

## Brant Houston

### *The future of investigative journalism*

When I was working at the *Hartford Courant* in Connecticut in the early 1990s, an editor came up with the theory of constant mass in a newsroom. He said that if you watched closely you would see that when one journalist went on a diet another one gained weight. But no matter the losses and gains, he said, the general mass of the newsroom stayed the same.

A similar theory might be applied to investigative journalism in the twenty-first century. While investigative reporting has drastically diminished in traditional and mainstream newsrooms, it has rapidly expanded into different forms and combinations in Web ventures and at universities throughout the world.

There is little dispute about whether there should be a future for investigative reporting. The issues are how will it be defined, how will it maintain high standards and quality, in what forms and with what methods will it thrive, and how will it be financed.

The definition of investigative journalism is multifaceted. It is original reporting full of rigorous documentation and numerous interviews. It is fiscally con-

servative, probing waste, fraud, and abuse in government agencies. It is adversarial and populist, challenging the powers that be. It brings with it moral judgments.

In *From Yahweh to Yahoo!* author Douglas Underwood tracks the origins of investigative reporting back to sixteenth-century England and its religious reformers, who traced their zeal to the New Testament. "Many elements of the prophetic tradition – the spirit of righteousness, the indignant moralism, the effort to maintain the purity of values, the call for spiritual and ethical renewal, the fierce sense of corruption abounding everywhere – are as typically found in today's best investigative reporters or crusading editors."<sup>1</sup> In fact, in 1975, The Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, was closely involved in the formation of IRE (Investigative Reporters and Editors) and the choice of its apt acronym.<sup>2</sup> The work thus brings with it heavy ethical burdens that underlie the standards – fairness, accuracy, thoroughness, and transparency – for the investigative journalism of the future.

Because of its adversarial qualities, investigative journalism is always under threat or attack – physically, legally, or financially. Now, with enormous losses in advertising revenue and ensuing lay-

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offs at news organizations, the worries about the future are constant. “Hardly a week goes by without someone lamenting the death of investigative reporting,” wrote veteran reporters Donald Barlett and James Steele in *Nieman Reports*. “It’s a familiar litany: The media are cutting back; crucial stories aren’t being covered; democracy will suffer.” (They added that the support given to investigative reporting by publishers in the twentieth century had often resembled the enthusiasm of drunken sailors at a prayer meeting.)<sup>3</sup>

Each year that I served as executive director of IRE, from 1997 to 2007, journalists interviewed me (as they had my predecessors) about the pending death of investigative journalism. But the ongoing deterioration of the mainstream media, particularly in the United States, and the sometimes overly partisan and amateurish practice of journalism on the Internet have raised the concerns to a much higher level.

Publishers and editors have countered that watchdog reporting is “the franchise” of the industry, and, to be sure, many investigative stories continue to be published and posted if one looks at daily blogs such as The Muckraker (<http://www.centerforinvestigative-reporting.org/blogs>) or Extra!Extra! (<http://www.ire.org/extraextra>). But even those with the best intentions have been unable to maintain investigative reporting at previous levels as newspapers have closed, declared bankruptcy, or slashed staffs to stay in business.

Robert Rosenthal, a former top newspaper editor and now the executive director of the Center for Investigative Reporting, has said some mainstream newsrooms are “toast,” with some having been “eviscerated.” He explained:

What that means is that on every level there’s less information, less government being covered, from the community to the state to the region. And part of what’s happening is the investigative reporting is something that’s being shoved aside in newsrooms that really have to feed the beast. I think the negative impact on all of us is drastic.<sup>4</sup>

The decline in print newsrooms actually began in the very late 1980s. For example, at the *Hartford Courant* the investigative team was reduced from nine to none by 1993, with reporters reassigned to beat or specialty reporting. Those kinds of reassignments have been repeated at other newspapers. The loss of a team of designated investigators meant many long-term probes were not produced, and the overall cuts in newsroom staffs meant reporters on town and regional beats had less chance to pursue public-service stories.

Longtime investigative reporter Laura Frank, in a 2009 piece for *Exposé*, a PBS program on investigative journalism, wrote:

The story line has been repeated time after time: The Internet is killing mainstream media, sending the Fourth Estate into record-breaking revenue declines. Online ads garner only a fraction of the dropping print revenue. When faced with cuts, investigative reporting is often the first target. Investigative journalism takes more time and more experienced journalists to produce, and it often involves legal battles. It’s generally the most expensive work the news media undertakes.

But Frank found a different story in her investigation. She discovered that the push by newspapers for high profit margins that began in the 1990s led to cost-cutting – like that at the *Hartford Courant* – that severely limited the quantity

and the quality of newspapers and, specifically, investigative reporting long before the advertising crisis hit.<sup>5</sup> In 2006, a survey of one hundred newspapers by Arizona State University students reported, “Newspapers care about investigative stories, but they frequently don’t back that up with resources that reporters say they need to do in-depth work.”<sup>6</sup>

By 2009, plunging advertising revenues were added to the mix, and more than twenty-five thousand journalists had left the field over a two-year period in the United States alone, with many investigative journalists among them.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the elimination or reduction of investigative teams accelerated and the termination of investigative reporters increased. Interviews in 2007 with staff at twenty medium-sized and large newspapers revealed that investigative reporters and teams had been eliminated or sharply cut at more than half the papers. By 2008, two of the papers that had maintained a strong commitment the previous year – *Rocky Mountain News* and the *Post-Intelligencer* in Seattle – had closed. (The *Post-Intelligencer* retained a small portion of its staff to operate an online version.)<sup>8</sup>

Even though newspapers are where most investigations happen, the damage from cuts to staff and resources has rippled outward throughout the entire media system. “The most extensive, substantive public-service journalism in America in the past century has been started, supported, and published by the nation’s newspapers,” wrote Charles Lewis, a founder of the Center for Public Integrity, which does state, national, and international investigations. He and his coauthor, Bruce Siever, noted that the losses affect “not only the newspapers themselves but also the multitude of radio and television outlets

that have depended on this information for the substance of their own broadcasts.”<sup>9</sup> The losses, in turn, undercut the content of news aggregators such as Google and Yahoo, which rely on other media to provide their stories.

Investigative journalists, because of the dedication and the zealotry they bring to their work, persist in the worst of times; sometimes they seemingly flourish when the challenges are greatest. “The people who are drawn to it and perform it are so dogged they are not going away,” said Tom Casciato, the executive producer of the PBS series *Exposé*, which has profiled investigative reports and the journalists doing them since 2006. “They got into it because they think it’s important. They can’t not do it.”<sup>10</sup> The result is that reporters and editors themselves have provided the models for how investigative journalism can proceed into the future.

One model for the future is that of the lone practitioner, as exemplified by I. F. Stone, who self-published an investigative newsletter in the twentieth century that relied on his copious and meticulous review of government documents. Other examples of this type include Seymour Hersh, who has done many independent investigations with little initial support from mainstream media, and Loretta Tofani, who recently did award-winning reporting on abuses in Chinese factories although no mainstream media financed her work.

“Back 40 or 50 years ago, some of us did it for nothing,” said Lowell Bergman, a longtime and internationally recognized investigative journalist. “Remember that when Sy Hersh did the My Lai story, which is a Pulitzer Prize-winning story about massacres in Vietnam, he had to go to the only existing nonprofit organization at the time, the Fund for Investigative Journalism, and get a grant

to cover his expenses. It's the same place I went to in those days."<sup>11</sup>

Following the recent layoffs there are more investigative journalists looking for financial support from nonprofit groups and foundations. But there also are more nonprofit organizations and donors to fund them. In addition to the Fund for Investigative Journalism are the Nation Institute, which has given grants to many notable progressive investigations, and the Pulitzer Center for Crisis Reporting, which supports international reporting and provided the financing for Tofani's work. Among foundations supporting individuals' work are the Alicia Patterson Foundation, which has given investigative fellowships since the early 1960s, and the Open Society Institute. Some new Web ventures and individual journalists are asking the public to suggest specific investigations and to send money to support them, although such practice risks raising ethical questions.

Playing the more prominent role in creating a future for investigative journalism are three phenomena: the rise of nonprofits, the rise of machines (computers and their software), and the rise of networks. These factors mean more focus to the investigative journalism itself, more citizen involvement in shaping stories, and more collaboration rather than competition. In fact, the past few years have seen remarkable growth in nonprofit newsrooms and greater use of data analysis and Web software by groups composed of journalists, computer scientists, and citizens. These initiatives then use new technology to create networks of newsrooms to share information, to improve the quality of their investigations, and to create cost-efficiencies.

Since 2007, investigative reporters who left mainstream news began creating local and regional reporting centers

throughout the United States, including Wisconsin, Massachusetts, Colorado, California, New Jersey, North Carolina, Missouri, Texas, Illinois, and the state of Washington. Similar centers have been established in other countries. These efforts, most of which began as ideas without financial backing, bear out a statement from *The Elements of Journalism*: "History promises that a market economy has the capacity to renew itself from the grassroots."<sup>12</sup>

These groups are meeting the need that Edward Wasserman, a Knight Chair in Journalism at Washington and Lee University, identified when he commented:

What's important is recognizing that investigative work doesn't solely mean national stories. Fundamental to the civic role of small and midmarket news organizations has been their work on zoning scams, courthouse favoritism, environmental degradation, political cronyism, and all manner of wrongdoing that may not register on a scale of national significance but that shapes municipal life in powerful ways.<sup>13</sup>

The centers and networks are based largely on principles developed by IRE. Reporters and editors began IRE as a way of trading story ideas, facilitating cross-training, and collating training tips and guides to improve the quality of investigative journalism. IRE also headquartered itself at a university, where it could receive support and work with students. The IRE association model (and its Arizona Project, discussed below) was an inspiration for investigative journalists in other countries who have consciously copied and adapted the IRE model. This trend started in Sweden and Western Europe and then spread to Eastern Europe and Latin America.

Because it has been such a role model, IRE's history is worth recounting in a bit more detail. Started by a handful of journalists from different organizations across the United States and with only a small amount of foundation funding, IRE began in 1975 and held an annual conference of three hundred journalists within its second year. With little industry support, its membership grew to more than four thousand as it steadily increased the number of seminars and conferences it offered and published educational materials.

IRE engaged in its only investigative project when a founding member was killed by a car bomb in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1976. The six-month investigation involved about forty journalists from twenty-eight different news organizations across the United States and expanded on the murdered reporter's work on organized crime and public corruption. The investigation resulted in a high-profile twenty-three-part series known as the Arizona Project. The project also set off years of unsuccessful, but costly, lawsuits against IRE. As a result, IRE revised its mission to focus on education, so that its resources might spawn many more stories than just one a year.

IRE also showed the strengths of associating with a journalism school when, in 1979, it moved to the University of Missouri School of Journalism. At Missouri, IRE received free office space and financial and administrative support in return for teaching and working with students and helping those students get jobs.

Most new centers are entering into some kind of arrangement with a university journalism program in which the centers receive administrative and faculty support in return for providing education and internships for students. At public universities, the centers have

usually incorporated themselves as independent nonprofits, such as is the case with the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism at the University of Wisconsin. At private universities, the centers often become a part of the university, as with the New England Center for Investigative Reporting, a part of the College of Communications at Boston University, or the Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University.

In both forms, the universities and centers realize that the collaboration affords mutual benefits. "I hold the view that universities with journalism programs are ideally suited – and perhaps even obligated – to help replace the loss of investigative reporting that had long been left to the for-profit news media," says Tom Fiedler, the dean of the College of Communications at Boston University. He lists several assets that a university offers to support journalism:

- Motivated students who can be trained to carry out much of the legwork that characterizes investigative reporting, especially the extensive culling of records or reports;
- A faculty that more often than not includes former investigative reporters who can supervise these students;
- Access to resources from other parts of the university that can assist investigations, including trained library researchers, extensive databases, law students eager to file Freedom of Information Act requests and other documents to aid in record searches, and experts in virtually every field (for example, business-school students and faculty to help student reporters understand corporate filings);
- Access to funding from foundations and from an alumni base of potential contributors;

- An infrastructure to support the investigative teams' needs related to personnel, legal liability, insurance, office space, and more; and
- The ability to use the university's reputation and goodwill to attract media partners and gain credibility with sources.

"Of course the university also benefits by enabling its journalism students to work alongside experienced investigative reporters on meaningful projects," Fiedler points out.<sup>14</sup>

Even some universities without centers are offering opportunities for investigative journalism. At these schools, typically one or two faculty members work with students to produce investigative stories that are published or broadcast through traditional media. In the 1980s, Northwestern University professor and investigative journalist David Protess received much recognition for the work he and his students did on wrongful prosecution cases. He has continued that work with students since then – work that has resulted in the release of those imprisoned through wrongful prosecution.

As investigative journalists have left their corporate newsrooms they have taken jobs as instructors or professors and followed in Protess's footsteps. At Northeastern University, former *Boston Globe* investigative editor Walter Robinson and his students produced nearly a dozen stories that appeared on the *Globe's* front page. *New York Times* award-winning investigative reporter Walt Bogdanich has his students aid him in his work that appears in the *Times*.

The new centers that have formed independently of universities have also integrated the model of two other long-time nonprofit organizations: the Center for Investigative Reporting, begun in 1977, and the Center for Public Integrity

in Washington, D.C., begun in 1989. These two centers are dedicated to doing long-term investigative stories independently or in collaboration with broadcast or other print newsrooms. They depend mostly on foundations and individual donors for ongoing financial support.

As other nonprofit centers have proliferated, their founders predictably have embraced data analysis, the Web, and social media tools to do more with less. Investigative journalism has long been the research and development arm of the industry, and it took the lead in understanding and promoting computer-assisted reporting (that is, data analysis) in the 1990s.

Investigative reporters have constantly sought new techniques to employ in their work, and most reporters starting the new centers were already using the new Web tools and data analysis when they left their newsrooms. While still at newspapers or TV stations in the 1990s, they had already integrated social science methods and data analysis into traditional methods of on-site observation, face-to-face interviews, and Freedom of Information requests.

They were responding to a decades-long call by journalist and futurist Philip Meyer for journalists to prepare themselves for the new journalism environment. In his book *Precision Journalism*, Meyer said, "[T]hey are raising the ante of what it takes to be a journalist," pointing out that at one time a successful journalist needed only dedication, energy, and talent for writing. From the time his book first appeared in 1978, Meyer recognized the need for new skills for journalists: "The world has become so complicated, the growth of available information so explosive, that the journalist needs to be a filter, as well as a trans-

mitter; an organizer and interpreter, as well as one who gathers and delivers facts. . . . In short a journalist has to be a database manager, a data processor, and a data analyst.”<sup>15</sup>

More recently, academic computer scientists have upped the ante yet again, calling for the creation of a new field: “computational journalism.” They foresee the development of algorithms that can automatically do much of the data analysis and pattern recognition now being done manually.<sup>16</sup>

These predictions and new realities are beginning to shape a part of the future of investigative journalism into “mash-ups”: journalists, computer scientists, and developers working together to seek large government data sets in order to detect favoritism, incompetence, and corruption through the visualization of data. Sunlight Foundation is one of the prominent groups engaged in this cross-disciplinary initiative, and it has targeted congressional data sets.

A mash-up of old and new journalism nonprofit groups also is occurring. In the summer of 2009, twenty nonprofit groups gathered to confront the changes in investigative journalism. In attendance were the new state centers and longtime nonprofits like National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service. From that meeting attendees issued a declaration of purpose and created the Investigative News Network, a network that would share administrative and journalistic resources and become a distributor of local, national, and international content produced by the members.<sup>17</sup>

That effort actually mirrored an earlier international meeting of nonprofit groups. In 2003, a small group of journalists gathered in Copenhagen to create the Global Investigative Journalism Network, which is now composed of

nearly forty nonprofit investigative centers from thirty countries and holds conferences biannually.<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile, a longtime nonprofit network, the Associated Press (AP), is itself trying to adjust to the new financial landscape for journalism. The investigative editor for the AP, Richard T. Pienciak, said that the AP has begun placing four sets of investigative teams in regions around the country. The teams come up with months-long reports or breaking news stories, some of national interest and others more regionally focused.<sup>19</sup> In 2009, AP entered into a trial run to distribute the work of the four investigative nonprofit centers.

The advent of the nonprofits has led newspapers to embrace collaboration, especially with nonprofits, as one way to counter the decline of staff and resources. Leonard Downie, who is a former editor of *The Washington Post* and writes about changes in journalism, said collaboration is growing quickly among newspapers, broadcasters, and nonprofits as they combine resources for stories.<sup>20</sup>

He and others observed that in the past, newspapers have been reluctant to collaborate because media competition encouraged one organization to publish a story exclusively. Being first with a story meant being at the top. But now that any citizen with a camera or the ability to post to Twitter (“tweet”) can be first with the news, a newsroom gains credibility through its ability to explain, interpret, or investigate, often in a collaborative way.

Stimulated by the ease of using Web software, the new model of investigative journalism includes citizens who provide expertise or bloggers who contribute analysis or review of documents – what is commonly called “crowd-sourc-

ing.” “Online is about connections and collaboration,” says Jeff Jarvis. “Bloggers rely on the resource that mainstream media puts into this [the news], but they also can collaborate. They can help push the story, they can help add facts to the story.”<sup>21</sup>

The for-profit website *Talking Points Memo*, which has won investigative awards, also acknowledges the site’s interdependence with reporting by other news outlets. But the site’s primary strength is in seeking the public’s help in analyzing government documents to ferret out wrongdoing, abuses, or malfeasance.

While the nuances of collaboration and networking are being worked out, the question of how investigative journalism is paid for remains to be solved. “If, like an endangered species, there will be fewer sightings of serious, independent, high-impact ‘truth-to-power’ national reporting, will this kind of vital, no-holds-barred truth-telling become a thing of the past, like the dodo bird?” asked Charles Lewis. “No, but what is needed are new, sustainable economic models for in-depth news and a new, much greater ownership and management commitment to publishing it ‘without fear or favor.’”<sup>22</sup> The same question and need for a new business model apply to local and regional reporting as well as the new investigative centers.

The expense of a single investigation can range from a few thousand dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on the salary costs and the travel expenses. The maintenance of an investigative staff can be \$1 million or higher. For example, the newest, largest nonprofit center, ProPublica, has a staff of twenty and a budget of \$10 million a year.

“Good journalism does not come cheap. The most powerful journalism – breakthrough journalism – can be shockingly expensive,” said Marty Baron, editor of *The Boston Globe*, in 2008. “The first story in the *Globe*’s Pulitzer-winning investigation of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church, and a 40-year cover-up, was published in January 2002, but it required eight months of reporting and major litigation before a single word appeared in print.” Baron said a second year of reporting on the issue by a team of eight staff members resulted in the publication of one thousand stories, but “the overall cost of this effort was probably more than \$1 million in staff salaries, and tens of thousands of dollars in legal costs.”<sup>23</sup>

A more recent example shows how costly a single in-depth project can be. Reporter Sheri Fink did a long investigative article on a New Orleans hospital where patients were euthanized after Hurricane Katrina struck the city. It appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* after she spent nearly two years working on the piece while a fellow at a journalism program and then at ProPublica. Estimates of the overall cost for the story, including the fellowship, salaries, photographs, review by lawyers, travel, and editing went as high as \$400,000.<sup>24</sup>

Currently, the bulk of the money for existing and new nonprofit centers originates mostly from a handful of national media foundations. A recent study reported that since 2005 foundations have contributed \$56 million to investigative centers and projects.<sup>25</sup> The amount of money has surprised some journalists and also raised the specter of partisan influence. The Open Society Institute has supported both progressive, left-leaning coalitions and nonpartisan centers. The Sam Adams Foundation and related entities, whose leadership is conservative

and libertarian, is opening statehouse investigative operations under the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity. Its stated mission is:

To promote social welfare and civil betterment by undertaking programs that promote journalism and the education of the public about corruption, incompetence, fraud, or taxpayer abuse by elected officials at all levels of government. The Franklin Center will accomplish these goals by networking and training independent investigative reporters, as well as journalists from state based news organizations, public-policy institutions and watchdog groups.<sup>26</sup>

Mainstream journalists at centers supported by the Open Society or by the Franklin Center say they will have editorial control over what they do. They assert that their organizations will be transparent in their funding and that centers with different sources of funding likely will be watchdogs of each other.

In any case, many centers and journalists do not see foundation donations as a sustainable model. Edward Wasserman has suggested a series of strategies of possible donor and in-kind revenue sources – what he calls “the more promising dimensions of the emerging regime under which investigative reporting can survive and flourish.” He has outlined strategies that call for enlisting the public’s help to supplement reporting on specific investigations. His strategies entail using part-time non-journalism professionals, such as lawyers and accountants; persuading donors to endow an investigative position in a newsroom; using city-wide foundations to make grants for individual projects or to assist ongoing newsroom operations; and creating specialized commercial newsletters whose revenue would support investigative efforts.<sup>27</sup>

Some new strategies are already being tried. The online Voice of San Diego is a nonprofit and relies on large gifts from individual donors, grants from philanthropic organizations, and reader pledge drives, but is working on increasing its online ads to achieve sustainability. Other centers are considering memberships, subscriptions, data analysis for other newsrooms, and online ads to supplement donations.

But media critics Robert McChesney and John Nichols believe nonprofits will fail without new government policies and subsidies. In *The Nation* magazine, they wrote:

The fatal flaw in so many sincere but doomed responses to the current crisis is that they try to do the impossible, to create a system using varying doses of foundation grants, do-gooder capitalism, citizen donations, volunteer labor, the anticipation of a miraculous increase in advertising manna and/or a sudden – and in our view unimaginable – reversal on the part of Americans who have thus far shown no inclination to pay for online content. At best, these are piecemeal proposals when we are in dire need of building an entire edifice. The money from these sources is insufficient to address the crisis in journalism.<sup>28</sup>

One example they suggest “eliminate[s] postal rates for periodicals that garner less than 20 percent of their revenues from advertising. This keeps alive all sorts of magazines and journals of opinion that are being devastated by distribution costs. It is these publications that often do investigative, cutting-edge, politically provocative journalism.”

U.S. journalists have resisted direct government support while international journalists, particularly in Europe, are more comfortable with it. But media observers note that the U.S. government

*The future of investigative reporting*

has supported or influenced the operations of the media for years through broadcast regulation, postal rates, and other policies.

Whatever the funding strategies, the future of valuable investigative journalism appears to rest in the paradoxical ability to do hyper-local reporting and/or international reporting, sometimes in the same story. For example, a detailed investigation into soybean production in central Illinois could easily include information and reporting from Brazil since soybean production can affect prices in Illinois.

Charles Lewis, who has chronicled the rise of investigative nonprofits, has envisioned a future in which reporting networks he calls WIRE use the latest technology to do investigations around the world and quickly distribute them. “[T]hese vast networks became both specialized markets for the work of WIRE’s international cadre of reporters . . . and pathways to new information resources, crowd-source experts, and potential citizen muckrakers.”<sup>29</sup>

Mark Feldstein of George Washington University subscribes to a theory of a cyclical pattern of investigative journalism. He has described an environment in which such a vision might flourish:

Investigative reporting reaches a critical mass when both its supply (stimulated by new technologies and media competition) and its demand (by an aroused public hungry for exposés in times of turmoil) is high. This explanation includes political, social, and cultural causes, since such foment increases demand for exposé journalism; and it includes economic, technological, and legal causes as well, since new media outlets with greater reach and latitude boost the supply of muckraking.

Feldstein said this explanation of why investigative reporting thrives seems to offer a larger, overarching analysis for the twentieth century’s two prime eras of investigative reporting, which for him are the eras of the so-called muckrakers at the turn of the twentieth century and of the investigative reporters in the 1970s.<sup>30</sup>

When considering investigative journalism’s future, Feldstein’s view of the interplay of new technologies and public demand bodes well for a third era, whether it is now attaining critical mass or maintaining its constant mass through migration. David Boardman, who straddles the worlds of old and new as executive editor of *The Seattle Times* and as an advisory board member for the Center for Investigative Reporting and ProPublica, puts it thus: “We may be entering a period of renaissance as the struggles crystallize in the public mind about the essential service of investigative journalism and create an awakening and concern of what democracy would be without it.”<sup>31</sup>

ENDNOTES

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- <sup>16</sup> Interview with James Hamilton, *Duke Magazine*, March/April 2009, <http://www.dukemagazine.duke.edu/dukemag/issues/030409/depqa.html>.
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