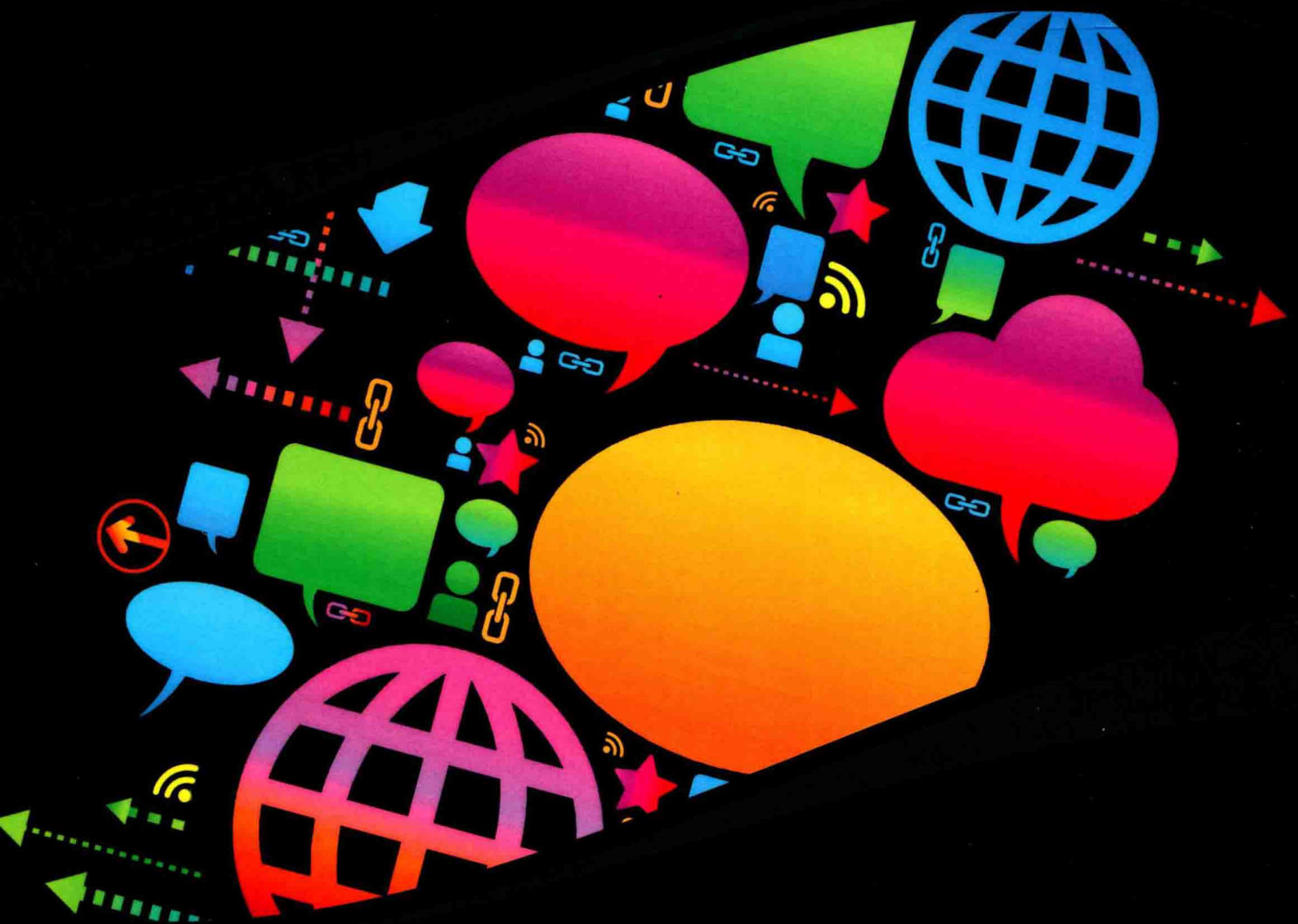


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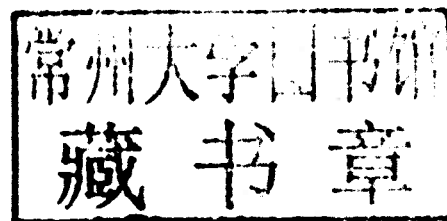
Communication and Language Analysis in the Public Sphere



Roderick P. Hart

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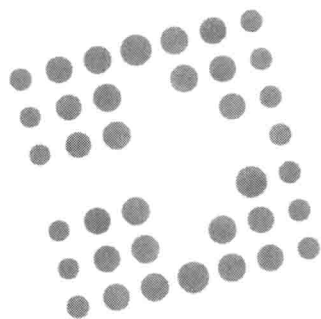
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Preface

STUDYING PUBLIC AFFAIRS WITH DICTION

The essays in this volume examine two of the most potent institutions in modern life – government and the mass media. Each of these institutions determines a great deal about how people transact their lives. Government, of course, determines who will live—children with adequate health care, enemy combatants treated well in Guantanamo—and who will die—poorly maintained highways resulting in traffic accidents, state laws allowing capital punishment, etc. The mass media also determine who will live and who will die when they adequately (or inadequately) tell Oklahomans about an oncoming tornado or when they distribute health warnings to the elderly during flu season in a timely (or untimely) manner. When these two institutions interact with one another, things change even more profoundly. The Washington Post’s examination of the Watergate burglary reminds us of this fact, as does the WikiLeaks controversy and the News of the World scandal that compromised Rupert Murdoch’s hold on British politics. Government is not defenseless, of course. The Supreme Court’s docket in the U.S. is awash with First Amendment cases. Proposed mergers among media giants are often frustrated by monopoly laws. Media and politics are an uneasy relationship in the best of times.

In February of 2013, some sixty scholars from a wide variety of backgrounds came together in Austin, Texas, to examine these matters. All were social scientists of one sort or another but they hailed from different disciplines, but they did have one thing in common: they believed that examining the language of institutions holds special promise. They also believed that all institutional actions—a corporate merger, an athletic controversy, an educational revolution—leave linguistic traces. Power exchanges are inevitably transacted through discourse, as when a new Pope launches a theological revolution with a social encyclical or when a head of state loses a recently won mandate via an inept maiden speech. Language never seems important in political life until, suddenly, it is.

In addition to their interest in the language of institutions, the authors in this and its companion volume (*Communication and Language Analysis in the Corporate World*) also had something else in common – they used the same computer program to do their work. The software they used, DICTION (www.dictionsoftware.com), analyzes large groups of texts and does so quickly, accurately, and reliably. Other automated content analytic systems exist, but DICTION is unique in at least two ways: (1) its dictionaries (its collection of search terms) are unusually exhaustive and (2) it provides norms for all the data it processes based on 50,000 previously analyzed passages, thereby letting a user compare a given text to some 40 genre (e.g., speeches, news coverage, advertisements, citizen commentary, religious sermons, corporate reports, theater scripts, television drama, etc.). Because it provides a “base standard” for tracking language patterns (i.e., it is agnostic about the source of a given set of messages), it is especially useful for comparative and cross-disciplinary work, features that are amply on display in this volume and in hundreds of other studies completed with DICTION (see <http://www.dictionsoftware.com/published-studies/>).

Because it can process a great many texts quickly, DICTION is especially well suited to the Big Data era. Every major news organization, for example, now has a Website, thereby providing a treasure trove of contemporary (and often historical) materials for the enterprising researcher. Governments throughout the democratic world download gigabytes upon gigabytes of textual data every minute of every hour of every day, all of which can be searched more meaningfully because of programs like DICTION. The world's people are increasingly letting themselves be heard, incessantly (and colorfully) sharing their views of tawdry politicians, crusty reporters, and singing cats via social media. People are now joined together on Twitter, apparently disclosing to one another everything they know or can imagine. Programs like DICTION cannot forestall this fire hydrant of information but it can help monitor the flow.

STUDYING THE LANGUAGE OF MEDIA AND POLITICS

Scholars from a variety of disciplines—Communication, Political Science, and Sociology, primarily—have amassed a great deal of information about how politicians and other government officials encode their messages. Murray Edleman (1985) started scholars on this path many years ago when he patiently tracked the assumptions underlying political discourse, assumptions that could be brought to the surface via patient textual inspection. Countless researchers have followed in his wake. Presidential scholars have been particularly active, often keying on major public pronouncements from the Oval Office (e.g., Zarefsky, 2008) or on political campaigns (Hart, 2000a). A variety of other genre have been examined as well, including political platforms (Laver, Benoit, & Garry, 2003), diplomatic negotiations (Bashor, 2004), Internet blogs (Ulsaner, 2004), television talk shows (Hart, 1994), local town hall meetings (Bryan, 2003), gubernatorial addresses (Crew & Lewis, 2011), political rituals (Dickinson, Blair, & Ott, 2010), campaign debates (Doerfel & Connaughton, 2009), political advertising (Kenski, Hardy, & Jamieson, 2010), citizen deliberations (Tracy, 2010), and informal badinage at the local breakfast shop (Walsh (2003),

When listening to this chatter, scholars have not been happy with all they have found. Lim (2008), for example, sees in presidential remarks a “dumbing down” of the office over time, while Morris (2011) reports a new kind of narcissism creeping into American politics. Some scholars have argued that politics and entertainment have become dangerously intertwined (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2002) but others are more optimistic, arguing that the “common style” in American politics brings leaders and citizens together in important ways (Lind, 2013). Researchers using the case study method have found new openings in the rhetoric of Barack Obama, arguing that he has reinvented the American dream in powerful ways (Rowland & Jones, 2007), even as he made the national patois more complex than ever before (Terrill, 2009).

Politicians and the electorate are only part of the story, of course. Each day, the press intrudes into their lives, fostering a complex dialectic. When examining such interactions, Hart (2000b) identified four functions served by political reportage, each of which has distinct linguistic markers. These include (1) a disciplinary function – the news inevitably features disagreements between the government and the governed; (2) an energizing function – the press features constant motion, thereby increasing psychic involvement and, potentially, citizen engagement; (3) an exploratory function – the news tells us what events mean in an often oracular (and sometimes frightening) fashion; (4) an objectivity function – despite legion complaints, research has been unable to find systematic political biases in Western news coverage.

The complex relationship shared by government and the media produces an equally complex rhetoric. So, for example, studies find that the U.S. press cozied up to the Bush administration by downplaying evidence of prisoner mistreatment at Abu Ghraib (Jones and Sheets, 2009) and by reframing the lessons of 9/11 (John, Domke, Coe, & Graham, 2007).

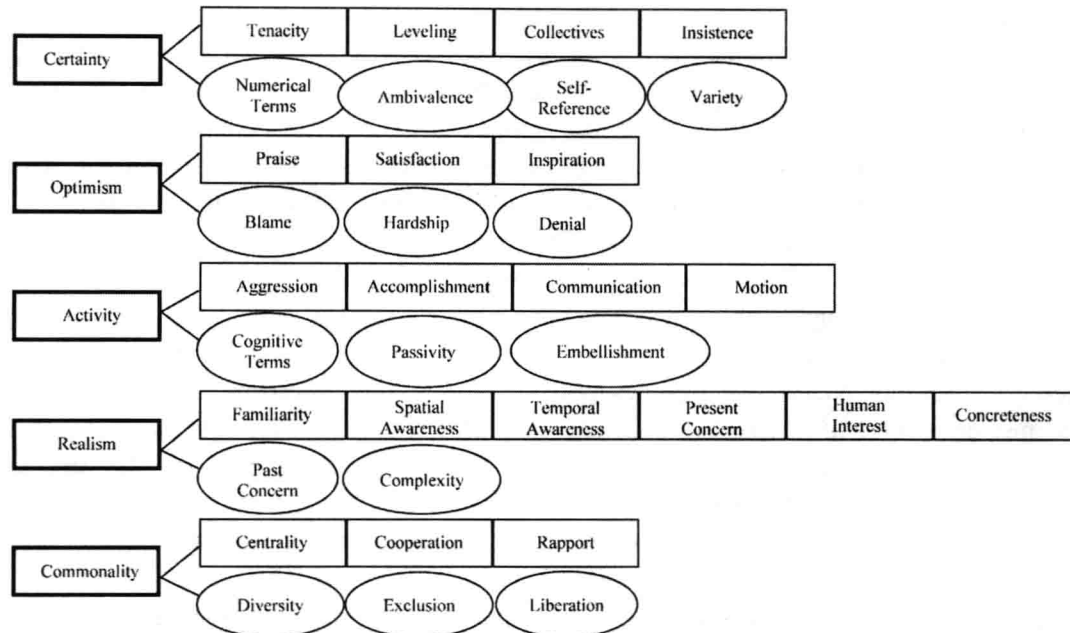
Soft-pedaling bad news was also found during the Clinton administration (Bates, 2009), and another study linked news coverage to the ideological positions adopted by U.S. representatives (Simon & Jerit, 2007). Other scholars have studied how news coverage figures into complex diplomatic scenarios (Cheng, 2002), with some linking rival news reports of whale fishing to the economic interests of the nations in question – in this case, Great Britain and Japan (Murata, 2007). Continuing struggles over national identity have been found in German press coverage (Johnson & Suhr, 2003) as well as in Scottish newspapers (Higgins, 2006). Scholars have also linked the “slant” of news coverage to governmental positions on terrorism (Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2008), political reformation (Pan, 2009), religious extremism (Baker, 2010), the treatment of immigrants (Santa Ana, 1999), abortion legislation (Ferree, 2002), and racial identity (Squires & Jackson, 2010).

However, government and the press move in opposite directions as well. Jerit (2006) finds an often palpably proletarian tone in news coverage of economic inequality, while Scheithauer (2007) finds that even objective-sounding news reports slyly encourage voters to become politically involved. Baym (2010) reports a similar effect when reporters implicitly promise complete transparency of all things political. Tardy (2009) takes a different approach, showing how “soft news” hastens assimilation by recent immigrants, a finding echoed by Hartmann, Zhang, and Wischstadt (2005). On this same issue, though, Baker and his colleagues (2008) determined that different news outlets have treated immigration differently, with the mainstream British press subtly endorsing it and the tabloid press rejecting it out of hand. As is so often the case with rhetoric, differing audiences and political circumstances can change things profoundly.

AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF STUDYING POLITICS AND MEDIA

The scholars referenced above approach the matter of politics and the media differently but all confess to three basic beliefs: (1) language matters, (2) it signals institutional values, and (3) language patterns are of special importance. However, the authors in this volume share an additional belief: they have found DICTION useful in their work. One reason is that DICTION is easy to use no matter what one’s disciplinary background. It is a multi-platform program written in Java for both PCs and MACs that deploys some 10,000 search words in 33 word lists or dictionaries and that includes several calculated variables as well. None of the search terms is duplicated in these lists, which gives the user an unusually rich understanding of a text. The program also produces five master variables by combining (after standardization) the subaltern variables. The master variables were designed intentionally. The operating assumption was that if only five questions could be asked of a given passage, these five would provide the most robust understanding. Based on an analysis of some 50,000 verbal texts, no statistically significant relationship exists among any of these five master variables. Thus, each sheds unique light on the passage being examined. Figure 1 provides DICTION’s complete variable structure

Figure 1. Map of DICTION variables



DICTION's five master variables derive from work by others. Certainty, for example, originated in the work of the general semanticists, particularly Wendell Johnson (1946), who studied how language becomes rigid and what happens as a result. Definitionally, Certainty indicates resoluteness, inflexibility, and completeness and a tendency to speak *ex cathedra*. Optimism, language endorsing some person, group, concept or event or highlighting their positive entailments, and Activity, language featuring movement, change, and the implementation of ideas, were inspired by the work of Barber (1992) and Osgood (1957). The fourth dimension is Realism, language describing tangible, immediate, recognizable matters that affect people's everyday lives, and it taps into the Western pragmatism discussed by Dewey (1954). Finally, Commonality, language highlighting the agreed-upon values of a group and rejecting idiosyncratic modes of engagement, was inspired by the work of Etzioni (1993) and Bellah et al. (1991), although they were not language scholars per se.

DICTION users often embrace several key assumptions: (1) that institutional actors (even highly sophisticated ones like seasoned reporters and incumbent politicians) rarely monitor their lexical decisions; (2) that they have no ability at all to monitor their lexical patterns; (3) that they think they have control over such matters; and, hence, (4) that they encourage researchers to study that which they have deemed unworthy. This latter assumption shows why computer-assisted text analysis can be so powerful. After all, computers remember, ostensibly forever. If properly coached, computers can track associations across semantic space, note situational changes (and changes within those changes), and distinguish the characteristic word choices of one actor from another. Computers can also detect stabilities in language, the things that never change, a feature that is especially useful for students of complex institutions.

An especially handy feature of DICTION is that it lets users compare their results to a built-in normative database of previously examined texts, a feature that several of the authors in this volume have drawn on usefully. The program provides norms for some 40 genre (e.g., speeches, news coverage, ad-

vertisements, citizen commentary, corporate reports, financial documents, television drama, etc.), and, as a result, it is especially well suited to cross-disciplinary research (For a tolerably complete list of such researches see <http://www.dictionsoftware.com/published-studies/>).

DICTION also lets scholars build their own dictionaries for specialized purposes. A user may construct up to 30 such dictionaries (up to 5,000 words in each). So, for example, in political communication research, Hart (2000a) constructed lists of Patriotic Terms (homeland, justice, liberty, pilgrims, etc.), (2) Party References (Democrats, Republican, etc.), (3) Voter References (constituents, electorate, citizenry, etc.), and (4) Leader References (Adams, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Perot, etc.). Many of this book's authors have also created their own search lists to capture the specialized vocabularies in their disciplines.

DICTION also permits lexical layering, which involves standardizing the scores of individual dictionaries and then combining them to get at richer and deeper aspects of verbal tone. Such an approach trades on four assumptions: (1) families of words have their own distinctive valence but become mutually implicative when combined; (2) tone becomes more identifiable when word families are co-mingled; (3) tone becomes more forceful when these families are repeatedly co-mingled; and (4) lexical layering explains differences among rhetorical genre. For example, Hart (2014) recently measured the "storytelling" qualities of texts by assuming that narratives involve (1) vivid descriptions of (2) people's (3) activities at some particular (4) time and (5) place. Narratives are more than this of course—plot, characterization, motivations, etc.—but they are rarely less than this.

Operationally, Hart standardized the following variables prior to combining them in a single measure of Narrative Quality: Embellishment (ratio of adjectives-to-verbs) + Motion (bustle, jog, lurch, etc.) + Human Interest (cousin, wife, grandchild, etc.) + Temporal Terms (century, instant, mid-morning, etc.) + Spatial Terms (southwest, coastal, border, etc.). This measure powerfully distinguished among texts with narrative qualities (e.g., news reports) from more quotidian texts (e.g., legal contracts). In short, although DICTION has only so many search terms and so many lexical categories, it provides an almost unlimited set of optics for the enterprising scholar.

USING DICTION TO STUDY GOVERNMENT AND THE MEDIA

While all the chapters in this volume employ DICTION, they do so in varied ways. Some use lexical layering (e.g., Abelman, Chapter 18), but not all do. Some use DICTION descriptively to take a "first pass" at their data (e.g., Rodriguez, Chapter 3), while others test detailed theoretical propositions (e.g., Heith, Chapter 8). Some authors use DICTION inductively, "wondering aloud" about questions not asked before (e.g., Jarvis & Stephens, Chapter 13), while others use it deductively, testing hypotheses embedded in the scholarly literature (e.g., Hart & Scacco, Chapter 4). Some authors use DICTION's norms as referential guideposts (e.g., Stewart & Rhodes, Chapter 16), while others employ their own datasets patiently built up over the years (e.g., Collier, Chapter 11). Some link DICTION's findings to results from other CATA programs (e.g., Lowry, Chapter 14), while other authors supplement DICTION with human coding (e.g., Diels & Gorton, Chapter 1). Particularly interesting is the work of Lellis (Chapter 20), who uses her own custom dictionaries to track the value propositions of disability politics.

The authors represented here also approach institutions from different theoretical perspectives. Some look at the partisan aspects of public affairs (e.g., Trimble, Chapter 2), while others look at cultural forces transcending party differences (e.g., Childers & Wonnacott, Chapter 5). Especially intriguing is the work of Grose and Husser (Chapter 9) and Crew and Lewis (Chapter 10), who link message behavior

(“output” data) to public perceptions (“uptake” data). Other authors inspect language patterns to see what happens when rivalrous institutions interact. For example, Ying (Chapter 15) examines relationships between the White House and the media, while Ragas (Chapter 19) observes what happens when corporate and press norms collide.

This volume also provides numerous examples of different scholarly “textures.” Willis et al. (Chapter 7) look at the psychological dimensions of institutions, while Lind (Chapter 6) takes a more psychosocial approach, examining the give-and-take between candidates and voters in a contested primary season. Politics never stops at the water’s edge, of course, which Feste (Chapter 12) demonstrates in her study of conflict reconciliation and which Merola (Chapter 17) shows in her analysis of the civil liberties debates following 9/11. Also intriguing is DeMoya and Jain’s work (Chapter 22) on how different international actors use different media to define themselves attitudinally and politically.

In a “wired” world, no message exists on its own. Because of the Web, ordinary citizens’ blogs and presidents’ speeches swirl around one another in cyberspace. Pacea (Chapter 21) explains some of the resulting rhetorical complexities in her study of new-but-old genre. Waisanen (Chapter 23) adds to this swirl when describing how professional comedians deconstruct institutions on late-night television. He also opens up the question of what could happen when everyone knows everything but when political beliefs are hard to come by.

The work contained in this volume hardly tell us all we need to know about political dynamics but the questions it addresses are important: When is the natural tension between politicians and the press useful and when is it toxic? When does partisanship move us forward and when does it produce endless dilation? What sort of rhetoric opens up new political directions and what merely opens up old wounds? What makes policy discussions productive? What turns them into mere ego displays? When do political ads, political tweets, and political comedy become derivative? When do they point up arresting possibilities?

The institutions focused on in this book—politics and the media—are designed to be porous, to share information available with all comers. Therein lies the health of a healthy democracy. However, with openness comes responsibility: politicians must respect their constituents, reporters must resist grandstanding, and the new media must acknowledge cultural folkways. How well are they doing? *DICTION* can help answer that question by exposing who said what to whom, when, and where and then explaining why.

One of the great difficulties in studying government and the press is staying suitably objective. Politics, after all, is a system for apportioning scarce resources and that inevitably leads to conflict. Politics deals with deeply held belief systems and that can launch people at one another’s throats. Politics is further confounded by ethnic, regional, religious, and class-based differences. Not surprisingly, wars have been fought over such things from the beginning of time. A voracious, free press only adds to this *sturm und drang*, exposing cultural ambivalences and axiological discontinuities for all to see. Therein lies the vortex of democracy, and this is why *DICTION* research is so useful: It sticks with the facts and leaves ideologies to the ideologues. *DICTION* documents utterances in an orderly fashion so that others can judge what is happening. The authors in this volume took on such tasks in unique ways but each adds a chapter to the age-old story of democracy. Perhaps the reader will add another.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For a detailed description of DICTION's variables, see Hart (2000a, pp. 245-251).

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Examining Public Arguments

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