20 times.

Before reviewing the word frequency lists for the articles’ contents, it is important to note that any increases in word frequencies from before the whistleblower news to after are not due to an increase in article length. In fact, for both publications, the average article length was shorter after September 18 than it was before. For the Times, the average article was about 1,626 words before the whistleblower story broke. After, the average word count of an article was 1,070 words. For the Post, the average article length was approximately 483 words before the whistleblower story came out, and 459 words after.

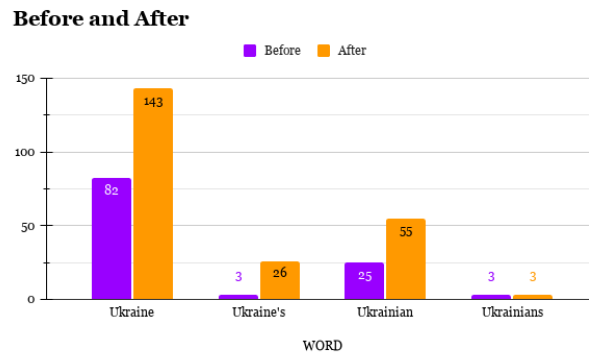


(Figure 3: the Times’s Ukraine words usage)

Overall, the Times used “Ukraine” and Ukraine-related words more, but the Post saw a higher increased use of the same word from before to after September 18. As communicated in Figure ____, there was only a small increased usage of “Ukraine’s,” but a much larger difference

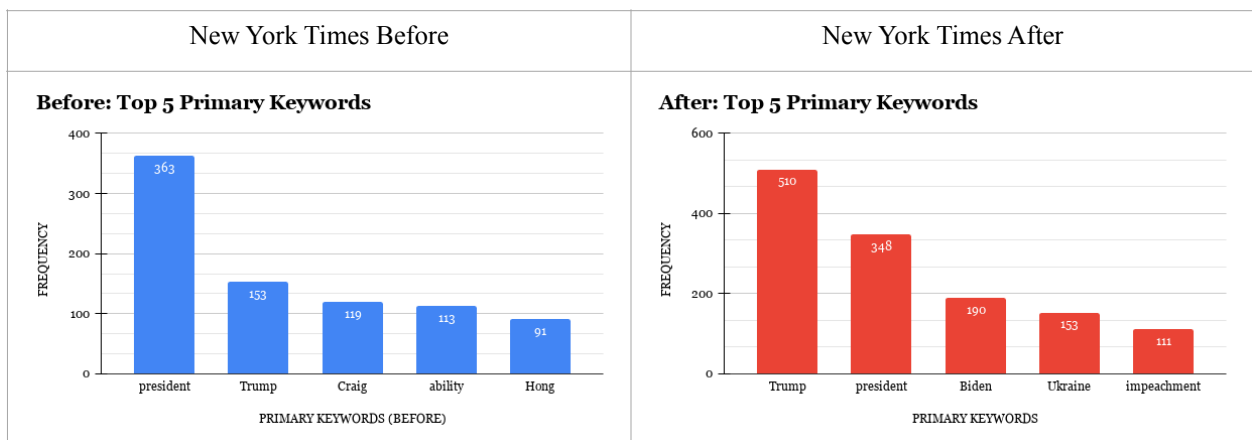
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in the use of “Ukraine,” “Ukrainian,” and “Ukrainians” in the Times from before to after September 18. In the same amount of articles, the use of “Ukraine” increased by 88%, the use of “Ukrainian” increased by 59%, and the use of “Ukrainians” increased by 63%.



(Figure 4: the Post’s Ukraine words usage)

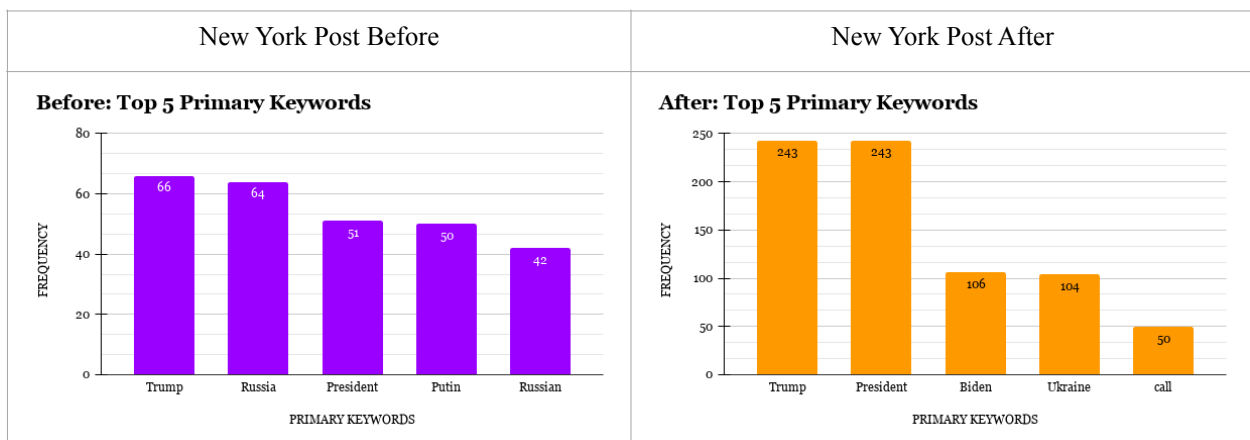
For the Post, the only word that did not experience any change in frequency was “Ukrainians.” The other three words were used much more frequently after the whistleblower story broke. The use of “Ukraine” increased by 74%, the use of “Ukraine’s” increased by 766%, and the use of “Ukrainian” increased by 120%.



(Figure 5: The Times’ top 5 words comparison)

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In the Times, 192 unique primary keywords appeared among the top five words in one or more articles before the whistleblower news was made public. The top five words overall for the before period were “President,” “Trump,” “Craig,” “ability,” and “Hong.” After September 18, 128 individual primary keywords were among the top five most used words in an article. During the after period, the top five primary keywords were “Trump,” “President,” “Biden,” “Ukraine,” and “impeachment.”



(Figure 6: The Post’s top 5 words comparison)

In the Post, before the whistleblower story broke, 287 unique primary keywords were among the top five words in one or more articles. As shown in the figure above, the top five primary keywords in the before period were “Trump,” “Russia,” “President,” “Putin,” and “Russian.” After September 18, 160 distinct primary keywords made a top-five list for an article. For the after period, the top five primary keywords were “Trump,” “President,” “Biden,” “Ukraine, and “call.”

Limitations

This study has a few potential limitations. The main issue is with the potential broader application of this study. The research only included two publications, and both are based in New

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York. Furthermore, these publications are each one example of opposite ends of the political spectrum, this study does not account for the shifts in word usage of news outlets with more centrist perspectives, nor does it account for far-right and far-left perspectives. Additionally, to the best of my knowledge, there are no studies for comparison that also analyzed word occurrences in the media in relation to the Trump-Ukraine scandal. Therefore, this study is not representative of shifting media representation of Ukraine throughout American media, it is much closer to a case study of changing media representation of two newspapers, and the differences between those individual changes.

There are also limitations to the methodology, the main issue being limited depth. The word occurrence counter used did not include bigrams or trigrams, which are two and three-word phrases respectively. As it is, this study only analyzes changes in word occurrence from the before to the after period, whereas the inclusion of bigrams and trigrams would have allowed for word association analysis. In addition, following data collection, there was no text analysis or statistical software used, and all data was analyzed manually. The lack of software use limited the amount of data that was able to be analyzed, further limiting the broader application of any findings of this study.

Discussion

To refresh, this study intended to answer the following questions: how has the language used by the media changed when talking about Ukraine before September 18, to after? Did news outlets convey a particular opinion or perception of Ukraine and its role in the Trump-Ukraine scandal through its word choices? And finally, did word choices and opinions of Ukraine differ between two papers with different political leanings?

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Put simply, how the Times and the Post discussed Ukraine changed dramatically after September 18. The average daily volume of news stories mentioning Ukraine sharply increased following the whistleblower story. In the time it took the Times to write 50 articles mentioning Ukraine before the whistleblower incident, the paper was averaging about 1.1 Ukraine-related articles per day. After September 18, the Times was averaging 8.3 articles in the six days it took the publication to write 50 articles. The change for the Post was even more pronounced. In the time it took the Post to write 50 Ukraine-related articles before September 18, it was averaging about one article every two and a half days, whereas after, the paper averaged 7.1 articles a day. Not only was Ukraine just being written about and mentioned more, but it was also becoming a much bigger subject in the content of the articles. For both the Times and the Post, “Ukraine” and any other related words did not make the list of the top five most used primary keywords during the before period. After September 18, it was the fourth most used word for both papers.

That being said, while Ukraine gained popularity across both papers after the whistleblower incident, other subjects gained as much, and often more, popularity. Similar to “Ukraine,” the word “Biden” had not made an appearance in either top five primary word lists before the whistleblower incident. In the Times, “Biden” was not a top-five word in any of the 50 articles from the before period, and while it did appear among the top five most used words in the post, it was only used 15 times overall and ranked 19th amongst the other top five keywords. A word that was consistently popular across both publications and in both the before and after periods was “Trump.” Before and after the whistleblower incident, “Trump” was either the first or second most popular of all the top five words used in the 200 articles analyzed for this research. Despite the word’s already established prevalence in both newspapers, its usage

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increased by 233% in the Times and by 268% in the Post. Finally, some data observations that are important to point out are that the word “Zelesnyk” was absent from all four lists of the overall top five primary keywords and that the word “impeachment” is only present in the Times top-five word list after September 18th.

After studying all the collected data and any patterns or interesting findings that arose, I have found that while Ukraine was clearly written about more frequently, and the word was used much more often, both the Times and the Post were not really writing about Ukraine. During the before period, both papers often only used “Ukraine” or one of the other three related words once during an article, sometimes only in a photo caption or credit. The country was mentioned in reports of Gregory Craig’s trial, as an attendee at an international conference, and in references to the Orange Revolution in articles about political protests occurring in Hong Kong. For context, Gregory Craig is an American lawyer who previously served as White House counsel under the Obama administration from 2009-2010. After resigning from that position, he joined private law firm Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher, and Flom, where he did work for former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. In 2019, Craig was indicted on charges of concealing information and falsifying materials relating to the Special Counsel investigation (Lucas, 2019). The Hong Kong protests began after a bill was introduced that would allow criminals to be extradited to mainland China, which does not operate under the same judicial system or with the same legal rights as Hong Kong. The bill was eventually suspended as a result of the protests, but activists demanded a complete withdrawal of the bill. Protests escalated as the police became increasingly hostile and violent towards protesters (Cheung and Hughes, 2020). A few times, despite appearing under the search term “Ukraine,” the word never appeared in an article at all.

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So Ukraine, if mentioned at all, was hardly ever the main subject of any article that appeared when you searched the country's name.

During the after period, the country was still seldom the main character in reports of a major political scandal where it was one of the two parties involved. It is obvious how little both publications wrote about the role Ukraine played in the Trump-Ukraine scandal when looking at the data collected about the word "Zelensky." Former US President Trump and President Zelensky of Ukraine were the only two people on the call that directly resulted in the whistleblower complaint, and subsequently, the first impeachment of former President Trump. Regardless of Zelensky's crucial role in the whistleblower story, "Zelensky" was the Post's 15th most used word in the list of top five primary keywords, only appearing 16 times as a top-five word in an article. In the Times', it was the 22nd most used word in its top-five word list, appearing 27 times as the top five most used words in an article. So did the Times and the Post change the way they talked about Ukraine? Technically, yes. Ukraine went from barely registering on the media's radar to being a vessel used to carry a story about Donald Trump.

This research has the potential to be a jump off point for future studies. Expanding the timeframe for articles collected to include coverage of former President Trump's first impeachment trial could yield interesting findings that further show how Ukraine was used as a background character in an American political event. Additionally, including another data set of articles written several months after the conclusion of Trump's first impeachment trial could show how newspapers' treatment of Ukraine changes after a major political event. Finally, collecting data on specific words rather than the most popular words could help researchers understand different ways in which media representation of Ukraine shifted over time.

Conclusion

While the data clearly shows that Ukraine was mentioned more frequently across both newspapers, it also shows that Ukraine was knocked out of the media's spotlight even though the country's president played a significant role in the whistleblower incident. Ukraine, as an entire country, became representative of the actions of Ukrainian President Zelensky. Simultaneously, the use of the word "Ukraine" paled in comparison to the word "Trump." The Times and the Post both managed to make Ukraine a hotter buzzword, or a more popular search term but failed to really talk about Ukraine at all. If Ukraine can even be considered a player in the Trump-Ukraine scandal from the media's point of view, it was simply a pawn used to advance a story about American politics, more specifically, former President Trump's impeachment and the political wrongdoings that led to it.

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