

The cultural imperialism paradigm: Implications for media and identity

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Résumé

Ce document propose un examen en profondeur de la perspective de l'impérialisme culturel. Il expose sa thèse principale et les hypothèses théoriques et discute leurs implications sous-jacentes pour les valeurs et l'identité culturelles. Il aborde également la question de l'afflux de médias étrangers, ses multiples manifestations et ses répercussions. La dernière partie de l'article examine les limitations les plus saillantes de ce paradigme.

Mots- clés

Impérialisme culturel, valeur, identité culturelle, effets, médias étrangers.

Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth examination of the cultural imperialism perspective. It outlines its main thesis and theoretical assumptions and discusses their underlying implications for cultural values and identity. It also addresses the issue of foreign media influx, its manifold manifestations and its repercussions. The last part of the article considers the most salient limitations of this paradigm.

At the outset, it is important to give a brief account of the main reasons that have motivated this endeavor on the issue of cultural imperialism and its implications. Generally, the rationale that legitimates this undertaking is three-fold. First of all, cultural imperialism (C.I. henceforth) is one of the most well-established and prominent approaches in mass communications which has been adopted by many scholars as a self-contained media-effects model for decades. Secondly, C.I. bears close epistemological and theoretical affinities with powerful-effects media models and theories, mainly the cultivation theory in the sense that they overemphasize the mesmerizing power of media messages, the vulnerability of the audience, and the critical attitude towards TV as a means of cultural and social control. Saito (2007) maintains that the cultivation theory is a model that needs to be “regarded as a hybrid of empirical research on media effects coupled with a critical approach to mass communication” (p. 512). In the same vein, Livingston (2001) proposes a taxonomy of mass media theories in which she postulates that both the cultivation and the cultural imperialism theories can be subsumed under the category of macroscopic theories that “are more concerned with media’s social role and their impact on culture and society” (p. 7). The third reason pertains to the fact that a substantial fare of TV programs aired on both Moroccan and

Arab TV stations is imported from foreign countries, especially from the U.S.A and Western Europe. C.I. is a particularly useful perspective that can illuminate the intricate flow patterns that govern international communications and the social and ideological influences on indigenous and less powerful cultures.

Keywords

Cultural imperialism, value, cultural identity, effects, foreign media.

Cultural imperialism: Approaching the concept

Because of its wide scope and various theoretical and empirical constructs, researchers are often beset with a multitude of definitions that have been proposed to explain the concept of C.I. The literature abounds with definitions which are, at times, complementary but at others, even divergent and inconclusive. This may be partly assigned to the scholarly richness of a paradigm that dates back to the early 1970s of the last century. I will therefore limit myself to those definitions developed by eminent and leading theorists in the tradition. Besides, the following definitions have been chosen because they all capture the fundamental aspects and dimensions of the theory.

Before considering the definitions, it is worth-stating that C.I. appellation has been used interchangeably with other phrases such as ‘Communication imperialism’ (Sui-Nam lee, 1988) and ‘Cultural dependency and dominations’ (Mohammadi, 1995). Of all those who have written on C.I., the name of Herbert Schiller stands out as the most influential and the most quoted theorist. According to Schiller (as cited in Livingston, 2001), C.I. refers to

the sum of the processes by which a society is brought into the modern world system and how its dominating stratum is attracted, pressured, forced and sometimes bribed into shaping social institutions to correspond to or even promote the values and structures of the dominating center of the system (p. 9).

Lee (1988), on the other hand, defines C.I. as “the process in which the ownership and control over the hardware and software of mass media as well as other major forms of communication in one country are, singly or together subjugated to the domination of another country” (p. 74). According to Downing, Mohammadi, and Sreberny-Mohammadi (1995), C.I. process involves key political and cultural elements. They hold that C.I. transcends “beyond economic exploitation or military force [and that] ... the educational and media systems of many third world countries have been set up as replicas of those in Britain, France or the United States and carry their values”(p. 482). All the above definitions emphasize that C.I. is an indirect and often subtle means of manipulation and domination by other more powerful nations. Let us now consider the theory’s basic assumptions and its critical approach to media, culture, and identity.

Cultural imperialism: A prelude

The thriving of C.I. literature owes a great deal to the political and economic developments in the last century and more precisely after the rise of neocolonialist movements in most parts of the third world. In fact, when the imperial era of direct colonial domination came to an end, it was not the end of the story. Put differently, when the Europeans “packed their bags” (Mohammadi, 1995, p. 366), they left a heavy cultural heritage. They left behind their languages and also their “values and attitudes, including religion, ways of organizing public life, styles of politics, forms of education and professional training, clothing style and many other cultural habits” (Mohammadi, 1995, p. 366). This had created a state of entire dependency over former colonizers, which only exacerbated the new mushrooming states’ frustrations at all levels.

The emergence of viable states in many parts of South Asia and Latin America had sparked fear of serious economic and political competition. Stringent regulations, and even sanctions, were installed by powerful countries to safeguard their economic prerogatives and political

eminence. At the communications level, distribution was largely under the monopoly of a handful of counties.

Ironically, in the late 1960s, even European countries were already experiencing similar frustrations in global communications. In this regard, Sreberny-Mohammadi (1997) explains that “imperialism has been a double-edge sword, impacting, albeit unequally, both the colonized and the colonizer” (p. 33). Mattelart also states that the French have started to lose their cultural influence because of the supremacy of the U.S. in areas of information and communication technologies. Patterson (1998), in his turn, demonstrates how the French government had sought to “restrict American influence (or increase European influence) by imposing quotas on air time for American products” (p. 134). The U.S. dominance was perceived by most European countries as posing serious “threats not only economically, but also in terms of loss of identity” (Ibid.). Such fear had led to a series of measures from the European commission to protect the diversity of European culture and create strong European audiovisual scenery.

Key constructs and basic assumptions

The bulk of scholarly research on C.I. hinges on the assumption that audiences are passive recipients who are easily manipulated. Indigenous people, accordingly, are overwhelmed with media narcotizing content that reinforce western values and beliefs. The end-result, goes the argument, is an acculturated mass society that will give up its traditional identity in exchange for hegemonic and alien ways of life.

To support this thesis, rigorous content analyses of western programs such as movies, news, and ads have been conducted by C.I. advocates to unpack the numerous facets of capitalist cultural representations. In his quantitative information study, Barber (as cited in Moorti, 2003) has “documented the dominance of U.S. American popular culture” (p. 294). Moorti (2003), in an attempt to “unravel the discourses of nation, identity and sexuality” (p. 295), surveyed an extensive body of western programs. He concluded that most media images and messages portraying native cultures are “neither innocent nor frivolous” (Ibid.). He also asserted that “rather than provide a better understanding of other cultures, media images appropriate and manage difference, a move I characterize as symbolic cannibalism” (Ibid.). Several other empirical studies have also been carried out, most of which have centered on the impact of American TV on local viewers. El Asmar and Hunter (1997) and Sengupta and Frith (1997), to cite but a few, are benchmark researchers who underscored the deleterious effects of imported western audiovisual media, fraught with ideological and propagandistic content, on local audiences.

Another important assumption which is preponderant in nearly all the literature pertaining to C.I. is the dichotomy between core and peripheral nations. This division is steeped in the belief that mass media industry is marked by a sheer imbalance in areas of program production and distribution. Core or central countries are those powerful, rich and industrialized nations such as U.S., Western European states, Canada, and Australia, whereas peripheral countries are those poor and economically dependent states of Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Hamelink, 1995, p. 294). According to the same author, peripheral nations suffer huge information imbalance in five major areas. He believes that core countries hold more useful information, better information capabilities, access to information hardware, information software and other kinds of information related to scientific, technical, financial,

military, and political spheres. Information shortage, C.I. theorists argue, is bound to stand as an impediment to local development. Seen from a modernization perspective, the media are thought of as significant “multipliers of the mobile personality” (Lerner, as cited in Mohammadi, 1995).

One predominant tone in most works by C.I. authors is the global conspiratorial attitude towards the peripheral states. The media, and TV in particular, are produced in industrialized states with a deliberate attempt to acculturate other societies to their own cultural value-systems (Mizrach, 1998). To lend support to their argument, C.I. proponents contend that most western programming reinforces western beliefs and values and asserts the pre-eminence and superiority of the west.

Cultural imperialism and the identity issue

Before considering this complex relationship, we need to briefly examine the notion of identity. Clearly, the issues of culture and identity have gained a strong momentum over the last few decades. The word ‘identity’ has, consequently, been rendered both a popular and an equivocal term. The concept of identity has taken on new meanings and dimensions as it has formed a nexus of ideological, political and academic struggle (Hmami 2007). This Arab thinker explains how ‘identity’ has become

A mine-field and a debatable issue par excellence which is magnetized by the hardly irreconcilable dichotomies of tradition vs. modernity, past vs. present, openness vs. closeness, newness vs. oldness. A number of currents are striving to get the legitimacy of defining its content (Trans. mine, p. 1).

The existing literature on identity teems with definitions, typologies and taxonomies of the concept. This diversity stems mainly from the various academic disciplines that have approached the issue of identity. For our purposes here, we will content ourselves with two central types of identities, namely; individual vs. collective identity.

For Dyczewski (2002), individual identity evolves during the fundamental stages of the socialization period and refers to the “awareness of one’s traits that contribute to the sense of distinctiveness of an individual as well as of his or her likeness with others” (p. 30). In a sense, then, for a person to develop a sense of his or her identity, they need to unequivocally provide clear answers to such basic questions related to status, origins, roles and expectations. However, this type of identity is a continuous fluid, and an ever-changing process. It is, as Adams posits, “an evolutionary process of differentiation and integration, synthesis and re-synthesis and increasing cognitive complexity” (cited in Basit, 1997, p. 11).

The other major type of identity, i.e. collective identity, is best described by Stuart Hall (1990) as “a sort of collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common” (p. 223). Clearly, then, this category refers to a group, be it a community, a society or nation which defines itself as ‘we’ and perceives other groups or societies as different or alien or even hostile. This definition finds strong support in Maurice Halbwach’s concept of ‘collective memory’ which pertains to a group’s feeling of “a sense of community and continuity in time and space” (cited in Dyczewski, 2002, p. 32). Overall, both identities are, in fact, inseparable as they immensely contribute to the making of the cultural identity and the development of a ‘national character’ (Barakat, 1993). Cultural identity also serves important social, economic, and political functions. Dyczewski (2002) states that cultural

identity acts as “a link between cultural and social systems [...], as a factor of interpersonal communication [...], as a selective mechanism” (pp. 33-35).

Surveying the communications scholarship, it is not hard to pinpoint the various conceptual ramifications of C.I. theory and its basic tenets. As a media-effects perspective, C.I. shares many of the fundamental principles with the Toronto School and the communications approach known as ‘Technological determinism’ (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 305). Advocated and initially developed by the Canadian scholar and theorist Marshal McLuhan as early as 1964, the theory proponents highlight the primacy of “the technological aspects of the media beyond their content” (Ibid., p. 307). McLuhan is especially famous for the catchphrase which assumes that “the media is the message” (Ibid.). By this phrase, McLuhan insists that “the real message ... [is the way] the media themselves extend our senses and alter our social world” (Ibid., p. 307). Curiously enough, both “medium theorists” and C.I. scholars assert that the advent of a medium like TV is likely to transform people’s lives and that “old roles and identities [become] blurred or reconfigured in response to new kinds of situations” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 311). Technological determinism theories are immensely concerned about the transfer of communications technology to other weaker nations. They argue that if “one culture takes on a technology diffused from another culture, the second culture will take on the socio-cultural attributes of the diffusing culture” (Mizrach, 1998, p. 3). However, for McLuhan and his followers, and unlike C.I. theorists, it is predicted that technology will not only change traditional societies but it will also radically redefine social identity and social relationships and turn our world into a ‘global village’ (Mc Luhan, as cited in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 308.). Technological determinism was extremely lauded in its early beginning for its promising prophecies. However, as time wore on, many of its propositions were described by critics as sheer fantasies.

In the same vein, and despite the burgeoning of new information and communication technologies, many postmodernist writers and researchers believe that TV has become a central medium in people’s lives and that it is “changing social patterns, particularly with respect to who and what we know” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p. 310). Put differently, TV is both changing and redefining our reality. This position is quite reminiscent of the cultivation approach to TV and how the latter shapes and remarkably determines our world-views and frames of reference. Baudrillard (as cited in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003) claims that our modern society is “characterized by an unusual kind of ‘hyper reality’, in which the boundary that used to separate reality from representation, has imploded” (p. 310). For him, images are totally detached from real life and have “no real-world referents” (Ibid.).

Aligned with C.I. main thesis, Foucault (as cited in Butcher, 2003) describes the mass media as “technologies that disseminate a dominant truth” (p. 151). He also denigrates contemporary media for their role in severing local and global identities (Ibid.). In this regard, he seems to take sides with Galtung and Vincent (1992) who consider the media as lethal weapons of imperialism.

One is extremely impressed by the sheer size of scholarship that has approached the debate on the impact of western media from Islamic and Arab perspectives. Kettani (1997) has voiced alarming concerns about western, and the American in particular, threat not only to Moroccan and Arab cultural identities but also to European ones as well. He claims that, due to the American highly developed media technologies, “western culture itself is heading towards a pre-arranged objective, namely a state of Americanization” (Trans.mine,

Kettani, 1997, p. 242). Other non-western states, unfortunately, will not be able to “resist this new penetration, in addition to the earlier penetration in terms of the deeply ingrained cultural colonization” (Trans.mine, Ibid.). Following the same line of thought, Rahimi (2003) laments the Arab and Islamic state of inertia and unpreparedness to cope with the challenges of the globalization phenomenon “whose values of modernity, while apparently tantalizing and enticing do truly endanger the very essence of nations and their identities” (Trans.mine, p. 38). Mahatir Mohamed (as cited in McIntyre & Zhang, 2003), the former Malaysian prime minister, was one of the most strident critics of the global cultural onslaught, led by the U.S., towards the Islamic world. He has, on many occasions, described the American overwhelming media monopoly as a “recolonization project of western global media” (Ibid., p. 2). He also cautions against global news agencies’ real intentions and accuses them of seeking to “destabilize individual countries ... to achieve an economic domination” (Yao, as cited in McIntyre & Zhang, 2003, p. 35).

Global media and the value debate

A recurrent concern by most early advocates of C.I. is that western media, in general, is driven by a genuine desire to immerse local cultures “and foster consumerism in the poor world” (Schiller, as cited in Kamalipour & Rampal, 2001, p. 1). The accessibility, the dominance, and the popularity of American programming are three key features which are believed to have deep sociological and economic implications. Mander (Rampal, 2001) holds that giant media corporations “transmit their western images and commercial values directly into the brains of 75% of the world’s populations ... media imagery is surely the most effective means ever for cloning cultures to make them compatible with the western corporate vision” (p. 117). American TV entertainment programs, such as music, movies or fashion seem to have invaded most homes on our planet. Rampal (2001) explains how the music channel MTV has gained wide popularity “even in highly conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia and Iran” (p. 116). The author also argues that other American programs, especially movies, have considerably derailed the local value-systems of many Asian countries. By watching programs such as ‘Dallas’ or ‘Dynasty’, Indian viewers were, for the first time, experiencing “the sex and violence culture long decried even in the west” (Ibid., p. 118). The values and attitudes projected on western programming are often diametrically opposed to local TV standards where “kissing has never been allowed in Indian movies” (Ibid.).

Of all ages, youth are reported to be the most affected by western media. C.I. advocates think that young people, because of their relatively heavier exposure to foreign media, are liable to fall prey to social deviance in “areas of sex, violence and drugs” (Rampal, 2001, p. 119). As a case in point, the same author reports how a seventeen year old Indian girl told a news weekly that, after listening to one of the Spice Girls’ famous songs (I wanna, I wanna), she decided to transgress social controls and borders because she said that “there is some kind of subliminal message telling me to go ahead and do my own thing” (Ibid., p. 119). The attitude that most western programs are deliberately designed for local youth is espoused by Petras (1994) who affirms that the “principal target of cultural imperialism is the political and economic exploitation of youth” (p. 2070). Butcher (2003) pronounces the same anxiety vis-à-vis the massive visual assault on young viewers. She stipulates that “the acculturation of foreign (predominantly the U.S.A) culture was thought to particularly impact on young people who historically have been designated as highly vulnerable to a powerful image” (p. 265).

Media imperialism: Flow patterns in the global era

As mentioned earlier, peripheral countries are the largest importing markets of both information software and hardware. In the field of media alone, and despite their efforts in audio-visual production and distribution, most peripheral states suffer a flagrant imbalance in international TV program flows. According to a UNESCO report (as cited in Hamelink, 1995), the programming that flows “from core to periphery is 100 times more than the flow in the opposite directions” (p. 298). American giant news agencies, such as Reuters, are reported to control more than 80% of world news in many parts of the world, including Europe (Vincent, 1997). The real anxiety, according to cultural critics, lies in the nature of the bulk of imported news content which is characterized by prejudice, stereotypes, and ideological bias (Ibid.).

The major TV programs that enjoy enormous global circulation and reap huge financial benefits are entertainment program genres, especially sports, music video, movies and soap operas. Just like movies, soap operas have achieved great success mainly because they are broadcast during prime-time and also because they can be “viewed in a range of cultural contexts” (Barker, 1999, p. 54) and thus TV acts both as “a disseminator of representations in contemporary global culture [and its] dislocation... from place leading to the juxtapositioning of a variety of global discourses” (Ibid). Croteau and Hoynes (2003), however, argue that not all western programmings are exported on an egalitarian basis. While violence and sex-loaded packages “seem to cross cultures easily, comedy and some forms of drama have a more difficult time” (p. 261).

The monopoly of western -mainly U.S.- television industry on the international scene is mainly attributable to the ownership and control of the biggest media markets in the world. According to Hirsh and Peterson (as cited in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003), the American media “control 60% of the film distribution networks in Europe” (p. 260). Besides, according to De Bens, Kelly & Bakke (as cited in Croteau & Hoynes, 2003), more than 50% of movies screened on European TV are produced in America. This is believed, goes the argument, to have brought about “a decline in local traditional values and promoted, instead, values associated with capitalism” (Ibid.). Obviously, such a position is especially fortified by the existence of giant transitional media corporations and holdings such as the Time Warner, News Corp. and Maxwell communication.

Powerful media conglomerate owners such as Rupert Murdoch, Ted Turner, Silvio Berlusconi or Michael Eisner are influential empire builders often referred to as media ‘moguls’ or ‘magnates’ (Gershon, 2001, p. 8). These tycoon businessmen, because of their grip on world media consumption, are also often described as the ‘lords of the global village’ (Ibid.).

In the Arab world, the picture is far from appealing. Local audiences are inundated with televisual programming in different genres. Despite the latest surge in local production and distribution, the flow is still predominantly a one-way traffic. This phenomenon has led some skeptical Arab media analysts to assume that western “image makers are busily producing everything from soaps, toys and breakfast cereals to presidential candidates, nations, religions and ideas” (Kamalipour, 2000, p. 57). The author contends that because of foreign media saturation, the Arab and Islamic world is “perhaps the most represented, misrepresented and stereotyped region of the world” (Ibid.). He also cites Ben Bagdikian

(1997) who accuses foreign media of possessing “a homogenizing power over ideas, cultures and commerce that affects populations larger than any in history” (Ibid.). Hafez (2001) sums up the argument by concluding that “the widespread view among Muslim thinkers [is] that western media is a tool of western cultural ‘invasion’ ” (p. 13).

The paradigm’s limitations

In spite of its long history, sizeable body of literature and popular appeal to opponents of western media culture, C.I. assumptions have been a target of relentless and voluminous criticism. The first shortcoming of the theory relates to its inability to offer a coherent and precise research framework. Many theoreticians also criticize C.I. advocates for failing to arrive to a unanimous agreement on a definition of the concept of C.I. Sereberny (1997) observes that “from the beginning, the concept was broad and ill-defined, operating an evocative metaphor rather than precise construct” (p. 49). Some hard-line critics have even stripped the theory of its theoretical thrust claiming that it is lacking in conceptual consistency and is not backed by strong empirical evidence.

Another outstanding criticism to the model relates to its over-emphasis on the pernicious effect of foreign media on indigenous audience by presupposing that local viewers are gullible and passive consumers of manipulative media messages. In some respects, this view recalls to mind the earlier models to mass communications such as the ‘bullet theory’. To refute this claim, however, a number of critical-macro studies have been undertaken by ardent critics of C.I.. In their study on Israeli subjects (including Moroccan Jewish immigrants) Libes and Katz (as cited in Livingston, 2001) demonstrated that, contrary to prior C.I. findings, domestic audiences did respond actively to ‘Dallas’ in substantially different ways based on the individual’s “values and... the experiences of the particular group to which the viewer belongs” (p. 6). In a similar vein, Salwen (1991) equally analyzed an important body of existing C.I. literature to verify the claim that heavy foreign TV programs broadcast on local TV stations will eventually lead viewers to adopt capitalistic western cultural standards to the detriment of their local values. He concluded that audiences are active agents and that we need to “readily discard the broad claim that exposure to western media alone will cause people to shed their cultural identities and values” (Ware & Dupagne, 1994, p. 948). Sinclair, Jacka and Cunningham (1996), based on an in-depth study of national programming of several countries -including middle-eastern ones- have also pronounced their rejection of the predominant discourse espoused by C.I. hardliners who firmly believe that American western programs, in general “had an inevitable and self-sufficient ideological effect upon their helpless audience in the periphery” and that such perspective failed to account for “the mystique of television’s entertainment’s multivalent appeal for its audiences and how specific audiences responded to it” (Ibid.).

Another shortcoming of the paradigm, according to critics, and which relates to the aforementioned weakness, pertains to the theory’s patronizing assumption that audiences generally prefer to consume western imported material and reject local programming. Straubhaar (1991), following a comprehensive survey of most existing research literature, forcefully affirmed that “local culture producers would eventually begin to compete with American products, and as these productions increase and become more readily available, audiences would prefer regional or national products to international products” (p. 6). This prediction has been reinforced with the same scholar’s development of the concept of ‘Cultural proximity’ which is predicated on the premise that the “audience will tend to prefer that programming which is closest or most proximate to their own culture” (Straubhaar, as

cited in Livingston 2001, p. 4). In this sense, Straubhaar's argument resonates well with Garofalo (as cited in Golding & Harris, 1997) who thinks that C.I. "overstates external determinants and undervalues the internal dynamics... *and* conflates economic power and cultural effects" (p. 5).

Skepticism towards the powerful effects of western media is further supported within Arab media scholarship. Hafez (2001) doubts the omnipotent view of foreign imports and posits that "the media from outside the middle east are not as appealing to consumers and societies of the middle east or as socially mobilizing as one might suppose" (p. 3).

Another recurrent criticism to C.I. theory relates to its intransigent and clear-cut dichotomy between the core and peripheral nations in terms of media ownership and flows. The belief that TV programs follow a no-return superhighway is intensely rebuffed by several media analysts who believe that the global media scenery has witnessed important structural changes and that audiovisual products today flow in both directions. Smaller countries in Latin America, Asia or Africa have, over the last few decades, developed viable and more competitive media industries which allow them to export televisual programming in different genres. In line with the 'Cultural proximity' principle, Moroccan viewers, for example, are offered a rich and sometimes very palatable menu of made-in-Morocco programs, some of which, like comedies and music programs, have achieved unprecedented viewing ratings. Because of the proliferation of sophisticated information and communications technologies, most developing states "have been willing, indeed eager, to participate in trans-border communication" (Amin (1990), p. 101).

Appadurai (1990) conceives of global cultural flows as one integral dimension in his five-scape conception of globalization. According to this model, the traffic of cultural products, albeit rather imbalanced, is increasingly getting more interactive and heterogenized, just like the other dimensions. Tracey (as cited in Sinclair, Jacka & Cunningham, 1996) seems inclined to endorse the optimistic view by pointing out that "the very general picture of TV flows... is not a one way street; rather, there are a number of main thoroughfares, with a series of not unimportant [sic] smaller roads" (p. 23).

Overall, despite the numerous criticisms that are leveled at the C.I. theory, many of its conceptual and empirical inadequacies are mostly ascribable to its broad scope nature as a macroscopic perspective that attempts to explain multi-faceted, cultural, and international phenomena (Livingston, 2001). The model cuts across a wide range of disciplines and addresses key "issues of culture, transitional media and political economy" (Ibid. p. 5).

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