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The Long Arm of Facebook – Social Media as a Tool for Survival in Informal Settlements

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The Long Arm of Facebook – Social Media as a Tool for Survival in Informal Settlements

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I. Introduction

Conventionally, it is argued that people engage with new media for reasons such as creating a virtual community, relationship maintenance, social interaction and communication (Ferris & Hollenbaugh, 2018: 65-66; Kim & Kim, 2019: 156; Sundar and Limperos, 2013: 518; Quinn, 2016: 81).In addition, social networking sites are used to enhance social capital(Ellison, Steinfield& Lampe, 2007: 1161-1162; Gil de Zúñiga, 2012: 329; Utz & Muscanell, 2015: 422; Bouchillon & Gotlieb, 2017: 312; Greenhow & Burton, 2011: 223).However, using Facebook to connect with others who are better resourced (especially when a person is impoverished), and converting bridging social capital-based networks from virtual to tangibly beneficial is a rare and undocumented function of Facebook.

South Africa's history of colonisation and apartheid has resulted in wealth, employment and opportunities being unequally distributed in favour of the minority white population (Meiring, Kannemeyer & Potgieter, 2018: 5-6).This implies: 1) that white people 27 years after apartheid ended in 1994 remain better resourced than the rest of the South African population, and 2) the concept of white informal settlements is anomalous in the country. With this as background, using Facebook to secure donations is a crafty solution to lessen the effects of poverty successfully implemented by residents of both Pango Camp and Sonheuwel. Since white people in South Africa are generally still wealthier than the rest of the Black population, there are several (white) networks and individuals that the informal settlement residents in this study can contact through Facebook for assistance. Groups that are specifically sympathetic to white poverty in the country.

Pango Camp is an informal settlement on the West Rand of Johannesburg. This informal settlement houses approximately 150 adults and 50 children. There are no legal electricity connections, houses are made up of tin and corrugated iron structures, and six water connections service the entire community. A portable toilet is shared between two houses. Sonheuwel used to be a caravan park, but over the past decade it has transformed into an informal settlement where residents live in caravans or informal housing structures on a permanent basis. There is an ablution block on the premises and prepaid electricity connections. Both of these communities are informal settlements according to the official definition of an informal settlement which describes one as "an unplanned settlement on land which has not been surveyed or proclaimed as residential, consisting mainly of informal dwellings (shacks)" (Statistics South Africa, 2004). Statistics South Africa specifies further that houses in informal settlements are "informal dwellings, … a makeshift structure not erected according to approved architectural plans" (Statistics South Africa, 2004).

Despite living in poverty, residents of these two informal settlements have reliable enough access to Facebook to use this to penetrate networks of middle-class and wealthy users, and to fruitfully engage with them to extract donations and other forms of support. In this vein, Facebook renders itself a tool of survival since without this platform residents of these informal settlements would not have been able to connect with their benefactors, and, furthermore, without donations in the form of clothing, food and toiletries, life would certainly be much harder if not completely insufferable.

II. Uses and Gratifications of Social Media, and the Role of Social Capital

New adaptations of the original uses and gratifications theory of Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973-1974: 509-523) have emerged with the arrival and rise of new media. These include aspects such as passing time, need for recognition and affirmation, agency, interactivity, information sharing, escape and entertainment (Ferris & Hollenbaugh, 2018: 65-66; Kim

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& Kim, 2019: 156; Sundar & Limperos, 2013: 518; Quinn, 2016: 81; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2008:11). What is further especially profound about the reasons and motivations (uses and gratifications) behind individuals' social media engagement is their desire to be part of a virtual community (Ferris & Hollenbaugh, 2018: 65-66), to meet new people, to interact socially (Kim & Kim, 2019: 156; Sundar &Limperos, 2013: 518; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2008:11) and to have companionship (Quinn, 2016: 81).

Networks that are established and maintained through social media, and what these are used for, warrant a look at social capital and the role social media plays in increasing and maintaining a person's social capital. Bourdieu (1986: 248-249) describes and defines social capital as follows:

> Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a "credential" which entitles them to credit in the various senses of the word.

Social capital, in other words, is the value of a person's networks. Any social network comprises actors (nodes) and the relationship between these actors – the ties or edges (Sauer & Kauffeld, 2013: 28; Borgatti & Foster, 2003: 992). The general assumption and understanding is that the poor suffer from "network poverty" which implies that their relationships and connections are typically with other impoverished, ill-resourced people (Van Eijk, 2010: 469). In this context, it is important to distinguish between bridging social capital and bonding social capital (Gowan, 2010: 51; Van Eijck, 2010: 478; Osterling, 2007: 130).Bonding social capital consists of primary networks and strong ties that provide assistance with basic, day-to-day tasks and responsibilities such as watching children or lending or borrowing cooking ingredients (Adato, Carter &May, 2006: 245; Saracostti, 2007: 520; Santini & De Pascale, 2012: 19; Granovetter, 1973: 1364). Bridging social capital, on the other hand, comprises weak ties that extend across socio-economic boundaries and beyond an individual's immediate social circle (Osterling, 2007: 130; Gowan, 2010: 51; Lewandowski, 2008: 32; Granovetter, 1973: 1364).Bridging social capital therefore has the ability to provide opportunities for upward mobility (Lewandowski, 2008: 32; Gowan, 2010: 60). Poor individuals and communities tend to possess and maintain only bonding social capital – networks that, although helpful with basic and immediate needs and requirements, do not have the ability to provide opportunities for socio-economic growth and promotion(Osterling, 2007: 123; Adato, Carter &May, 2006: 245; Saracostti, 2007: 520; Santini & De Pascale, 2012: 19; Granovetter, 1973: 1364).

With this understanding of social capital and the differentiation between the two types thereof in mind, the role social media plays in establishing and nurturing relationships is of relevance since this provides an avenue for individuals to enhance their social capital. The very nature of social media allows users to connect with others and to maintain relationships in a cost-effective and seamless fashion (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007: 1161-1162). In this vein, social media has proven to be an effective platform for users with compromised financial means to create and enhance their bridging social capital (Gil de Zúñiga, 2012: 329; Utz & Muscanell, 2015: 422). Facebook especially provides a gateway for impoverished individuals to connect with others and to build bridging ties (Bouchillon & Gotlieb, 2017: 312; Greenhow & Burton, 2011: 223). In other words, in enabling a person to initiate contact and establish communication with someone they would not have been able to connect with under different circumstances (without access to social media), impoverished users are given an opportunity to establish networks (to increase their weak ties) in such a way that they could benefit from them (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007: 1164; Ellison, Vitak, Gray & Lampe, 2014: 863; Bouchillon & Gotlieb, 2017: 299).

Although online, virtual connections may resemble physical networks and the limitations or boundaries attached to these (boyd & Ellison, 2008: 221; Schoon & Strelitz, 2014: 25), social media platforms have proven to be able to break through socio-economic barriers (Micheli, 2016: 565). The intensity, motives, intent and status aspirations of users directly determine their ability to increase their bridging social capital through social media, and this especially applies to low-income social media users (Johnston, Tanner, Lalla & Kawalski, 2013: 35; Mahmood, Zakar & Zakar, 2018: 856). This suggests that when users apply themselves in a focused, goal-directed manner with the intent being to increase their bridging social capital and expand their personal networks, social media successfully enables these users to advance and diversify their contact networks (Bouchillon & Gotlieb, 2017: 299).

In this vein, some research discusses using social media for fundraising activities (Saxton & Wang, 2014: 862; Davis & Moscato, 2018: 284; Guo & Saxton, 2013: 74). The literature does however not discuss any specific examples of severely impoverished communities that have effectively employed their own, independent survival strategies through Facebook – using this platform to secure frequent, if not daily, donation deliveries.

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III. Method

A qualitative research approach was applied to understand how residents of informal settlements use social media to establish connections with individuals in higher socio-economic circles (to enhance bridging social capital), and how they leverage these networks, established through Facebook, to survive. A qualitative method was selected as this study is interested in "what", "why" and "how" questions, and these types of enquiries are best suited to the qualitative research approach (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2013: 3; Grossoehme, 2014: 119; McLeod, 2015: 196; Du Plooy, 2009: 148).Furthermore, the goal of qualitative research is to produce data that richly and authentically reflects views, expressions, words and opinions (Ormston et al., 2013: 3; Grossoehme, 2014: 119; McLeod, 2015: 196; Du Plooy, 2009: 148). In fact, the researcher did not embark on this study to determine if or how participants use Facebook to solicit donations or enhance social capital.Instead, the researcher wished to understand what residents of white informal settlements in Gauteng use social media for, and using Facebook to survive was a prominent theme that emerged from semi-structured interviews. This indicates how qualitative research invites exploration and rich data.

In this vein, semi-structured interviews were selected as a method to collect data. These interviews adhere to a loose framework of key questions that navigate the researcher around the specific area of investigation, but it allows for enough room to divert when certain topics warrant deeper exploration – which is the purpose of a qualitative study (Gill, Stewart, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008: 291; Davies & Hughes, 2014: 28). For sampling, the researcher used three techniques. Purposive, non-random sampling was used since the researcher valued the different characteristics of the study population (Wilmot, 2005: 55). In other words, participants were selected to represent different genders and ages to determine if using social media to enhance bridging social capital is gender or age-specific (this study found that it was not). The convenience sampling method was also applied since the study population was selected based on practical criteria including easy accessibility, geographic location, availability and eagerness to partake (Etikan, Musa & Alkassim, 2016, 2; Daymon & Holloway, 2002: 163; Edwards & Holland, 2013: 6). After the first round of interviews, the researcher used snowball sampling where one participant would recommend another participant based on their understanding of the recommended participant's knowledge of the research topic (Daymon & Holloway, 2002: 161; Edwards & Holland, 2013: 6) – in this case social media use.

Two white informal settlements in Gauteng were selected for this study – Pango Camp in Krugersdorp on the West Rand of Johannesburg, and Sonheuwel in Pretoria. The researcher selected these two informal settlements as she has access to said communities. Moreover, she is fluent in Afrikaans and could therefore easily converse with participants in their mother tongue. During exploratory visits to these two informal settlements, the researcher established that most residents have access to social media, and therefore these communities were ideal to research with regards to social media usage. In Pango Camp, the researcher did extensive interviews with five participants, and in Sonheuwel, the researcher engaged rigorously with another five participants. In Pango Camp, community leader Hugo predominantly manages and facilitates communication with "sponsors" as well as mostFacebook "marketing" activities. He provided invaluable insight into the donation system in the informal settlement.

Thematic analysis was applied in the sense that the researcher transcribed her own data manually, she then created codes, searched for themes, revised themes, and, finally, described and named themes with well-defined clarifications (du Plooy, 2009: 219-220; Liamputtong, 2013: 249).

IV. Ethical Considerations

The researcher interchanged the names of certain participants and others' real names were used when they stated no objection to this. Hugo's name, for example, has been kept as he is a rather well-known figure in the community and has received attention and recognition in the media for being the community leader of Pango Camp. Participants are not shy or sensitive about how they use social media as a tool of survival. In fact, they do so under their own names and not as a "fake" online identity. The researcher wishes that the online strategies employed by participants in this study is not viewed as duplicitous actions of people who are not as deprived, disadvantaged or in need as they appear to be. This is certainly not the case. Although social media access may point to some form of comfort, being digitally connected does not, by any means, imply that these participants are not impoverished, marginalised and destitute. Their innovation should be applauded for being exactly that – originality in finding means to survive day after day despite facing enormous and often crippling challenges.

V. Findings

Interviews with participants revealed how Facebook is used to solicit donations from well-resourced individuals. This social media platform does however not only lend itself to fundraising, but it has also assisted participants in finding employment and sourcing free or cheap goods from people wishing to rid themselves of used clothes, furniture, and other household appliances.

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a) *Support, financial aid and donations as result of Facebook "advertising"*

Pango Camp is well-organised when it comes to using Facebook to elicit support and donations. Community leader Hugo (63, Pango Camp) has, over time, devised and executed a successful Facebook strategy to attract donors to Pango Camp. He has created a Facebook page for Pango Camp and an NPO (non-profit organisation) under which he tradeson behalf of Pango Camp. Heis mostly in charge of "advertising" and the relationship with benefactors. Hugo describes the process of acquiring Facebook donations as such:

> Mostly, I use Facebook to advertise. I am part of groups – there are many. I sit with something like eighteen groups. See, I put up a post that says we need help with this and this. Then we take the post and share it with our people [individual donors and groups on Facebook]. So, it's a thing … how shall I say? You balloon the thing. You blow the balloon bigger than what it is. So, now it goes to so many people – if you take it and you share with your people, then you have access to so many people. Those people that we have in our group, they share it then with other people. Then the thing builds.

Hugo's (63, Pango Camp) Facebook campaigning does not only involve asking for general donations. He also embarks on target-driven initiatives when something specific is needed:

> If a man here is looking for building material, then I ask on Facebook: "Listen, here's someone who needs building material, can anyone help him? I'm specific [when I ask]. Like, now, for Christmas, the [Pango Camp] people said they wanted something for Christmas. So, I advertised on Facebook. I can show you, there [in a storage room] are hordes of toys and gifts. Hordes.

Hugo (63, Pango Camp) is passionate about the value of Facebook in terms of reaching people he would never have knownabout or be in contact with had it not been for the social media platform. Hugo (63, Pango Camp) is adamant that Facebook has enabled him to extend his network beyond his restricted physical community to include individuals that fall in a higher socio-economic bracket. Furthermore, he is able to productively and fruitfully liaise with well-resourced individuals through Facebook and these connections tangibly benefit him, his family and Pango Camp. He explains that "…because of Facebook I can contact someone I would never have known. Look, how will a guy on the outside know he can bring stuff here if he doesn't see that on Facebook?"

Although Hugo's Facebook activities and initiatives have resulted in a lucrative donation system for the Pango Camp community, it has resulted in tension and conflict in the community. Hugo explains:

> You have to use your instinct to decide who you want to give to, and then you give who you want to give to. And, if you know that guy is going to sell it for drugs or alcohol, then you don't give to him. Finish! I don't care if he's going to blow a gasket or ten gaskets or talk nonsense about me – when I get up there one day, I have to take responsibility … Let me put it like this, for me it's not about the adults. For me, it's more about the children. So, if a child doesn't have food, you're welcome to ask and I'll make a plan. If you want to drink and do drugs, you have money for food. I'm sorry.

As result of the evident success of Hugo's Facebook campaigning and the rising tension in Pango Camp regarding the distribution of donations, other Pango Camp residents have launched their own Facebook initiatives. Chantel (43) told the researcher how a woman had helped her with baby clothes for her new-born. She explained that Mariska (24) gave her the woman's cell phone number. When asked how she learned of the woman, Mariska answered:

> I met her on Facebook. She has her own page. When I was pregnant with my twins, I asked her for baby stuff and she gave me her number. Those are the types of groups I follow, like the one Chantel told you about where I got that lady's number who can help with stuff.

At Sonheuwel, certain participants alsouse Facebook to organise activities and donations for their fellow Sonheuwel residents. JP (42) explained:

> Antoinette [JP's wife] and I do lots of donations for the park. We ask people for a bed or if someone needs something, then we ask … and we receive. I also have a non-profit, an NPO that I use for donations and stuff when people are struggling. I connect through Facebook groups. I post … not too far, obviously only on Pretoria groups. When the stuff arrives, they drop it off with us, but we always confirm first with the camp manager. We don't take the donations to our house.

Antoinette (40) further elaborated:

> You can ask my mom how many donations we got in last December. We posted a thing on Facebook and we got a good response. There were probably five, six, seven people here in one week with donations. And I drove fifteen kilometers to a smallholding where I was told I could get vegetables. Last year, I also organised something for the children for Easter. The people came from the Facebook groups, but then they ask for my Whats App number, they were individuals [not organisational aid]. They learn about me through Facebook groups. When they react to your post, they also tell you who you can contact. So, we called the one shopping mall and the lady there organised gifts for the children for Christmas.

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At both Pango Camp and Sonheuwel, residents benefit from the Facebook initiatives of a handful of others. In this vein, Facebook has proven to be a powerful platform and tool to connect those who need with those who are willing and able to give. Facebook connections, bridging social capital established and maintained through this social media platform, do not only prove valuable in terms of donations. Facebook has further assisted participants in finding employment and earning an income.

b) Income and employment obtained through Facebook

JP (42, Sonheuwel), together with his wife, Antoinette (40, Sonheuwel) own a small business that does web designs, web hosting and VOIP telephone numbers. JP explains that he finds Facebook to be an essential tool to promote their business and attract clients:

> Without it, I would have been stranded. Our entire income comes from the internet. All my work, I get through Facebook.

He discussed the way he advertises his services on Facebook: "I randomise between 700 groups. I use them all." He further expressed that he has enough work to keep him busy every day.

Another Facebook success story was shared by Alta (53, Sonheuwel). The researcher interviewed Alta in her home where she apologised for the mess in the house and explained that that she and her husband were actually in the process of packing up their home and moving to a game park. Her husband had been offered a position as general maintenance person, and she would be managing the game lodge's kitchen. Alta explained that this job opportunity came as result of Facebook:

> I went onto the one Facebook page *Afrikaners Wat Werk Soeken Arbeidswet*[1]. I went onto it and I typed that I was doing it on behalf of my husband. Then I put in his skills and everything, and his phone number. I did it for the guy next door too. The next day, we were sitting here when my phone rang. Then they [her husband and the game farm owner] spoke, and he [game farm owner] then asked: "Can your wife cook?"

Alta (53, Sonheuwel) and her husband were invited for an interview shortly after that phone call. They were both offered positions to help with the daily running of the game lodge. As part of their employment package, they were asked to live on the farm on a permanent basis. Alta wasexpressive about her feelings: "I am so happy for Facebook."

These participants have been successful in using Facebook to improve their circumstances. Although one could argue that living in an informal settlement could hardly be considered a comfortable lifestyle, the context deserves further discussion. JP (42, Sonheuwel) and Antoinette (40, Sonheuwel) live significantly more comfortably than several other Sonheuwel residents – they have a new flat-screen television and they have a car and a scooter (most Sonheuwel residents do not own motorised vehicles). In fact, Antoinette explained to the researcher that the reason they still stay at Sonheuwel, despite being able to move out of the informal settlement, is because her mom, Bokkie (66, Sonheuwel), lives two houses away and she is happy there. It is important for Antoinette to live close to her mother. In other words, the positive, productive outcomes of these participants' Facebook engagements should not be underplayed just because the optics may suggest a severely impoverished lifestyle.

c) Free and cheap goods acquired through Facebook

Residents of informal settlements have compromised financial means. Through Facebook, participants are able to source and acquire necessities and commodities at reduced prices, and sometimes even for free. Jannie (36, Sonheuwel) explains: "If you couldn't use Facebook, you would struggle a lot to get stuff and to sell." Bokkie (66, Sonheuwel) uses Facebook to procure equipment for her needlework business:

> When I go onto Facebook, I like Marketplace[2]. For example, if I need an overlocker urgently, I will put on Facebook that I am a pensioner, and trust me, I will get one for cheap. But, I will have to go fetch it, so I say it must be somewhere in Pretoria.

In Pango Camp, participants spoke about Facebook groups they are part of which are designed for buying and selling products. Elize (42, Pango Camp) mentioned *Koop enVerkoop*, *Karreonder R5,000* and *Karreonder R15,000*,[3] explaining that her husband is part of these groups since he purchase sold vehicles to fix and resell. Hugoshared what the benefits of these Facebook groups are, specifically *KomVra of Gratis en Verniet*:[4]

> It is very helpful, because if he says come and take a lounge suite for free, then you quickly go there to get it. There you go! Then you give it to someone who needs it. This one [Hugo was

[1] Interviews were predominantly conducted in Afrikaans as most participants' mother tongue is Afrikaans. The researcher is fully bilingual and was comfortable speaking Afrikaans to participants. *Afrikaners Wat Werk Soek en Arbeidswet* translates to *Afrikaners Looking for Work and Labour Act*

[2] Marketplace is a Facebook service of classified advertisements. This offers Facebook users a platform to sell and buy goods using their Facebook profiles.

[3] Buy and Sell, Cars under R5,000 and Cars under R15,000.

[4] Come Ask or Free.

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interviewed in his neighbour's house and pointed to the couch he was sitting on], I got like that.

The researcher interviewed Douglas (35, Pango Camp) while he was busy fixing a car. He shared that he was part of several Facebook groups advertising discounted, second-hand items. The groups he is most active on are all community-specific since proximity is an important factor considering the cost of transport:

> I am part of *Randfontein Koop en Verkoop*,[5] *Rand-en-Dal*, *Meyersdal* … all those places. My work [fibre optic technician] is everywhere in Gauteng, so when I drive there, I join those groups. That's how it goes.

Douglas told the researcher that he mostly participates on these groups to "window shop", but that he has, on occasion, used them to buy and sell in the past. Chantel (43, Pango Camp) successfully uses *KomVra of Gratis enVerniet*to secure items needed for her new-born baby. Mariska (24, Pango Camp) is part of the Facebook group *Krugersdorp, komhaal of word weggegooigratis enverniet "Mahala"*[6], and said that "the people who can give, will give to you."

The cost of items such as clothes, furniture, household appliances, tools and car parts can be debilitating to residents of impoverished communities and informal settlements. Facebook groups that advertise second-hand goods at hugely discounted prices and even offering free give-aways to anyone willing to come and collect discarded items are invaluable tools to the residents of the informal settlements of this study. Without these Facebook groups, participants expressed that they would probably never have acquired many of the items they came across on these Facebook pages. From this point of view, being able to use Facebook to obtain necessary, but usually rather expensive, products can be seen as a tool that adds enormous value to the lives and quality thereof to participants.

VI. Conclusion

Facebook allows participants in this study to increase their bridging social capital and to leverage these networks to tangibly benefit from them. Solely because of Facebook, participants are able to connect with groups and individuals that are better-resourced and in higher socio-economic circles. Had it not been for Facebook, or social media for that matter, participants would be physically and socially confined to their immediate surroundings, isolated to an extent, since the high cost of transport and their depressed financial circumstances do not allow for much freedom in terms of movement. In this context, Facebook has opened a world of opportunities to them that would otherwise perhaps have existed, but would not have been accessible or penetrable to these participants.

Bridging social capital by definition often leads to upward mobility. Whether this is the case in these two informal settlements is certainly debatable. Surely, one could argue, living in an informal settlement reliant on the goodwill of others cannot be seen as an enviable position. The alternative however is what is relevant. Without Facebook, the resources that assist the two informal settlements in this study would simply not be available. This would drastically diminish and erode the quality of life they are afforded through the donations and opportunities gained through Facebook. In other words, perhaps the upward mobility of participants, as result of their increased bridging social capital acquired through Facebook, does not extend to a lifestyle beyond the informal settlements they reside in, but it certainly affords them the comfort of surviving a little better.

VII. Contribution of this Study

Using Facebook as a tool of survival was one of the themes that emerged from the researcher's doctoral thesis. Although using Facebook for fundraising has been explored (Saxton & Wang, 2014: 862; Davis & Moscato, 2018: 284; Guo & Saxton, 2013: 74),this study's original contribution is that it views using Facebook as a tool to survive from the perspective of the impoverished user and not the aid organisation, benefactor or even Facebook itself. It explains the "lived" experiences of participants and how they engage with Facebook to "market" and to liaise with others that are in a position to assist them in one way or another. Current available literature does not provide accounts of Facebook survival strategies such as this manuscript does. It furthermore hopefully introduces the concept of using Facebook to survive, albeit simply a little better, to other informal settlements and residents of these communities, emphasising their very own agency and self-empowerment.

[5]Randfontein Buy and Sell.
[6]Krugersdorp, come get or it will be discarded, it's for free.

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