



## A REVIEW OF THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN THE NIGERIAN ELECTORAL PROCESS

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper focuses generally on the role of the mass media in the Nigerian electoral process as it pertains to the overall development of Nigeria. The background is the recognition of the central role of the media in political and social affairs as a natural outcome of its unlimited communicative strength and outreach. The statement of problem is anchored on the widely spread negative image of the media in electioneering campaigns in Nigeria's political history. The objective of this paper is to examine the role of mass media in shaping and influencing the Nigerian electoral process. It is also to identify the ways in which mass media contributes to or detracts from the democratic process, evaluates the effectiveness of media coverage in fostering informed voting, and explores the implications of media practices on the integrity and transparency of elections in Nigeria. The study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a review approach to analyze existing literature and data on the role of mass media in the Nigerian electoral process, the Agenda-Setting Theory served as the theoretical framework. The study revealed that the mass media plays a crucial role in shaping the electoral process in Nigeria, yet it faces significant challenges. The media's current status as an elite institution, primarily serving the interests of the powerful and government entities, undermines its effectiveness in promoting democratic values and transparent electioneering. The study recommends that to enhance the media's role in the electoral process, it is crucial to promote greater independence from political and elite influences. Media organizations should implement robust editorial policies that prioritize public interest journalism and critical analysis of election campaigns, ensuring that coverage is unbiased and focused on informing the electorate about democratic principles and political accountability.*

### KEYWORDS

Mass Media, Nigerian Electoral Process, Democratic Values, Agenda-Setting Theory, Political Accountability

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## INTRODUCTION

The history of elections in Nigeria has generally afforded us the golden opportunity to assess the divergent roles of the media in the Nigerian political process within the framework of our national political goal. The issues of education, information, mobilisation, and monitoring have become crucial factors in the realisation of national objectives in the electoral process. This results from the ugly incidences of various forms of electoral malpractice, which have repeatedly threatened the possibility of credible elections and national integration in Nigeria.

Though the issue at stake is the responsibility of all stakeholders in the political body, there is, however, a rationale for assigning this responsibility as a primary concern of the mass media on the grounds of professional competence as the fourth estate of the realm. It has, therefore, become very important to assess the mass media's role in Nigeria's electoral history. To what extent has the Nigerian media discharged its statutory functions towards achieving a positive political national agenda? Iredia (2007:12), the former Director General of the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA), insists that the people must be assisted to make rational choices and vote wisely during elections. They must have all the information needed to elect the right candidates to ensure good governance. Where such public awareness is lacking, those in the media must accept a share of the blame for failed elections in Nigeria.

The role of mass media in shaping the Nigerian electoral process has garnered significant attention due to its profound influence on public opinion and political engagement. Despite its critical role, there is a notable gap in comprehensive research examining how mass media affects electoral outcomes, voter behavior, and political discourse in Nigeria. Existing studies highlight the media's potential for positive contributions, such as increasing voter awareness and transparency (Adeniran, 2021), and negative impacts, including misinformation and electoral bias (Ibrahim, 2022). The complex interplay between media coverage and electoral integrity remains underexplored, particularly concerning how media framing and content affect electoral fairness and democratic participation (Nwosu, 2020). This study aims to fill this gap by providing an in-depth analysis of how mass media influences the Nigerian electoral process, thus contributing to a better understanding of the media's role in democratic governance.

The primary objective of this study is to critically examine the role of mass media in shaping and influencing the Nigerian electoral process. This includes assessing how mass media

impacts voter perceptions, electoral campaigns, and overall public engagement with the electoral system. The study aims to identify the ways in which mass media contributes to or detracts from the democratic process, evaluates the effectiveness of media coverage in fostering informed voting, and explores the implications of media practices on the integrity and transparency of elections in Nigeria.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

For a study reviewing the role of mass media in the Nigerian electoral process, the agenda-setting theory served as the theoretical framework. This theory, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in the 1970s, posits that the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by highlighting certain issues over others. Regarding application to this study, the agenda-setting theory suggests that while the media may not tell people what to think, it significantly influences what people think about it. By prioritizing certain issues, the media sets the public agenda and influences which topics are important.

The theory helps analyze how mass media coverage of electoral issues, candidates, and political events influences Nigeria's public opinion and electoral outcomes. Furthermore, it allows for the examination of how the framing of electoral issues by the media impacts voter perceptions and decisions. Lastly, the theory aids in understanding how media coverage contributes to the setting of the electoral agenda and shaping the priorities of the electorate. By applying Agenda-Setting Theory, the study explored how media coverage influences the Nigerian electoral process, affects voter behavior, and potentially impacts electoral results.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employed a qualitative research design, utilizing a review approach to analyze existing literature and data on the role of mass media in the Nigerian electoral process. This design is chosen to gain a comprehensive understanding of how mass media influences electoral outcomes, public opinion, and political engagement. Data was sourced through a review of scholarly articles, books, and reports on mass media's impact on elections in Nigeria. Sources include academic journals, government publications, and credible news outlets. A content analysis of media coverage during key elections was carried out. This involved analyzing news articles, social media posts, and broadcast segments to assess the themes, biases, and messages disseminated to the public. The literature was selected based on relevance to the Nigerian electoral process and the role of mass

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media. Preference was given to sources published within the last decade to ensure up-to-date information.

## **THE CONSTITUTIONAL AND MORAL BASIS OF THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA IN POLITICS AND GOVERNANCE**

Dukor (1999) anchors the assessment of the role of the media in politics on the fundamental right to receive and impart information". This becomes not only the standard for assessing the role of the media but also "the neglected role of... states to uphold the ethics of the right to know... in an ideal democracy." The natural law doctrines influenced this quest to propagate the inalienable right to know and impart information, the articles of the French Revolution, the precepts of the American Declaration of Independence, the United Nations Declaration of People's and Human Rights, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights Dukor (1999). For instance, the "African Charter on Human and People's Rights," adopted in 1986 and ratified in July 1990, states, among others, that "every individual shall have the right to receive information, shall have the right to express and disseminate his opinions within the laws."

It has become very pertinent to examine the extent to which these precepts of the fundamental rights of man have been observed in Nigeria's politics and media practice, especially in democratic elections. It must be emphasised that any talk of democracy without the right to receive and impart information is empty. Nigeria has a background of liberalism, which dictates the free flow of information, yet the country's media, according to Dukor (1999) have been, for the most part, performing within the air of regulated freedom. Since independence, several factors have encumbered the right to know about government policies. This has been the case mostly during the military interregnum.

For instance, a good number of decrees were put in place to hinder press freedom and jeopardise the public right to know and receive information. Dare (1985) gives a rundown of such decrees including the Newspaper (Amendment Act) of 1964, the Official Secrets Acts of 1962, the Defamation Act of 1961, the Public Officers (Protection Against False Accusation) Act No. 11 of 1976, the Newspaper Prohibition Circulation Act of 1967, and the Public Officers (Protection Against False Publication) Decree No. 4 of 1984. On the other hand, Dukor (1999) opines that there has been a democratic flowering of the independent press, which has generally accompanied moves towards democracy and respect for human rights. But regrettably, journalism in Nigeria is

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bedevilled by some unethical issues. The media, hitherto, is politically polarised regarding axis, ethnic loyalty, sectional party, and selfish interests Dukor (1999). This is against the backdrop that the media is one of the institutions that sustain democracy. On this basis, Dukor (1999) examines the relationship between the state and the media in Nigeria and observes that it has been one of mutual distrust.

According to the Nigerian Press Council, the Nigerian media have fallen victim to manipulations by the government and politicians. We witness the fallen standard of the journalistic profession and its negative contributions to nation-building through hackneyed, uncouth, and indiscrete reporting of events and issues, the ethnic polarisation of media houses, and consequent undue influence on power and political tussles. As a result, in moments of crisis, the media become ready tools for those actively involved in the crisis of power.

One of the main constitutional roles of the media in a democracy is to objectively monitor governance while remaining consistent, preserving, and holding those involved in the democratic process accountable to the people. These include those with executive, legislative, and judicial functions in the polity and all institutions of governance and democracy. Dukor argues that the mutual distrust between the state and the media in Nigeria has negated the benefits of the fundamental right to know and impart information. This paradoxical trend in Nigeria is for the state to negate its constitutional relationship to the media and citizenry. The consequence of this situation is that the development of the entire society is undermined concerning the right to know and impart information. This tends to widen the gap in communication between government and society.

It belongs to the responsibility of the media in Nigeria to, for instance, inform the Nigerian public on how “vested interests have become policy matters, how obvious facts have been hidden under honorific national interests, how violence has been condoned as law and order, and how cold-blooded murders have been perpetuated as encounters” (Dukor, 1999). The role of the media in any democratic society is to educate, inform, and entertain people. However, they have to be vigilant watchdogs of public interest, and under no special circumstances should they demean themselves into acting as lapdogs for the establishment. Even in very normal and placid times, the media is expected to be a keen observer, alert, and concerned, even though non-intruding and non-partisan in governance (Dukor, 1999).

## **MEDIA AND POLITICS IN NIGERIA: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE PROBLEMATIC**

At independence, African leaders borrowed the authoritarian attitude regarding the curtailment of press freedom from Eastern and Central European regimes, “action seemingly justified by the urge to fight against western imperialism and colonialism.” According to Becker and Lower (1976), this gave rise to the culture of one voice, which was institutionalized. One voice culture entailed only one official press, the effect of which was that authoritarianism grew into a conformist press. During the colonial struggle, indigenous newspapers became a rallying dissent point against colonial iniquities and injustices to “propagate political ideas, to fight colonial injustices, to seek and demand freedom, to protect the people’s interests, and to educate them about the present and the future” (Dare, 1985), the reverse became the case on the attainment of political independence. However, as a colonial heritage, when in 1953, the motion for self-governance was made by the Action Group, Sir John Macpherson, the then colonial governor, made a radio broadcast castigating the party. When Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the party leader, sought a “right of reply” to the broadcast, the management of the radio service rejected the request on the directive of the colonial government. According to scholars, this introduced a culture of imbalance and partisanship into the Nigerian media. According to Adedeji (1991), in 1961, the same government media were used to announce landslide victories for the ruling political parties in the regional elections. According to Adedeji (1991), contrary to public knowledge, the victories attributed to the Northern People's Congress (NPC) in the north and the National Council for Nigeria and the Cameroons (NCNC) in the east were achieved using in part all forms of electoral chicanery, political intimidation, and even coercion, including the imprisonment of opposition leaders.

In 1964, the government media was again used to announce that over fifty percent of the ruling party's candidates were returned unopposed without voting in many places in the election into the federal House of Representatives that year. This was again contrary to the fact that Dare (1985) observed that Nigerians were aware that the announcements were false because, in some cases, the returning officers disappeared and could not be contacted after receiving papers for the official candidates. 1965 Okolo (1993) noted that different versions of the results of the same election held in the western region in October of that year were announced by different media houses operating in Ibadan, the regional capital.

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The affected media were Eastern Nigerian Broadcasting Services (ENBS), Western Nigerian Broadcasting Service (WNBS), and Radio Nigeria. In the second republic civilian government, the Newspapers and electronic media were owned by different state governments and the federal government. These media were, therefore, loyal to the governments in control of their states. Although it promotes healthy rivalry, this situation further dampens the media's image. "This is because the journalism practitioners wrote reports and news in their preconceived images, thereby destroying their integrity and profession and leaving behind vulgar journalism" (Dukor, 1999). This scenario of unprofessionalism implies that the Nigerian media became concerned not with "the truth but with rumors." This has largely led to the opinion that journalism, as practiced in Nigeria, is a "hogwash of exaggerations and speculations," where facts are distorted to suit the ends of those who own the media." (Eze, 2007).

Therefore, it can be argued that journalism in Nigeria, about its constitutional roles, is not scientific. This position is authenticated by many other findings, especially concerning the election in Nigeria. For instance, Egbon (2004), in his study of the 1983 elections, alleges that television houses made it impossible for any politician opposed to the government in power to appear on the screen. When he appeared at all, his picture would be distorted. The television mechanism would be upset to render his voice inaudible deliberately. As Okolo (1993) opines, Nigerian political parties and their functionaries have always been known for using the media unwholesomely. In 1983, for example, the incumbent state governors used the media controlled by them to announce their re-election. The announcements by the governors were made well before the Electoral Commission could include the collation of votes cast at the same election (Alao, 1992).

In 1991, the governorship election held in Edo on December 14 was nullified because the state-owned broadcasting service breached the rules on political broadcast (Alao, 1992). A report of the European Union (EU) Election observation mission regarding the 2003 general elections opines that media performance during the Nigerian elections was flawed, as it failed to provide unbiased, fair, and informative coverage of political parties and candidates contesting the elections. Federal and state-owned media were biased in favour of parties and candidates in power.

A cursory insight into the history of elections in Nigerian political development suggests a verdict of irresponsible media. This is because the media has unduly left itself to manipulate the negative factors in Nigerian elections and politics, thereby becoming irresponsible. The first of

these influences is the influence of tribalism in political party formation. Right from the period before and after independence, till date, political parties in Nigeria have been formed along ethnic and tribal lines. These parties have championed parochial and ethnic interests at the expense of national unity and the stability of the polity. According to Agba (2007:70), from the NCNC, AG, and NDC of the pre-colonial days and the first republic (1951–1966), Through the NPN, NPP, and GNPP (1979–1983) of the second republic and the third republic, and the NRC and SDP (1991–1993) of the botched fourth republic, and even to the present-day PDP, APGA, ACN, CPC, and others (1999–2011), political party formation has been an ethnic affair.

As a result of this tribalistic scenario, Edogbo (1999) carried out a comprehensive study of the relationship between the press and the political system in Nigeria and discovered that the character of political reporting and commentary was entirely dependent on media ownership structure and the owner's relationship with the political system. He concludes that most newspapers often spoke for one political party or one region against another, which means that the press has always acted not as an impartial estate but as the mouthpiece of the political divisions in Nigeria. Also, Mohammed (1994), observes that much did not change in the role of the media about its impartiality in subsequent democratic elections and electioneering campaigns. For him, press partisanship has always manifested in political reporting.

As Agba (2007) points out, these scenarios represent a failure on the part of the media to engage in a thorough analysis of party manifestos and de-emphasise ethnic politics. Agba's verdict on the electioneering campaign in Nigeria is that it is absurd. According to him, electioneering campaigns portray a consortium of insincere political figures whose failure to keep promises dampens the spirit of the electorate and the masses. He concludes that the electioneering campaign in Nigeria is characterised by electoral dirtiness and insecurity. Consequently, Uzuegbunam (1997) opines that these have been the basis for most irregularities, election malpractices, misappropriation, mismanagement, and insensitivity to the masses. To this effect, Stappel (1973) has called on the media to work on Nigeria's political culture.

Unfortunately, this unwholesome use of the media, which has become the norm in Nigeria, usually brings with it untold mayhem, chaos, and political instability. In 1965, for instance, following the conflicting election results announced by the media, political opponents in the Western Region engaged themselves in what was referred to as "Operation WETE," a process of



setting property ablaze with petrol (Agba, 2007). Many lives and much property were lost in that exercise. In 1983, the Federal Television Station in Abeokuta, Ogun State, was set ablaze to show public dissatisfaction with the station's broadcast during the election. Similar incidents were recorded in different parts of the country. Some politicians determined that the media was the primary cause of these issues. The implication is that election rigging in Nigeria usually attracts negative reactions from the public. These reactions become very destructive when exacerbated by the media's publication of inaccurate information or controversial results. This suggests that it is time to search for strategies that can improve the performance of the nation's media, particularly in politics and elections. The media should help to build an enlightened electorate. Public enlightenment is a pre-condition for free and fair elections. As Agba (2007) points out, achieving democratic governance depends on the citizens' psychological readiness and positive mental state.

### **THE MEDIA IN EFFECTIVE ELECTIONEERING CAMPAIGN REPORTAGE IN DEVELOPING CONTEXT**

The foreknowledge of Nigeria's unhealthy political culture should form the springboard for media action. Its present status as an elite media, the preserve of the powerful and the harbingers of government, does not augur well for the media, government, and society. Agba (2007:261) argues that the media should go back to the concept of journalism in the public interest to be able to discharge its proper role in times of election. In this regard, the very first task of the media is to make politicians respect people's right to candid electioneering. News should not mean alienating the audience and keeping the electorate groping in the dark. According to Nwaozuzu (1997), electioneering campaign reportage should seek out relevant truths for the people who cannot witness or comprehend the events that affect them. Cohen (1970) collaborates with the above viewpoint and clearly defines its implications for good political culture. According to him, news has gotten so complex that mere reportage is not good anymore. What is required is for the journalist to add analysis to campaign news. This implies that the media must interpret campaigns in light of the electoral needs of the people, that is, their implications and actions to people and the realisation of a vibrant political system.

This means directing the goals of the electioneering campaign to the desirable goal of responsible democratic principles that recognise the sovereignty of the people's votes.

The media, as Agba points out, should aim to get all political actors to believe in one Nigeria truly and to accept the rules that are made to guide the conduct of elections. These form the purview of media self-examination. Agba (2007) acknowledges that the electioneering campaign for political power in Nigeria has become part of the problem of national cohesion and integration. It has, therefore, become part of a profound socio-political rot." Electioneering campaigns have become part and parcel of national development, in that most often, they have become intriguing, intricate, and bloody, as ethnic rivalries and struggles struggle to get a big chunk of the 'National Cake' is a recurrent political experience. It is also acknowledged that the mass media has a very important role in channelling electioneering campaigns to serve the goal of national development. This is because the mass media is described as a pivot of social interaction, seeking to use the power of mass information to solve the problem of national cohesion and integration, both critical to the growth of a healthy electioneering campaign (Agba, 2007).

But to achieve the above objective, the mass media in Nigeria needs to solve its internal problem of cohesion and integration, "for there are as many media houses as there are many political interests. There are, therefore, external and internal obstacles to the realization of the positive role of the media in electioneering campaigns. It is argued that the media require a political ideology that guarantees freedom of speech and access to information. This is particularly true, as Kalu (1985) noted, that we can depend on free speech and democratic ideas only if we accept that the free flow of information is necessary for the propagation of political freedom, especially during elections. This argument hinges on the fact that without a free press, the reporter becomes a public servant, a stooge of the powerful, and a robot who acts out the scripts of callous politicians. Under this scenario, the media fails to become worthy representatives of the people.

Apart from the issue of critical self-examination of the role of the media in elections, the media also shares the responsibility of channeling the electoral process toward the desirable goal of national development and integration. For instance, Kalu (1985) points out that "the ordinary expectation is that the mass media will focus on serious matters that portend serious consequences for the people and their political choices. For Akpan (1985), the media must clarify issues during campaigns, bring aspirants close to the electorate, and teach the differences between party and candidate to enable the electorate to make a wise choice. If this is not done, political reporting will lose much of its lustre if it does not deal adequately with such issues as national problems, policy

guidelines, party programs, and government performance (Kalu 1985). The mass media should enable the electorate to analyse the campaign messages of politicians. The media should focus on setting the correct political agenda for the audience and not allowing politicians to do so. Ciroma (2005) Journalistic writing – commentaries, editorials, articles, reviews, columns, broadcast discussions – should raise and answer pertinent questions that help to elucidate confusing issues, particularly those relating to policies and leadership. Agba argues that questions like these and more could suggest workable techniques that can help Nigerians deal decisively with problems of corruption, ethnicism, lack of accountability, and weak checks and balances in government.

As pointed out earlier, the political trend in Nigeria concerning the electoral process demands specialist political reporters. This should cover critical areas such as knowledge of legal issues in campaign reporting, investigation, and balanced judgment that allows the establishment of gathered facts. On this note of expertise, general reporting can be said to have become increasingly handicapped. As Louis (1971) puts it, thorough voter guidance should be at the heart of campaign reporting by the mass media. To achieve this objective, the reporter must do so with absolute detachment. He should instead carry out a critical and objective analysis of candidates to educate the electorate. In this capacity of impartiality, the campaign reporter acts as a catalyst between the candidates and the electorate. Becker and Lower (1976) give an articulate summary of the functions of the mass media in electioneering campaigns as follows: reporting and interpreting events, defining issues, portraying personalities, investigating support.”

There is a very serious angle to the public enlightenment dimension of the role of the mass media in the electoral process. As Agba (2007) observes, people are eager to join the plethora of electoral malpractices without realising that they will be victims of bad government resulting from involvement in electoral fraud. Agba (2007) argues that 43% of our population is still illiterate, a rather large group that requires the special attention of the media. For this group, every piece of electoral information must be repeatedly disseminated, and in the local languages, too. The media must go beyond merely disseminating information and engage in political education. For example, educating the non-voting population on why they cannot vote is necessary instead of scaring them with numerous penalties for breaching the electoral law. As for the voting population, voter education programmes must be user-friendly, especially for disadvantaged groups like the non-literate and physically incapacitated. The programmes of voters’ education must offer

opportunities for all issues at stake in the election to be highlighted and explained. These include basic issues such as who can vote or contest an election, the date of the election, and where to vote.

Iredia (2007) opines that the Electoral Commission cannot undertake voter education. According to him, there is a big difference between voter education and the image-making ventures that many information departments of electoral commissions undertake. The powerful channels, the most potent strategies, and the technical format for effective public enlightenment belong to the media. The media's role in an election also extends to monitoring the electoral process. To this extent, the media's emphasis should no longer be limited to when and how the leaders voted or were registered. How the entire process fared would serve a greater public interest. For instance, were the arrangements for each exercise adequate? Were people registered or able to vote? For example, Nigerians have, to date, not known how the Electoral Commission in 1991, concerning the delimitation of electoral constituencies, arrived at 5,575 wards in the country. This has led to the fear in certain circles that there is what is known as gerrymandering in Nigeria's electoral process, a feature in which a favoured candidate has more election centres in his areas of strength, while very few centres are allocated to areas where his opponent has his main supporters.

## **DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS**

The analysis reveals that the mass media plays a crucial role in shaping the electoral process in Nigeria, yet it faces significant challenges. The media's current status as an elite institution, primarily serving the interests of the powerful and government entities, undermines its effectiveness in promoting democratic values and transparent electioneering. There is a strong call for the media to return to journalism in the public interest, providing coverage and critical analysis of election campaigns to ensure that political actors adhere to democratic principles and that the electorate is well-informed. Additionally, addressing the internal issues within media organizations and enhancing their role in voter education and public enlightenment are vital for improving electoral integrity and fostering national development. This involves focusing on serious issues and providing comprehensive, unbiased information to enable the electorate to make informed decisions.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

The analysis underscores the pivotal role of mass media in influencing Nigeria's electoral process, revealing its dual nature as both a crucial actor and a significant challenge. Despite its potential to

enhance democratic values and electoral transparency, the media's current alignment with elite interests hampers its ability to serve the public effectively. To fulfill its democratic role, the media must refocus on public interest journalism, ensuring that election coverage includes in-depth analysis and critical evaluation of political campaigns. This shift is essential for holding political actors accountable and informing the electorate, thus strengthening the democratic process. Additionally, addressing internal media issues and expanding voter education and public enlightenment efforts are crucial steps. By providing clear, unbiased information and tackling serious electoral issues, the media can better support democratic development and national progress. Therefore, reforming media practices and enhancing their commitment to unbiased reporting and voter education are necessary to improve Nigeria's electoral process's integrity and effectiveness.

Based on the conclusion, the following recommendations are made;

- i. To enhance the media's role in the electoral process, promoting greater independence from political and elite influences is crucial. Media organizations should implement robust editorial policies prioritizing public interest journalism and critical analysis of election campaigns, ensuring that coverage is unbiased and focused on informing the electorate about democratic principles and political accountability.
- ii. Media outlets should invest in comprehensive voter education initiatives that address the needs of all segments of the population, particularly disadvantaged and non-literate groups. This includes disseminating clear, accessible information on voting procedures, electoral laws, and the implications of various candidates and policies, empowering voters to make well-informed decisions and improving the overall transparency and integrity of the electoral process.

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