

## Humanitarian Crises and U.S. Foreign Policy: Somalia and the CNN Effect Reconsidered

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*This article explores the relationship between foreign policy making and news media coverage. Specifically, we examine the CNN effect, understood here as elite decision makers' loss of policy control to news media. The initial decisions concerning U.S. intervention in Somalia are examined and related to the nature and extent of media coverage devoted to the humanitarian crisis there. We find that in the case of Somalia, news coverage trends do not support the claim that news attention to Somalia led to the Bush administration's decision to intervene. On the basis of content analysis and interviews of officials in Washington and Africa, we argue that the decision to intervene was the result of diplomatic and bureaucratic operations, with news coverage coming in response to those decisions.*

**Keywords** CNN effect, CNN factor, humanitarian crises, news coverage, Somalia, television, U.S. foreign policy

Writing in his diary on the day American troops landed on the camera-clogged beaches of Somalia, George Kennan wondered what explained this sudden and, for him, troubling undertaking. Equally perplexing was the easy acceptance of the mission by Congress and the public with practically no "preparation," as Kennan put it. He concluded that news media, particularly television, offered the best explanation.

There can be no question that the reason for this acceptance lies primarily with the exposure of the Somalia situation by the American media, above all, television. The reaction would have been unthinkable without this exposure. The reaction was an emotional one, occasioned by the sight of the suffering of the starving people in question. (Kennan, 1993, September 30)

The American involvement in Somalia, in short, was another example of what has come to be known as the *CNN effect*. Also known as the *CNN factor*, the term refers to the effect of a worldwide array of print and broadcast media capable of instantaneous, real-time coverage of breaking events (see Anderson, 1994; Beschloss, 1993; Coffey, 1992; Friedland, 1992; Goodman, 1992; Gowing, 1994a, 1994b; Hoge, 1993; Jordan, 1993).

## The CNN Effect

The CNN effect is the result of a clash of two distinct institutional imperatives: On one hand is the perceived need of various foreign policy actors to manage policy in an atmosphere of relative isolation, sheltered from the vicissitudes of public pressure. On the other are various news media creating those very pressures.

Foreign policy analysts, particularly those who espouse the dominant post-World War II Realist approach, attempt to minimize the role of emotion and moralism in the formulation of policy, stressing instead the role of expertise, rationality, and dispassionate analysis of international affairs, all in the pursuit of defined national interests (McElroy, 1992; Smith, 1986). "The interests of national society for which government has to concern itself are basically those of its military security, the integrity of its political life, and the well-being of its people. These needs," said Kennan, "have no moral quality" (Kennan, 1985, p. 206).

Yet for a variety of technological and commercial reasons, contemporary journalism places a premium on dramatic, breaking stories (Gans, 1979). Foreign affairs coverage in particular tends to highlight the sort of profound human suffering found in wars, famine, and natural disasters (Rosenblum, 1979; Wallis & Baran, 1990). Some argue that even print journalism is now more disposed to this sort of coverage, modifying its content and style to "intensify emotional and on-the-spot depictions, often at the expense of analysis" (Hoge, 1994, p. 136). If it bleeds, it leads.

With selection criteria of this sort, Realists argue, news content cannot serve as a basis for a well-conceived foreign policy, for news stories are "fleeting, disjointed, visual glimpses of reality, flickering on and off the screen, here today and gone tomorrow" (Kennan, 1993, October 24). Policy formulated in the faint blue glow of the television becomes a never-ending chase of media-induced challenge and response. Effective crisis management is rewarded, while time for careful analysis and reflection is lost.

Furthermore, in the view of some, the end of the Cold War has exacerbated this tendency. With a multitude of trouble spots competing for the attention and resources of the public and policy makers alike, the country is without a clear guiding principle. As James Schlesinger has remarked: "In the absence of established guideposts our policies will be determined by impulse and image. In this age image means television, and policies seem increasingly subject, especially in democracies, to the images flickering across the television screen" (Schlesinger, 1992, p. 17).

Yet, beyond this general description, the CNN effect remains poorly defined, used to explain a number of potential effects. Historian Michael Beschloss (1993), for instance, has argued that because of television, modern policy makers are no longer afforded the luxury of careful policy deliberation, as was the Kennedy administration during the Cuban missile crisis. The results, suggested Beschloss, could be catastrophic. In this view, real-time media serve as catalysts, accelerating policy making time to dangerously short and reckless intervals.

Conversely, the CNN effect has been understood as an impediment to policy implementation. Perhaps the best example of this precedes CNN: the bloody and negative news reporting from Vietnam (Braestrup, 1985; Hallin, 1989). The press control during the Persian Gulf War was designed to prevent the CNN effect so understood (Bennett & Paletz, 1994).

The first step in clarifying the CNN effect is to place it in a clearer theoretical framework. Second, a careful empirical examination of available evidence must be undertaken. In this article, this examination will take the form of a case study.

### CNN Effect as a Loss of Political Control

The issue at the heart of the CNN effect is not whether media have the capacity to produce an emotional or psychological effect that in some measure has an impact on policy. Most agree, as we do, that at some level media have this capacity. Instead, the question at the heart of the CNN effect is, Who controls that capacity? Believers in the CNN effect claim that the roles of the professional policy expert and diplomat have been undermined by media. To the degree that foreign policy is reactive to news content, the key decisions are those made by reporters, producers, and editors. In this view, foreign policy decision making has become epiphenomenal to news decision making.

After American troops waded ashore in Somalia, Kennan remarked that "if American policy, particularly policy involving the uses of our armed forces abroad, is to be controlled by popular emotional impulses, and particularly ones provoked by the commercial television industry, *then there is no place—not only for myself, but for what have traditionally been regarded as the responsible deliberative organs of our government, in both executive and legislative branches*" (Kennan, 1993, October 24; emphasis added).

For Kennan and other foreign policy makers, this is anathema. Fundamentally, the CNN effect is about a presumed shift in power away from the foreign policy machinery of government to a more diffuse array of nongovernmental actors, primarily news media organizations. "The process by which a particular human tragedy becomes a crisis demanding a response," remarked Jessica Mathews, "is less the result of a rational weighing of need or of what is remediable than it is of what gets on nightly news shows" (Mathews, 1994).

The CNN effect—understood as a loss of policy control—presumes an independent media capable of sustained attention in an environment relatively free of official cuing to distant trouble spots around the world. The problem with this formulation is that it contradicts many of the findings of the last 20 years of media and foreign affairs research, the most important of which is that officials, not media, set and maintain news agendas.

Reporters, for example, have been found to routinely turn to officials as news sources (Gans, 1979; Paletz & Entman, 1981; Said, 1981; Sigal, 1973), particularly in foreign affairs and national security reporting (Entman, 1991; Hallin, 1989; Livingston, 1994), allowing them—the official sources—to determine the relative emphasis given to issues and how they are framed (Entman & Rojecki, 1993; Rachlin, 1988). Likewise, the intensity of debate in the news regarding policy options usually does not reflect independent news priorities but instead is "indexed" to the level and intensity of official debate on any given issue (Bennett, 1989). In the absence of official debate, the news media will not generate it independently. As Bennett and Manheim put it, "As a practical matter, news organizations routinely leave policy framing and issue emphasis to political elites (generally, government officials)" (Bennett & Manheim, 1993).

Contrary to the assumptions of the CNN effect, previous research findings offer a vastly different picture of the relationship between foreign policy making and

news content. Changes in media content are the products of official actions. The tension found between the assumptions of the CNN effect and these research findings is the point of departure for the case study presented here.

### Somalia and the CNN Effect

The case study presented here examines the decision making process leading to the use of American airlift and security capabilities for humanitarian relief in Somalia during the summer of 1992. We have attempted to reconstruct that process with a sensitivity to the temporal ordering of official decisions in relation to changes in media content.

The logic of the study is quite straightforward. In its simplest form, the CNN effect suggests that changes in policy—whether forcing or impeding policy—by definition *follow* changes in media content. If key decisions follow surges in media content or brief but highly dramatic single news episodes (such as the BBC's initial reports from Ethiopia in 1984), then the CNN effect is real: Shifts in policy come in response to media content, and policy makers, in some measure, have lost control of policy making to the news media.

If, on the other hand, decisions reflect the employment of normal channels of diplomacy and information, such as diplomatic cable traffic, internal bureaucratic politics, intelligence reports, the official use of news leaks, and press conferences, then something other than the CNN effect is at play in the policy making process. Again, the issue explored here concerns the political question of policy control. The CNN effect suggests policy makers have lost control of policy making to media.

### Methods

We used two principal methods in our research. First, we conducted a content analysis of news accounts of Somalia in a variety of media between late 1991 and December 1992. Second, we interviewed officials and journalists involved in the Somalia story. Interviews were conducted by both authors in Washington, D.C., and by one of the authors in Nairobi, Kenya, the base of operations for the Western press corps in East Africa. Interviews were also conducted in southern Sudan, where many of the relief workers once involved in Somalia are now found. Though not necessarily cited, a wide array of current and former U.S. government officials, as well as persons working for the United Nations and several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), were interviewed.

We retrieved and analyzed the population of Somalia-related news stories aired by CNN ( $n = 513$ ); reported in ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts ( $n = 268$ ); and published by the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* ( $n = 751$ ) between October 1991 and January 1993.<sup>1</sup> The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were selected because of their reputation for journalistic integrity, their commitment to international news reporting, and their reputation for influencing elite decision making processes in a variety of ways.

Stories were independently coded by both authors for the several variables discussed in this article. All coding was straightforward and free of impressionistic judgments (such as whether a given news account was "negative" or "positive"); coding instead concerned only directly ascertainable values, such as article frequency, word frequency, byline, and dateline.

## Policy Developments

When the oppressive 24-year regime of Said Barre in Somalia came to an end in January 1991, there was only a brief lull in the violence. Barre had instigated fighting within Mogadishu itself when he armed his own Marehan clan and directed them to attack Hawiye supporters of the United Somali Congress (USC), led by General Muhammad Farah Aideed. Artillery based on the grounds of the presidential palace fired indiscriminately into the surrounding neighborhoods. Soon Mogadishu gave way to, in the words of Herman J. Cohen, former assistant secretary of state for African affairs, "general lawlessness" (H. J. Cohen, interview, January 20, 1995).

By midsummer 1992, the United Nations and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) estimated that 300,000–500,000 people in Somalia had died as a consequence of war, famine, and disease. One million people had fled the country, with another 2 million internally displaced. It was a profound human tragedy, yet one largely ignored by the American news media until the late summer of 1992.

Today, when most Americans think of Somalia, several images are likely to come to mind: the pictures of emaciated people seeking food, American Marines wading ashore in the glare of television camera lights, the picture of the battered face of a downed American helicopter pilot, or the dead American soldier whose body was put on macabre display by cheering mobs. Each of these scenes captures a certain essence of the American experience in Somalia. But most of these images came late in the crisis, well after the U.S. policy agenda regarding Somalia was already in motion and after the news media had "discovered" Somalia. Our questions are: When did the media discover Somalia? Why then? And what is the relationship between policy and media exposure? Our objective here is to fix key policy decision points in the context of relevant political and media developments so that we might better understand their relationship.

At an August 18 briefing at the State Department, shortly after the White House announced that the United States would conduct an airlift of emergency relief supplies to Somalia, Andrew Natsios, the Bush administration's special coordinator for the Somalia relief effort, remarked to reporters, "I get the impression sometimes from some of the media coverage that all of a sudden this started three weeks ago and that nothing has happened before. And that certainly is not the case." Under-scoring Natsios's point was the fact that the United States had already shipped 12,000 tons of food to Somalia in 1991 alone. This, of course, suggests the news media were late in coming to the Somalia story.<sup>2</sup>

In part this tardiness is explained by the occurrence of other events, particularly the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the continuing transformation of the former Eastern bloc states, the Persian Gulf conflict, and the plight of the Kurds, all of which crowded out news of Somalia. Also important was the fact that most of the institutional sources typically used by the news media had been forced to leave Somalia by the violence. All foreign embassies but Egypt's were closed at this time, as were the offices of the United Nations and most relief organizations. The ICRC was one of the few exceptions (Richburg, 1992). Without official sources in Somalia, news reporting was problematic for journalists.

Yet long before the media discovered Somalia in the late summer of 1992, the

situation there had gained the attention of officials in the U.S. government, particularly disaster relief officials in the Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA) of the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID) (B. Atwood, interview, May 1994; A. Natsios, interviews, January 16, 1995, February 17, 1995; B. Scowcroft, interview, May 16, 1995). We will find that the development of the U.S. policy response to Somalia rested with the officials in these sometimes specialized agencies. They, not the news media, put Somalia on the policy agenda of superiors in the U.S. foreign policy bureaucracy.

### Initial Developments

One of the first indicators that the humanitarian disaster in Somalia had begun to make the agenda of some U.S. policy makers came in March 1991 when Assistant Secretary of State Cohen declared Somalia a "civil strife disaster," the first step necessary to activate a response from OFDA. Even earlier, in February, OFDA had appointed Jan Westcott as the U.S. emergency relief coordinator for Somalia. Westcott's role was to manage the distribution of U.S. aid to the ICRC, NGOs, and U.N. agencies. She was also in regular contact with OFDA officials in Washington.

Furthermore, John Fox, a U.S. embassy political officer evacuated from Mogadishu, monitored events in Somalia on a full-time basis from his ersatz post in Nairobi (F. LaSor, interview, May 28, 1994). Early in the crisis, officials at this level of the foreign policy structure were well aware of the conditions found in Somalia and had begun to actively promote greater levels of attention to them farther up the chain of command in the foreign policy structure.

Shortly after Cohen declared Somalia a civil strife disaster, Fox urged Westcott to make a brief visit to Mogadishu to demonstrate to critics in the State Department that Americans could operate in Mogadishu and survive, "a first step toward winning agreement to a more regular U.S. presence in Somalia" (Sommer, 1995, p. 12). Westcott's own personal gamble paid off, for as OFDA's own commissioned report concluded, "Westcott's trip was a turning point for OFDA, which thereafter began to fund relief efforts in Somalia through the ICRC and NGOs" (Sommer, 1995, p. 12).

While Fox, Westcott, and others in Africa worked to raise interest in the situation in Somalia (with the encouragement and support of Smith Hempstone, the American ambassador to Kenya), several key officials in the State Department and OFDA did the same in Washington. Within the State Department, Assistant Secretary of State Cohen led the charge in helping OFDA advance its operations in Somalia. Opposition came from Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs John Bolton and Brent Scowcroft, President Bush's national security advisor. Both reportedly opposed any expansion of American involvement (Bolton, 1994; B. Scowcroft, interview, May 16, 1995).

In November 1991, at the urging of OFDA's Andrew Natsios, Ambassador Morris Abram, the U.S. permanent representative to U.N. organizations in Geneva, met with officials of the ICRC. At the time, ICRC efforts in Somalia were termed "the largest humanitarian relief operation since World War II" (A. Natsios, interview, January 16, 1995). Natsios wanted to use the ICRC as a conduit for American relief supplies, in part as a way of skirting others in the foreign policy community who had reservations about the United States becoming more deeply involved in Somalia.

## Media Coverage of Somalia

What was reported in the news media during these initial policy moves? Figure 1 juxtaposes print (*Washington Post* and *New York Times*) and television coverage trends along a time line beginning in November 1991 and ending in August 1992. Notations are also made for several key events and policy decisions.

As the war raged in Somalia, media coverage at the end of 1991 and the early months of 1992 remained light. Figure 1 indicates there was no television coverage of Somalia in this time period, and only a few *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles. In December 1991, the *Times* and *Post* published a combined total of 21 stories concerning Somalia, mostly describing its descent into anarchy.<sup>3</sup> The *Times* also reported that OFDA reallocated \$19 million in disaster assistance funds beyond the \$21 million already committed (Perlez, 1991).

Modest increases in coverage did not come until later. Figure 2 indicates that consistent print coverage was not found until July, when the Bush administration announced its intention to use U.S. airlift capabilities for the relief effort in Somalia. This is clearly seen in the cumulative story count offered in Figure 2b. Once the White House announced that the United States would commit American aircraft to the relief effort, the coverage began to steadily increase. Then, at the end of November when the White House signaled its intention to use U.S. ground troops in Somalia, coverage skyrocketed. This same trend is even more pronounced in television coverage. Figure 3 shows daily combined Somalia story counts from July 1992 to the end of December 1992 for ABC, NBC, and CBS. Beginning with the White House's announcement of the airlift in August 1992, we find significant levels of news media attention following official decisions regarding U.S. policy toward So-

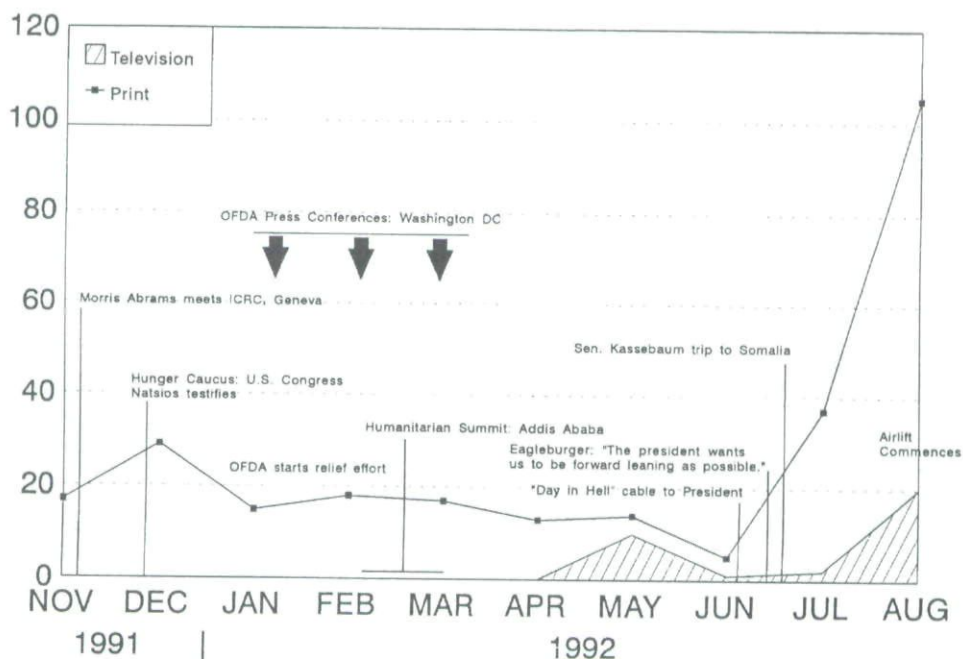
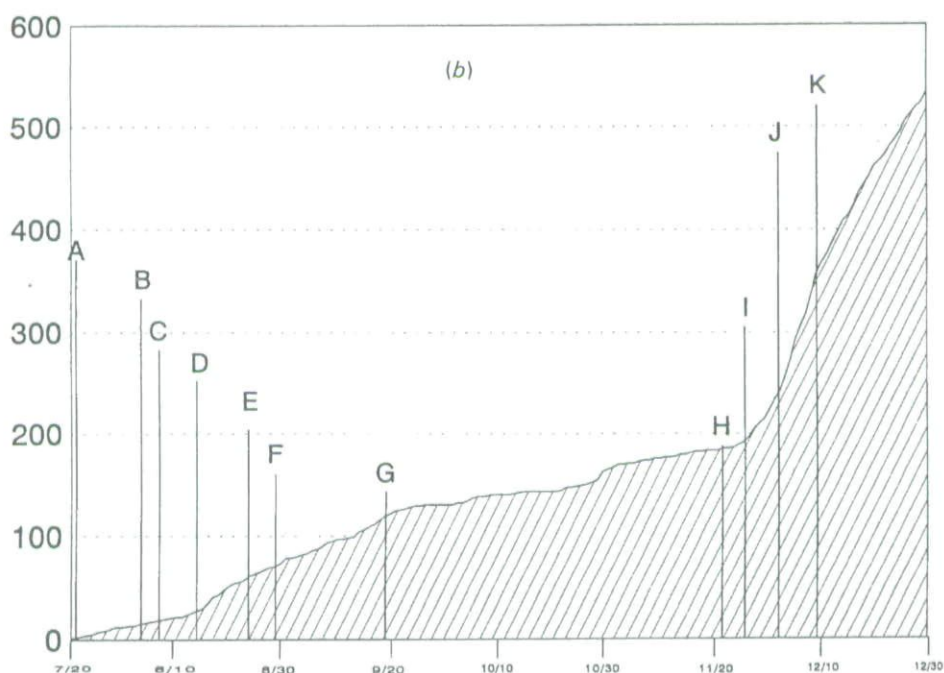
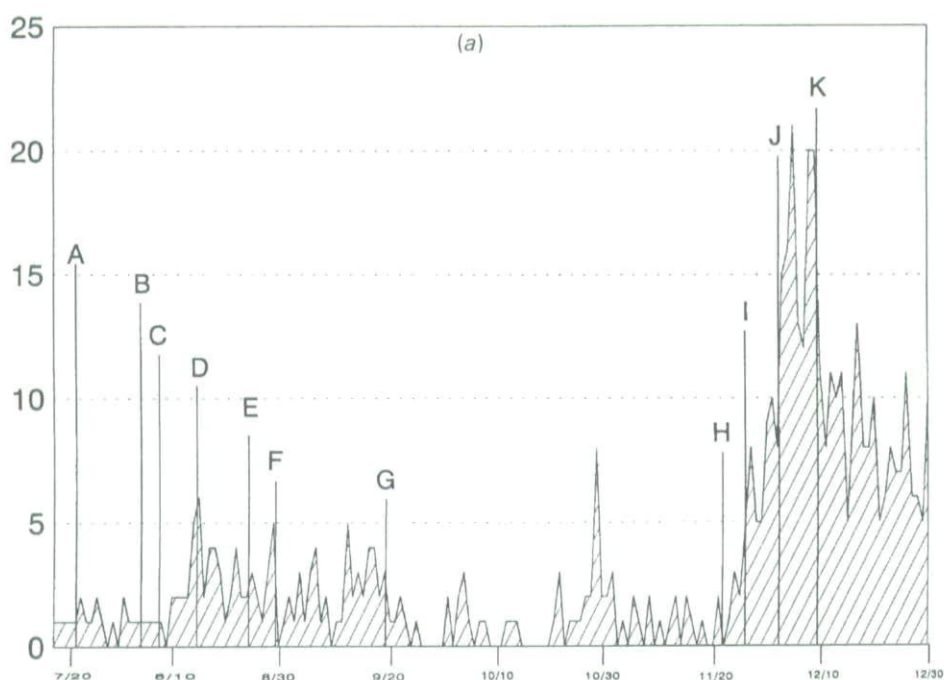
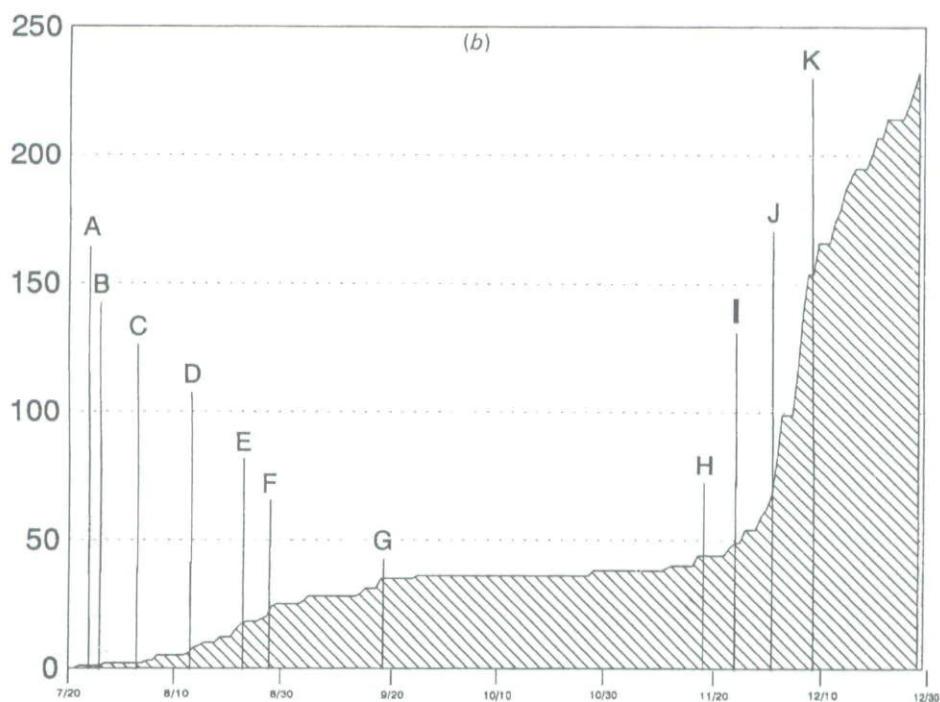
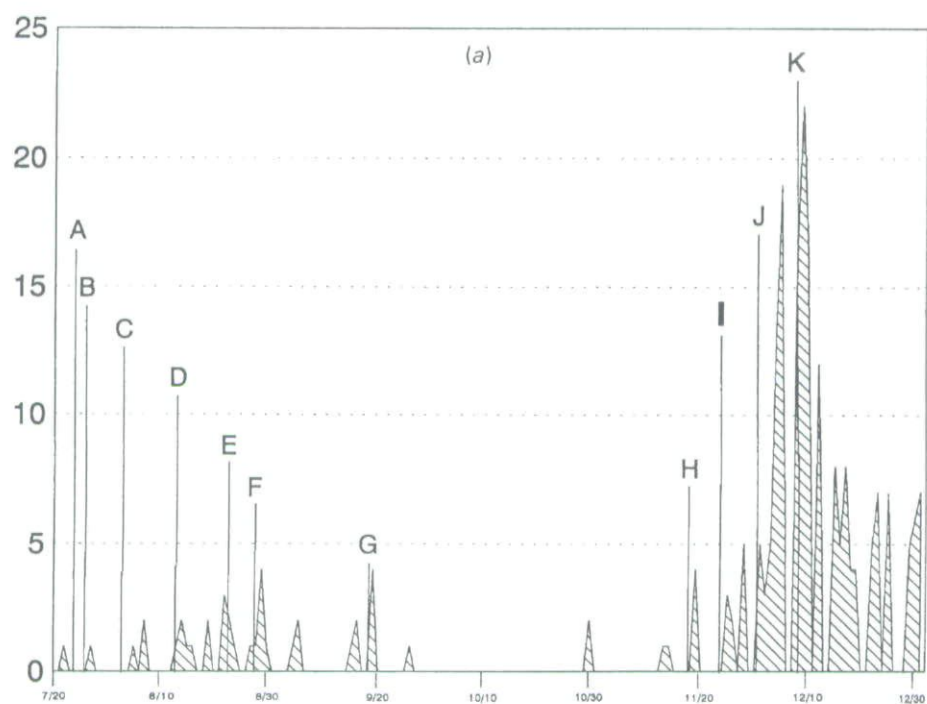


Figure 1. Significant events versus media coverage for period up to airlift.



**Figure 2.** Aggregate coverage of the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*. (a) Daily story count; (b) cumulative story count. A, U.N. secretary general's report to Security Council; B, U.N. Security Council's report on Somalia; C, OFDA press conference: Washington, DC; D, White House announces relief effort; E, U.S. airlift commences; F, first flights into Somalia; G, President Bush advocates use of security forces; H, Bush approves 28,000 U.S. troops; I, secretary of state tells U.N. that United States will send troops; J, U.N. Security Council authorizes troops; K, first U.S. troops go ashore in Somalia.



**Figure 3.** Network news coverage. (a) Daily story count; (b) cumulative story count. A, U.N. secretary general's report to Security Council; B, U.N. Security Council's report on Somalia; C, OFDA press conference: Washington, DC; D, White House announces relief effort; E, U.S. airlift commences; F, first flights into Somalia; G, President Bush advocates use of security forces; H, Bush approves 28,000 U.S. troops; I, secretary of state tells U.N. that United States will send troops; J, U.N. Security Council authorizes troops; K, first U.S. troops go ashore in Somalia.

malia. Again, it is evident that the announced introduction of American troops at the end of the year led to the increase in coverage, as Figure 3b suggests.

The same pattern is also found in CNN's coverage, analyzed separately. In fact, the trend is more pronounced in CNN's coverage. Figure 4 reveals that CNN paid little attention to Somalia until after official policy actions were taken later in the year. The same pattern is found when coverage is measured by minutes rather than story frequency. Once President Bush approved the use of troops, CNN coverage expanded rapidly. There is little evidence to suggest sustained media attention could have driven senior policy makers in the Bush administration to undertake the Somalia operation in the summer of 1992.

While it seems fairly evident that the bulk of sustained print and broadcast attention to Somalia followed rather than preceded government policy actions, the CNN effect does not necessarily presuppose sustained coverage. Instead, dramatic single-episode coverage of an event may well induce policy shifts. Is there evidence of this? While it certainly cannot be ruled out entirely, there does not appear to be.

In January 1992, a *Nightline* report from Somalia offered the most compelling possibility. To open the program—consisting largely of video shot by a British freelance photographer—Ted Koppel intoned,

It's been called the most dangerous spot in the world, a civil war that has killed or wounded 20,000 people. Widespread starvation. Even the U.N. has pulled its relief workers, deeming it too dangerous for them to stay there. Tonight, we'll take you to Somalia. . . .

You should watch this. We all have a moral obligation to at least know what is happening in Somalia, but in fairness, I must tell you it is a very disturbing piece of video.

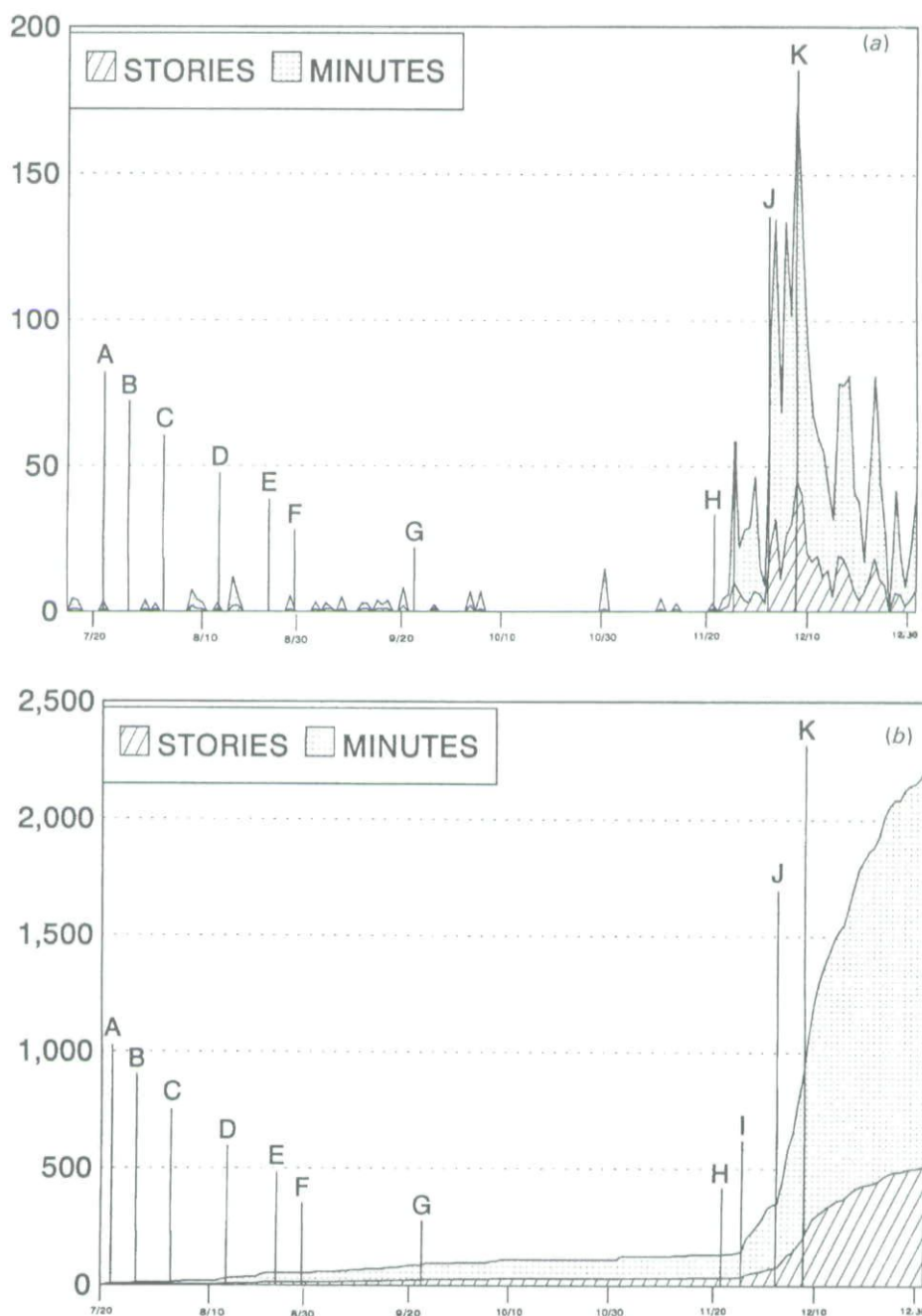
Yet, unlike the BBC and NBC broadcasts of the Ethiopian famine in 1984, there is no evidence that other news organizations rushed to cover a newly discovered tragedy in Africa or that senior policy makers altered policy.

In May, CNN's Brent Sadler filed several reports from Somalia. As with the *Nightline* program, these reports did not produce further media interest in Somalia. In fact, overall news coverage actually declined the following month. CNN did not cover Somalia again until July, after the Bush administration's airlift announcement. Nor is there evidence to suggest that senior policy makers were in any way affected by the media reports regarding Somalia in May.

As Figures 1 through 4 indicate, media interest in Somalia remained unchanged until much later in 1992. If media were not independently producing policy changes regarding Somalia, what explains both policy changes and subsequent changes in news content?

### Official Actions and Indexed News of Somalia

Bennett has argued that the level of media attention to any given issue is typically a function of the level and intensity of debate found within official circles regarding that issue. He refers to this as "indexing" (Bennett, 1989). In this view, media are key instruments in the policy making process, though not independent actors. Advocates of policy options, for instance, may attempt to "expand the fight," to use



**Figure 4.** Daily coverage of CNN. (a) Daily count by minutes and story; (b) cumulative count by minutes and story. A, U.N. secretary general's report to Security Council; B, U.N. Security Council's report on Somalia; C, OFDA press conference: Washington, DC; D, White House announces relief effort; E, U.S. airlift commences; F, first flights into Somalia; G, President Bush advocates use of security forces; H, Bush approves 28,000 U.S. troops; I, secretary of state tells U.N. that United States will send troops; J, U.N. Security Council authorizes troops; K, first U.S. troops go ashore in Somalia.

E. E. Schattschneider's phrase, to an otherwise disinterested audience—both the general public and more senior policy decision makers—by managing media messages in ways beneficial to their cause (Schattschneider, 1960). We would argue that this media-policy dynamic best explains eventual changes in U.S. policy toward Somalia.

As noted in a Refugee Policy Group report to OFDA, a vigorous debate within the administration and on Capitol Hill regarding Somalia developed in the spring and early summer of 1992. "While the Bush administration was divided on how to respond to Somalia, members of Congress—notably Senators Simon and Kassebaum and Representative Tony Hall—had been pushing with renewed vigor in early 1992 for it to become more actively engaged in efforts to achieve a cease-fire and ensure food deliveries" (U.S. Committee on Refugees, 1994, p. 20).

In particular, the Hunger Caucus, chaired by Congressman Tony Hall, served as a platform for aid advocates within the administration.<sup>4</sup> On the Hill itself, advocates such as Congressman Hall assisted other advocates in the administration, such as Cohen, Kunder, and Natsios.

One of the difficulties they faced was the lack of media coverage, particularly in relation to the media attention given to the crisis in the former Yugoslavia. "The way we operated in OFDA," said Natsios, "was that the bottom line was lives at risk, lives already lost, lives about to be lost. Bosnia came way down that list. I mean we cared, but not like in some other places, including Somalia" (A. Natsios, interview, February 17, 1995). Yet news media continued to focus on Bosnia. In 1991 alone, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published nearly 2,000 news items concerning the former Yugoslavia. In the case of Somalia, the *Times* and the *Post* published a total of 186 news items in 1991 and 1,025 in 1992, with the majority appearing toward the end of the year.

Relief advocates needed to reframe Somalia as something more than just another African crisis. In December 1991, Natsios testified before Congressman Hall's Hunger Caucus. During the testimony, implying a comparison to the former Yugoslavia, he stated that Somalia was "the worst humanitarian crisis in the world today." Natsios recalled requesting of Congressman Hall that he ask him what he, Natsios, regarded as the worst humanitarian crisis in the world. "I used to do that all the time. I'd say before the hearing, 'Ask me this question.' I was in politics in Massachusetts since I was twenty-two. I was used to dealing with the media. You could tell after a while what they'd pick up on. That's why I said it" (Natsios, interview, February 17, 1995).

Natsios believed the situation in Somalia had to be reframed if there was going to be progress in advancing OFDA's position. In the next several months, slight variations of Natsios's phrase were used in the media on at least 50 occasions. Kunder, who had become the OFDA director in December 1991, also used the phrase. Later, after the airlift had begun, when Don Oberdorfer of the *Washington Post* remarked, "For more than six months, the United States has been officially describing the man-made famine in Somalia as 'the most acute humanitarian tragedy in the world today,'" he was referring to Natsios's phrase (Oberdorfer, 1992).

Kunder, Natsios, and others at OFDA also held press conferences in January, February, and March. They were met with indifference, with few reporters bothering to attend (Natsios, interview, February 17, 1995). Despite the poor attendance, OFDA officials continued to attempt to use the media to draw attention to Somalia

and to advocate a shift in policy, a shift that could only be decided by more senior policy makers.

In June, the U.S. ambassador to Kenya, Smith Hempstone, traveled to refugee camps along the Somali border with Kenya and filed what subsequently came to be known as the "A Day In Hell" cable, a powerfully written account of the conditions found in the Somali refugee camps in northern Kenya. It was eventually forwarded to the State Department, the National Security Council, and ultimately to President Bush. Brent Scowcroft, President Bush's national security advisor, gave the cable to Bush. Said Scowcroft of the Hempstone cable, "It was extremely powerful. I wanted the president to see it" (B. Scowcroft, interview, May 16, 1995).

Ambassador Hempstone's cable proved to be one of the key elements in Bush's decision to initiate the relief operation. The president sent the cable back with a notation asking that he be kept apprised of the situation (S. Hempstone, interview, January 15, 1995).<sup>5</sup> This is the first confirmation that the president was aware of the situation in Somalia. From our perspective, it is also important to note that it was the result of regular diplomatic activity, a diplomatic cable, and not the consequence of news media accounts.

Opposition within the administration to the expansion of the U.S. role in Somalia remained strong, despite the efforts of OFDA, Hempstone, and Cohen at the State Department. During the month of June, for instance, several interagency deputies meetings were held to discuss options for relief to Somalia. In all of them, the Department of Defense and Joint Chiefs representatives remained opposed to deeper involvement (H. J. Cohen, interview, January 20, 1995). This was in addition to the reported opposition of Bolton and Scowcroft. Yet aid advocates were just as committed.

During a deputies meeting on July 5, Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger stated "the president wants to be as forward leaning as possible" toward Somalia (H. J. Cohen, interview, January 20, 1995). Was this the result of Bush's exposure to some media report? The only known news item concerning Somalia thought to have affected Bush came later: a July 19 *New York Times* article by Jane Perlez (Perlez, 1992). As best as can be determined, in this time frame no known media account of Somalia influenced Bush's decision making process. What led to Bush's decision?

The key event leading to the administration's decision to undertake an airlift was itself intended to generate press coverage. When asked what led to deeper American involvement in Somalia, former Secretary of State Lawrence Eagleburger first mentioned the intense pressure felt from some members of Congress, "particularly my good friend, Senator Nancy Kassebaum. . . . Though there wasn't broad support for humanitarian efforts in Somalia, there was intense pressure from a few key members [of Congress]" (L. Eagleburger, interview, May 12, 1995).

On July 16, James Kunder, the director of OFDA, announced that Senator Nancy Kassebaum would accompany him and a team of disaster relief officials to Mogadishu (Elsner, 1992; J. Kunder, interview, February 2, 1995). Senator Kassebaum was the ranking Republican on the Senate Africa subcommittee. On July 19, Kassebaum accompanied OFDA officials on a tour of refugee camps in northern Kenya and the Somali town of Belet Uen just across the border.

According to Thomas J. Dowling, the U.S. embassy press officer in Nairobi at the time, Senator Kassebaum's visit to the region was the turning point in U.S. policy. (With the embassy in Mogadishu closed, the embassy in Nairobi served as

the center of U.S. diplomatic activity for Somalia.) "After Kassebaum's visit, Somalia just took off. We started getting a lot of [cable] traffic coming in after that. The presence of the senator served to raise the visibility of the situation" (T. J. Dowling, interview, May 28, 1994).

On July 22, Senator Kassebaum testified before the House Select Committee on Hunger. She urged the United States to take more forceful measures to alleviate the famine in Somalia, including supporting a 500-soldier U.N. peacekeeping force, arguing that there was a moral obligation to do so. That evening, she reiterated that position in an appearance on the *MacNeill/Lehrer Newshour*.

Also on July 22, using Senator Kassebaum's trip to Africa and her testimony that day as a news peg, ABC ran a lengthy report on Somalia. Providing the voice-over of pictures of a Sarajevo food distribution center, ABC correspondent Beth Nissen intoned, "Scenes like these are broadcast on the world's most watched evening newscasts; scenes like these are not." The newscast cut to scenes of Somali children rushing to pick spilled grain off the ground. "At a congressional hearing in Washington today," said Nissen, "Senator Nancy Kassebaum, just returned from Somalia, tried to turn up the pressure. Half a world away, six million people waiting for relief; starving for attention" (*World News Tonight*, 1992).

Shortly after Kassebaum returned to Washington, Natsios received a call from someone in the White House who asked him what he was going to do about Somalia. "I told them what we were already trying to do," Natsios recalled. The White House caller then asked, "'Tell us what additional measures we can take'" (A. Natsios, interview, January 16, 1994; Oberdorfer, 1992). As the *Post's* Oberdorfer would later write, "At that point, the administration was mobilized at a higher level and at a greater intensity than ever. Plans were drawn up and decision papers written."

On August 12, President Bush met in the Oval Office with James Baker, Defense Secretary Cheney, and National Security Adviser Scowcroft and decided on the U.S. military airlift. Before announcing the decision they wanted technical experts to assess the feasibility of the plan. Finally, on August 14, the White House announced the airlift and related initiatives. It was this announcement that finally sparked the sort of intense media attention usually associated with the CNN effect. Following the president's announcement, media attention—in terms of story frequency—increased more than fivefold, to 26 pieces per week. When the airlift commenced on August 28, the Somalia story was established. As one NBC network executive was quoted as saying, "With international relief efforts growing, the Somalian situation is likely to be examined more often by the network news shows in the coming weeks. We're going to cover it more now" (LaFayette, 1992). Figures 3b and 4b confirm this speculation.

Of course, it would be another 4 months before the Somalia story really took off, with the introduction of U.S. troops to provide security for relief distribution. But the die was cast. In fact, according to one of the key architects of the airlift strategy, Andrew Natsios, the reason for the airlift itself was first and foremost to generate more media attention. The aid and security needs of the country were simply too great to be met by air cargo alone. Natsios and others knew that newspapers and television would be attracted to Somalia as a result of the presence of U.S. planes and security personnel. This, in turn, would lead to even more aid, and eventually security personnel too.

## Discussion

Who controls the capacity to generate emotional media content? We have argued that media generally do not serve as independent agents in the development of issues and concerns. Rather, because news agendas typically reflect the agendas of officials, the media serve as instruments of those officials who are most adept at using news to further their policy goals. In the case of Somalia, it was the combined pressure from elements of his own administration (officials in OFDA, Cohen in the State Department, and Hempstone in Kenya), the international community (criticism from the U.N. secretary general), and key members of Congress (Senator Kassebaum and Congressman Hall, among others) that led to the president's decision to widen U.S. involvement in Somalia.<sup>6</sup>

Almost immediately following the start of the airlift, in news accounts and popular imagination, a mythology began to develop. It came to be assumed, as Natsios said at the August 18 briefing, that "all of a sudden this started three weeks ago and that nothing has happened before." The most salient factor for most observers became the television images in close proximity to what *appeared* to be a sudden policy change. Ergo, we had the CNN effect. This was not the case.

The sequence of policy events in 1991 and 1992 supports the thesis that while news media played an important part in the policy process, they did not independently drive Somalia to the surface. Media are something more akin to tools used well or poorly by adept policy makers.

What may be at play here is the more decentralized nature of U.S. foreign policy making. According to former Deputy Secretary of State Clifton R. Wharton, a recent National Security Council study of all U.S. international activities required contacting 87 departments, bureaus, and agencies. Similarly, in a review of foreign assistance programs, a task force responsible for the review had 37 representatives from 13 departmental units (Wharton, 1995).

In this view, there does not exist a single foreign policy bureaucracy, but rather a diffuse array of semiautonomous units. Each unit (or coalition of units) has its own agenda and works with others, such as allies on Capitol Hill and counterparts in the international community (such as NGOs and U.N. agencies), to give greater prominence to shared agenda items. One way that is done is through the news media. Other ways include cables, interagency memoranda, and personal advocacy. For policy advocates the media are avenues of access to more senior decision makers. In those issue areas on the periphery, such as African affairs may be now without the Cold War context, deft use of the news media by policy advocates is all the more crucial.

We have tried to clarify the widely invoked but little studied CNN effect, suggesting that fundamentally it is best understood as a political question, that is, a question of policy control. In the case of Somalia, we have argued that although media content was an important factor in eventually expanding the U.S. role in Somalia, media content came in *response* to official initiatives, and not the other way around.

## Notes

1. Stories that mentioned Somalia only in passing, such as obituaries of someone who once lived or worked there, were discarded. Otherwise, we conducted a census of Somalia stories for these media outlets.

2. Space limitations do not permit a complete presentation of the chronology of events regarding Somalia from 1991 to 1993. Such a chronology is available in Sommer (1995). Also, based on their interviews, the authors have assembled a chronology of events that will be provided upon request.

3. Fifteen of the stories were published by the *New York Times*; five were published by the *Washington Post*.

4. For a chronology of congressional activity regarding Somalia, see Sommer (1995).

5. This was confirmed by a senior National Security Council official who wished to remain anonymous. One of the authors interviewed this official in Washington on January 15, 1995.

6. Beyond the pressures we have listed, what other reasons might President Bush have had for ordering the relief flights? At this point we can only speculate. Both Cohen and Natsios suggested that politics were a part of it. The announcement came just 10 days before the Republican national convention. The president had been criticized by candidate Clinton and others for his policy in Haiti, implying a lack of concern for people of color. The mission to Somalia may well have been an attempt to counter some of these criticisms, though we have no solid evidence to support this thesis.

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