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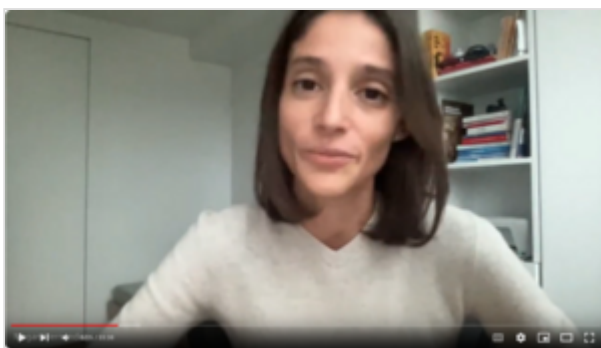
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Interview

Interview on Wikimedia Foundation fundraising and finance strategy

By Bluerasberry

Signpost interview with James Baldwin, Senior Director of Finance Strategy, and Megan Hernandez, Vice President of Fundraising, both of the Wikimedia Foundation

See the video on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SMhEvHGCZk)

Summary

As a Wikipedia community newspaper, *The Signpost* organizes the investigation and reporting of issues important to the Wikipedia community. At the start of 2024, the Wikimedia Foundation Community Affairs Committee invited any Wikimedia community members to Talking:2024 to request to talk with Wikimedia Foundation leadership about anything. *Signpost* editors made a request to discuss the nature of consensus and collaboration between the Wikimedia Foundation and the Wikimedia community on the issue of the Wikimedia fundraising banner.

Here to discuss are Megan Hernandez, User:MeganHernandez (WMF), Vice President of Fundraising, with the Wikimedia Foundation Advancement department to discuss fundraising; and James Baldwin, User:JBaldwin (WMF), Senior Director of Finance Strategy,

from the meta:Wikimedia Foundation Finance and Administration department, to discuss financial strategy. Lane Rasberry, user:bluerasberry, journalist for *The Signpost*, conducts the interview.

Transcript

bluerasberry: Hi, everyone. Wikipedia is the encyclopedia which anyone can edit. It's also a community project where anyone can participate in its governance. This includes things such as finance. Readers of Wikipedia will be aware that there is an annual fundraising campaign that involves banners, and those same people who edit Wikipedia also participate in the design and management of this fundraising campaign. We're going to talk about this today with staff of the Wikimedia Foundation. I have Megan Hernandez, VP of Fundraising, here and James Baldwin, Senior Director of Finance Strategy. James and Megan, can you please tell us what is finance strategy? What is fundraising in the context of the Wikipedia movement? And what do you guys do?

Megan Hernandez: Sure, I can kick it off. Thanks so much Lane for putting this together. I think we're excited to be talking with you today and happy to share a little bit more. My name is Megan Hernandez. I'm the VP of fundraising at the Wikipedia Foundation. I am from California in the United States, but I'm living in France. I've been with the foundation for about 14 years and and I've been working in fundraising throughout that time. I can talk a little bit about our fundraising approach. The Wikimedia Foundation is supported by millions of readers all around the world who use Wikipedia, find it valuable, and want to support our mission. We received donations from countries all around the world. We were on campaigns in about 30 countries and translate our messages in more than 20 languages to really be able to invite a very broad group of people to support our mission and participate in the movement.

Our movement strategy does call on us to ensure the long-term sustainability of our mission and we've been doing that over the years as the fundraising program has really evolved the diversify and have a more resilient model with the campaigns that I was talking about. But also through newer revenue streams like the Wikimedia Endowment and Wikimedia Enterprise that are really ... aim to have this longer term sustainability so that we're around for the long term.

bluerasberry: Great all things that people can read more about online. Very well documented, and active community discussions about all of these things. Anyone can participate in this. James, what can you say... finance strategy, what does this mean?

James Baldwin: Thanks Lane. Yeah, thanks for the question. I think, well, let't's maybe start the introduction. So again, I'm James Baldwin, senior director of finance and a big part of my role at the foundation is facilitating our budgeting process and managing our budget throughout the year (https://wikimediafoundation.org/about/financial-reports/) and I've been at the Foundation for about seven years, and so our finance strategy I think is helpful to understand. It's really about how we use and manage the resources and support of the mission. So first I want to maybe just share what are the things that we're deploying our resources around the major categories of investment that the foundation makes even each

year. Firstly we support the technology backbone of Wikipedia that makes our projects reliable, accessible, and secure. We are recognized as one of the fastest sites in the US, and we're working hard to deliver a similar experience in other regions of the world, including the Middle East, Africa, Asia, Europe.

We do this by running two data centers, four caching centers, over 30 internet peering and translocations, and over 2,000 servers; and all that supported by a team of hundreds of engineers who support that work in various capacities and fashions. And that's the first area. The second area is that we explore how to provide knowledge to people wherever they are and however they need it, that when we do that alongside volunteers. So a few examples of this one is we have a machine learning team that the foundation has supported since 2017. We also run a multilingual platform. We have support for 320 languages. We have a MinT translation service (https://translate.wmcloud.org/), which is AI technology (https://diff.wikimedia.org/2023/06/13/mint-supporting-underserved-languages-with-open-machine-translation/) to support volunteers in |creating translations and over 200 languages and that includes some languages that had never before had machine translation support.

James Baldwin: All of those translations are reviewed by volunteers and edited before they're published. The third area I'd highlight is supporting volunteer communities. So, we support communities all over the world. We operate a pretty complex and large grant making infrastructure that provides funds in over 90 countries. And lastly we help fight disinformation, (https://diff.wikimedia.org/2023/10/03/challenging-disinformation-in-the-wikimedia-ecosystem/) censorship, and other threats. We educate lawmakers and policymakers on the importance of Wikipedia, and we ... support and defend our projects and volunteers in the case of some threats. That's sort of what we're investing in terms of how the founding the finances are set up. We share our annual plan how we do this.

James Baldwin: We've been growing as a foundation for some time. Really the last five or so years, until last year. Last year we entered a period of slower growth. That's because we entered a much more uncertain environment, we saw a change in context around us, including higher inflation, more volatile currency exchange rates, and overall slower fundraising growth. So now after that period of growth that we had for some time, we're now entering a period of slower growth that we expect more in the neighborhood of 5-ish percent for the next several years. As we think about deploying our budget, a couple of things are important to maybe understand how we do that. One is we prioritize grants and movement support. Last year, in particular, we were in a position with slower fundraising growth than we expected, and that forced us to make some hard choices and reduce costs in certain areas [of] the Foundation in order for us to continue to fund increases in grants. We increase grants by about seven percent this year. Secondly, we're always considering long-term financial sustainability and stability of the organization and the mission. The board has a policy of maintaining a working capital reserve at 12 to 18 months of operating expenses. That's a core part of how we manage risk and ensure sustainability for the long term and in line with what we've seen in other major successful not-for-profits.

James Baldwin: Thirdly, we work to align our budget to our annual plan goals and we provide a breakdown of all of that in our annual plan, which we can talk a little bit more about and we can also reference last year's plan. Personnel is our largest cost of the budget. It's about two-thirds of our investments. And so what our staff are spending their time on is one

of the most important decisions we need to make each year. We also follow not-for-profit best practices. Rating agencies like Charity Navigator have consistently rated us a top-rated charity (https://www.charitynavigator.org/ein/200049703) because we understand the best practices they're tracking against and we make sure that we're in line with them. Maybe I'll stop there.

bluerasberry: Okay, James. I'm going to reflect some of that back to you.

James Baldwin: Right.

bluerasberry: So we're not going to talk about all these things in detail, but for anybody who wants to read more after this talk, you're going to share me the links. I know there's documentation for this. There's active community discussing and commenting on all of these things that you mentioned. It's been this way for many years. In this talk, we're gonna focus mostly on what is your relationship to the community in discussing these kind of things, but to recap, money is used to keep the lights on in the site. This is how we say it: keep the lights on, keep it fast. We're in this new age of artificial intelligence and machine learning. Yes! I'm so glad as our many wiki community members that this is our investment. Grant making - it couldn't be closer to the community than grantmaking. These are discussed and negotiated with the community. I encourage anyone who wants to see where Wiki Community money is going to check out these grants. They're also posted publicly. Very novel and innovative that Wiki does this! And then policy issues. Why are we doing this? Everyone should have access to Wikipedia. Everyone should have the right to edit Wikipedia, and then whatever related policies.

So about these money issues, about all these various priorities everywhere: you both mentioned that Wikipedia is multilingual, multicultural, multinational. You have comments from people all over the world and we can't go into a full detail about how this works. But can you possibly make an attempt to explain how do you get comments from people all around the world to come to some kind of consensus. This happens for things including the fundraising, the money, and where the money goes. How do you negotiate these things and collaborate with people on the Internet that perhaps you don't know, that are going by random usernames, and you come out with some kind of agreement that this is the way to do things. Megan should we go back to you for this?

Megan Hernandez: Yeah, I'd be happy to, for the question. It's such a good one. I think there's a lot I could talk about with our volunteer community, and how we create fundraising campaigns together, and I'll jump into that. But I also want to say we have also a broader community of our readers and our donors, and we take their input and feedback into shaping all of our campaigns as well. But I'll dive deeper into the volunteer community and that's really a huge part in how we are creating our campaigns together. We just ended, in December, our annual English fundraising campaign that runs once a year (and in a lot of the main English speaking countries).

Megan Hernandez: And it's our biggest campaign of the year. While it ran into December, it actually kind of started in July. So at the start of our fiscal year is in July, when our team starts preparing and running kind of "pretests" and all the preparations for the campaign of that year, and right alongside that at the beginning of the year. We kicked off this

collaboration process with our volunteers to be able to prepare and really create the campaign together. Practically, what this looked like, was of course a Wikipedia page where we put some sample banners and some ideas and just asked to have some ideas of how we could make it better this year and what messages folks would want to share with our readers.

Megan Hernandez: Throughout those six months preparing and getting ready for this big campaign, we just kept that collaboration up on Wiki sharing ideas, sharing thoughts for how we could get involved. I love earlier you were just mentioning "in this age of AI". I'll say that the whole movement right now, I think, is talking about AI, and that certainly came through on the fundraising collaboration page. It was one of the newer messages that came through in December. It started, "In the age of AI, access to verifiable information is more important than ever", or a few variations of that, was one of the messages that we ran in December, and that came through this on Wikipedia collaboration process, I think really highlighting an important topic for readers and volunteers – and kind of the world right now.

Megan Hernandez: But alongside the on-wiki collaboration. We also hosted calls similar to this, to get together and have conversations. We had folks from the team head to Wikimania in Singapore to run a workshop and brainstorm how we can run these campaigns together. I attended WikiConference America in Toronto (https://wikiconference.org/wiki/2023/Program) in November, which was just as we were getting ready to launch the campaign and was really a good moment, when we had folks right in person, right as we were getting ready, and worked through ideas there as well. So yeah, I think those were some of the themes and highlights from the year, and then we take that model and that English campaign runs in December once a year.

Megan Hernandez: The fundraising team is running campaigns year-round, in all different countries, and all different languages. And we take this collaboration model, and I've tried it in all these other countries where we run as well. I think we have our page up in Sweden right now a few weeks ago. We hosted some calls with the Latin American communities with folks on our team who speak Spanish and Portuguese, to join kind of existing community calls, to give updates about the fundraising and invite participation. So this collaboration process that I just talked about - we're doing it year round, in all different countries and languages, and working with folks on Wiki and Affiliates as well, to help localize our campaigns so that we have a good local experience for readers and in different countries.

bluerasberry: Thanks so much Megan! James, could I ask you, what's your experience with collaborating with community on any of the decisions you make?

James Baldwin: Yeah sure! I think it could be helpful, maybe, to start the budgeting process, and talk a little bit about the way the community is involved in that process at different levels. And then also talk about maybe a more interesting case around how we do grants, which is quite unique. When we build the budget, community conversations are a big part of our planning and budgeting process. The budget then allows management, the staff leadership of the organization, to make decisions on a day-to-day basis in most cases, the major exception being grants. So each year, we provide a breakdown of the annual plan on Meta-Wiki, and we describe what we're currently doing. We're working on the next years right now; our fiscal year starts in July. So this is our period of budgeting and planning. We've

already shared the proposed product to technology objectives for next year and as a week or two ago, they're posted on a blog post (https://diff.wikimedia.org/2024/02/20/thinking-about-annual-planning-in-the-wikimedia-foundations-product-and-technology-department/) and we're now getting some good feedback and input from community members. James Baldwin: In April, we'll do the same with the rest of the annual plan and we'll provide a breakdown of the budget and during that time like we did last year. We'll set up and join Community conversation to invite feedback and input on the work. From there the budget goes to the board for approval, and our board has a set of legal and fiduciary responsibilities to the organization. Our board is a combination of community-elected representatives - that's another point of community collaboration - as well as board and pointed positions. And they in practice will approve the budget. They also set policies to sign-on major strategy for the organization those kinds of things.

James Baldwin: Then, I'd like to talk a little bit about the regional funds committee. So we have expanded our approach to participatory grant making, with our last and most recent iteration of our grant making strategy a few years ago. And in that strategy, we created regional fund committees. They're designed to increase representation, and introduce more equity into the decisionmaking process and research allocation decisions. We have eight committees. So there's seven: one for each of the major regions. We're organized around the world, and another one for our conference grant program. They're all made up of volunteers, and supported by staff of the foundation, and they are the ones who make decisions on resource allocation for community project proposals.

James Baldwin: We developed a framework to guide those decisions that's based on evaluating the value for Knowledge Equity impact on the volunteer community for impact on the movement and the feasibility of the projects. And they also take into consideration, of course, what the resources is that are available to be distributed. We'll share with you some *Diff* posts. Probably interesting to read a little bit about some firsthand accounts of some of the members of these committees, who describe what it's like participating in these decisions. We have a couple on the *Diff* blog from a recent one from a North American Committee Member (https://diff.wikimedia.org/2023/12/12/navigating-the-challenges-of-multi-year-funding-for-north-american-grantees/) as well as a Middle East and Africa region (https://diff.wikimedia.org/2024/01/04/after-serving-on-the-mea-regional-grant-committee-insights-and-recommendations/).

bluerasberry: Yes, share those *Diff* links. For those of you watching, who aren't familiar, *Diff (https://diff.wikimedia.org)* is a blog by means of which people get information about these things. Very popular among the community! You've dropped a lot of names, dropped a lot of terms. Again, we don't have time to go into all of these, but we'll have links in the bottom. The point, that I'm glad that you're making, is that there's community process and documentation in all of these things. I've got a follow-up question to both of you. A little reality check, a little situating all this in the here and now, at this point in time. All this community collaboration - if you were perhaps employed at some other nonprofit organization, or if you went to another, and you met your peers, your colleagues, at other nonprofit organizations in the positions you are doing, tell me, how much of this community collaboration they would be doing? How common is it for these kinds of things to happen in your field of work?

James Baldwin: I can take a stab. I would say, it really depends on the stakeholders of your work how you're engaged with them. My background is in public education prior to coming to the foundation. And so the stakeholders that were interested are our students - I was at a public high school - and their families, principally as well as the wider community. And the way we engage with them was much more in person than the Wikimedia movement, of course.

bluerasberry: Perhaps not so much talking on web pages, online, for anonymous people.

James Baldwin: Yeah a lot less of that.

bluerasberry: All right.

James Baldwin: But don't think I could say "more" or "less". It was just different. The way, the input that we needed in the community, to align with our stakeholders and service of our mission, was the goal. I think it was the same: we're in this together. We need to do this together, and make decisions about the future of our work together. So that was my experience there and it's ... looks very different here, but I think there's a lot of parallels.

bluerasberry: Alright Megan. How do you feel about this? Anything unusual about the way this happens in Wikipedia?

Megan Hernandez: Sure, and I do actually meet with fundraising partners in other organizations regularly, and I do think we are in a unique space here in how Wikipedia is created and exists is unique in itself. People all around the world coming together writing content, writing creating an encyclopedia. And in the same way having, people all around the world contributing and making our campaigns together, I think is unique, just as Wikipedia is unique. I have worked another nonprofits, and there are ways that stakeholders are involved, but I think in a different kind of way than the way that we run our campaigns. There's different kinds of stories and engagement with communities with all nonprofits, of course, but I do think the model that we have is unique and to a different level than what I hear from colleagues in other organizations. Unique model for, I think, a unique movement!

bluerasberry: All right. Thanks. I'm gonna ask a little bit more about this movement. And this is going to be a broad question. There's so many ways you can feel free to answer it however you like, but I want to know more about the stakeholders in the Wikimedia movement who have voices or votes or can weigh in on all these conversations. Who are these stakeholders? You mentioned there's a Wikimedia Foundation. There's all these people and all these other countries. We've got the board weighing in, in different ways. What is the nature of the power-sharing among these demographics for Wikimedia financial decisions and other strategic decisions? So again, feel free to answer this however you like.

James Baldwin: So I think it probably starts with some of the points I made in the previous answer. The governance structure of the Wikimedia Foundation is designed to include community members as part of our board. That's like, the board is set up to meet the responsibilities and accountabilities needed as a us-based 501(c)3, but the composition of that board is something we can determine. So the organization in the movement is determined to include a combination of sort of community members who provide the expertise and voice of community, as well as other experts to sort of supplement expertise

and capacity, that we might need on a board. And the other place, again, is the regional funds committees, which I mentioned earlier: where we've taken a very participatory approach to provide, to create these committees, to support them with the resources they need to be successful, and then trust them to make decisions about the things that they're experts in. So in the case of the regions, we have community members...

bluerasberry: The grants, like you were saying.

James Baldwin: ...who are from that region, who understand best the needs, opportunities, challenges of that region; and they can then make decisions about how to allocate the grant budget and portfolio across the proposals they get from that region, which is the goal. The goal is to be in line with several movement strategy principles of including equity, and decision-making, as well as the principle of subsidiarity. Which, in paraphrasing, is that the people closest to the challenges and closest to the needs are the ones able to make decisions and respond to them.

bluerasberry: Subsidiarity, is that the word? Okay. Yes, okay.

James Baldwin: Subsidiarity is one of the concepts that the movement strategy highlighted. Yeah.

bluerasberry: Right. Megan what do you have to say about stakeholders and power-sharing?

Megan Hernandez: Yeah, I think we try to engage as many stakeholders as we can in how we fundraise. We talked a lot about the volunteer community. But we also have a very active donor and reader community. When we run these campaigns we get hundreds of thousands of messages from donors and readers around the world, telling us about Wikipedia, our fundraising, about our work - and we really listen to that.

bluerasberry: How do you listen to 100,000 messages?

Megan Hernandez: Clearly we have an amazing donor relations team on staff who speak a whole bunch of languages, and put together human responses. Humans actually respond to everybody, and engage with them, and we look at the recaps and breakdowns and what are people saying, and really try to listen to folks, which I think is kind of the spirit of this Talking:2024 Initiative: just to have these conversations, and have a better understanding, and listen to each other, and use that to inform the strategy and decision-making and our work together.

bluerasberry: All right. I got a last question for you both and this is going to be an opinion. What parts of the collaboration between the community and the Wikimedia foundation and other stakeholders work really well. What parts of this kind of collaboration is a challenge? James, what comes to your mind?

James Baldwin: We will stay with the specific example of the Regional Funds committees. And I think what we've seen, in a couple years of those operating, is that they do a great job of understanding the needs and opportunities of the region. And when grant proposals are really aligned, to the goals that region is working toward, they add a lot of value. The

decisions are clear. The frameworks are really helpful. When the regional goals and objectives are less clear, or the proposals are sort of at a right angle to some of those things, not necessarily different, they have occasionally had challenges to be able to respond, and understand, and think through, a decision about sort of allocating a portfolio of investments from grants, on how to consider these things that are different, or when the goals aren't super clear. So that's been a challenge. I think they've been struggling with that is maybe inherent to the movement.

bluerasberry: Can you say why it's inherent to the movement?

James Baldwin: Yeah, that's a great question. The reason I say that is because the goals of a grantee could be hyperlocal, it could be global. It could be technical. There are so many dimensions, that we're operating on – the ability to have a single 'what's the one thing that we're all aligned to' doesn't really exist in our movement. I personally haven't seen it. There's a bunch of different goals, and a bunch of different dimensions we're working on, which is sort of normal and makes sense. And so that makes it challenging I think sometimes to have goals that help make decisions about every single proposal.

bluerasberry: Okay, I get it. When you're trying to share all information, about all things, in every language, everywhere in the world, you have to set strategic priorities. It totally makes sense. Megan, what works well, and what is a challenge?

Megan Hernandez: Sure, I think the collaboration process is going well and it's been something we've been growing and improving on over the past year. I think we're actually creating campaigns together, and I think more than we have in the past and that's really exciting. I think we still have work to do. I think the team has been trying to share more information, and share more insights of the work, so that we have more of a shared understanding and can work through and improve our campaigns together. And we also have challenges - right? - with a changing Internet environment and changes and trends and how people donate and help people read, for the longer term.

bluerasberry: Okay.

Megan Hernandez: We have improvements to make into our fundraising to continue to support our movement and we need to run stronger campaigns. And so I think we have room to grow and how we do that together and how we learn together and learn how to improve our campaigns. But I feel like we have the structure here, and the people we need, to work through that together.

bluerasberry: And Megan, I appreciate your commitment to improving sharing information. It is indeed a challenge to share this amount of information. It's a challenge for Wikipedia editors to read, and digest, and respond to this information. I would like to invite anybody watching this to look at the links below to read more about this information. Also, even if you're not a Wikipedia editor, you're still invited to read these things and comment on them. Wikipedia is not just for the editors, it's for the readers! And even if you've never edited before, you've never posted a comment, you're quite welcome to go into any of these initiatives, read them, comment, ask questions, respond, as you like. Megan, James, thanks

so much for joining me today. Thank you *Wikipedia Signpost* for being a newspaper for the Wikipedia community, helping us organize and report these kinds of things. If you have any questions or comments, please post them on the wiki. Thank you all.

James Baldwin: Thank you very much for having us.

Megan Hernandez: Thank you.

bluerasberry: Alright, thanks so much for a great interview guys, and, Nadee, you'll please send me the recording, any time you're ready. I can't promise when this is going to be in the *Signpost*. They have their own editorial schedule. But I anticipate ... I hope before May, probably realistically in April

Megan Hernandez: Thank you so much! That was fun.

bluerasberry: It was fun. Thank you so much for meeting with me.

Megan Hernandez: Thank you, have a good one.

James Baldwin: Alright, thanks.

bluerasberry: Bye-bye.

Megan Hernandez: Bye.

Fundraising banner discussion

Previous discussions on Wikipedia fundraising banners include the following:

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+ Add a comment (https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?editintro=Wikipedia:Wikip edia_Signpost/Templates/Comment-editnotice&title=Wikipedia_talk:Wikipedia_Sig npost/2024-03-29/Interview&action=edit&preload=Wikipedia:Signpost/Templates/S ignpost-article-comments-end/preload)

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- A disappointing lack of discussion of whether the screen banner campaigns are appropriate now and for the future – particularly the obstructive full-screen campaign appeal on phones. During the latter part of 2023, the splash screen impeded using Wikipedia for random momentary queries ("What is the population of Blahtown?" or "this film seems familiar, is it a remake?", etc.). This is an experience counter to point 3 in the linked *Wikimedia Foundation Annual Plan/2024-2025/Product & Technology OKRs*. It is these queries which are typically the start of a down-the-rabbit-hole process, which lead to discovering the unexpected, correcting errors, etc., so are crucial to the project. If people ("consumers" in that WMF plan) feel impeded from using Wikipedia to seek quick info, the new search engines tools can appear easier to use (with or without hallucinated info). There is a danger in Fundraising simply operating on a rote diary (Aug: pick up last year's campaign artefacts and get the en.wiki campaign started for Dec). Is there also strategic thinking – about mobile-first, about LLM-driven querying becoming prevalent elsewhere, about whether the splash-screen fails to *"make our content easier to discover and interact with"* - and, if so, how to re-orient for the future? AllyD (talk) 08:42, 2 April 2024 (UTC)

- The budget for the WMF needs to be shrunk drastically, there is no evidence more value is provided to users or editors with them as a behemoth than as a tight lean organization. They have developed a terminal case of Big Non-Profit brain. Antrocent (♫♬) 14:40, 12 April 2024 (UTC)

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IT'S YOUR *SIGNPOST*. YOU CAN HELP US.

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