

HYBRID CITY 2015



DATA TO THE PEOPLE

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 3RD INTERNATIONAL BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

EDITORS

I. THEONA
D. CHARITOS

UNIVERSITY RESEARCH INSTITUTE OF APPLIED COMMUNICATION

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Placemaking and place identity in social media

Snapshots from Facebook

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Abstract. There is more to place on the social network site of Facebook than its software configurations that allow seamless location sharing and tracking. Users do much more complex linguistic and multimodal work to give meaning to specific places foregrounding them as geographical but also as social, political, cultural, and emotional entities. This paper draws on insights from discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, semiotics, and online ethnography to explore the ways in which two Greek female Facebook participants talk about and represent places in their postings. The analysis shows that, by means of the place, the users communicate something about themselves: they confirm belonging, they communicate respect to other cultures, they use different languages to affiliate with certain places, they make political statements, they disidentify with the stressful aspects of a place in crisis, and they raise awareness about local and national issues.

Keywords: place identity; social media; Facebook; discourse analysis, semiotics; online ethnography

I. FACEBOOK AND MULTIPLY-PLACED IDENTITIES

Who we are is entwined with where we are, where we have been, or where we are going [2]. Web technologies have marked a fundamental shift in the ways we perceive and experience place. In the social media ecosystem of Facebook, the practice of writing and uploading other multimedia material is a self-reflexive process which is not situated in a particular location; it can exist anywhere, allowing the en route construction of a hybrid place identity as mobile, shifting. Consider the case of my research informant, Helen, who experiences a triple spatial reality: She lives and works in Athens; she has stayed for seven years in the UK while she has been serving as a visiting English for Academic Purposes tutor in British universities for two months per year since 2010; her partner is Hungarian and lives in Budapest. While observing her profile, I noticed that in several instances it was difficult for me to decipher in which of the three places (UK, Greece, Hungary) she was located

at the time of posting on Facebook. During 2011, the bulk of Helen's posts were related to the Greek crisis. Hence, one of my very first questions in my interviewⁱ with Helen dealt with her location while posting. She stated that:

i was here most of the time
 but some posts were made when I was in Hungary
 and if I wrote some posts in September then I was in England
 but mainly I was here and I participated in what was happening
 hm.. even if I'm not in Greece I write posts on issues related to the
 situation here
 moreover, on the other hand, when I'm in Greece I write posts that
 concern the UK
 for example, when the fees increased in UK universities i was in
 Greece and I was very worried about this issue, as far as I can
 remember from my profile
 or other issues related to UK universities
 but when the big demonstrations were held and I wrote some
 [status] updates I was here
 I also posted some photos
 I shot them the day after the demonstrations [...]
 sometimes I write posts that concern Hungary even if I'm not there
 oh, this identity is too complicated.. a mess!

Helen acknowledges the complication of her place identity by jokingly characterising it 'a mess'. Having Greeceⁱⁱ as the location of her immediate proximity (here), her place posts revolve around the three countries: Greece, UK and Hungary. Helen feels entitled to comment on her Facebook on issues about the Greek crisis wherever she is, because she still has a legitimate interest in Greece when she is in the UK. Time and again, in these posts, she draws on English language resources as illustrated in Fig. 1. But she also has a special entitlement to speak from experience on these matters: when she is in Greece, she takes part in demonstrations and then uploads relevant material on Facebook, as we will see later on.

With posts like this in Fig. 1, Helen navigates multiple places simultaneously: the one she is physically located in, the one she is thinking of as well as Facebook space itself. Facebook is brought into the places Helen occupies, and, likewise, those places are brought into Facebook. This ability to navigate multiple places at the

ⁱ The interviews were originally conducted in Greek.

ⁱⁱ I interviewed Helen via instant messaging. We were both located in Athens at the time of the interview (29 October 2011).

same time is in effect ‘the ability to consolidate and locate the spaces and information that we associate with our “digital selves” into something of a hybrid space’ [14]. In these hybrid spaces, the borders between remote and contiguous contexts, be that Greek, English or Hungarian, can no longer be clearly defined [9]. Bringing thus these contexts together in Facebook is not messy (as Helen says) — there are just many theres there [11].



Fig. 1. Using English sources for the Greek crisis.

In this light, the matters that will be addressed in the present paper are the following: How do Facebook users refer to places? Where are these references tied up to places? What do they imply or infer about place identities in these references? The paper is organised as follows. After defining place, I briefly discuss its relation to identity as well as the role of language as a kind of glue that keeps together people and places. Next, I present my data and methods of analysis. The remainder of the paper investigates instances of locating the self textually and visually, geographically and socio-politically in a variety of posts and comments. I close by drawing both specific and general conclusions.

II. PLACE, IDENTITY, AND LANGUAGE

Place is not just a position in space; it is the location plus everything that occupies that location, i.e. tasks, practices, routines, everyday life, seen as an integrated and meaningful phenomenon [29] [32]. Places are classified into three basic types: personal and interpersonal, social, and geographical [41]. Personal and interpersonal places deal with where we are now (in the sense of where our bodies are now) as well as our interlocutors, in other words a space that organises our interaction, perspective and discourse. Social places, on the other hand, locate our activities in everyday life, at home, at work, and during leisure time, and hence are usually defined in terms of what people do in these places – many of which are institutional. Examples in this category comprise outdoor places, residential places, commercial places, commercial service places, community service places, government agencies, educational places, leisure places, and workplaces. Ultimately, the third kind of place, although called geographical, in essence embraces social, political and cultural dimensions. These places can be represented by their scope, range, size or level, and are progressively inclusive, for example: home, street, neighbourhood, city, state, province, country, region, continent, world, and so on.

French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) propounded the idea that individuals are not distinct from their place – they are that place [32]. All of us have a

strong bond with the places where we were born and grew up, where we live, or where we experience particular stirring moments. Humanist geographers see this bond as a starting point from which we can orient ourselves to the world [32]. By the same token, environmental psychologists duly acknowledge that ‘who we are’ is intimately related to ‘where we are’, arguing that identity is not only shaped by place, but we ourselves may also serve as contextual markers for shaping place identities [10] [34]. Reference [31] views place identity as consisting of cognitions about the physical world in which we are located. These cognitions represent an assortment of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, attitudes, values, beliefs, social meanings, preferences and feelings about specific physical settings. Put it plainly, place identity refers to the ways in which we understand ourselves by attributing meanings to places. As such, it should not be understood as a separate part of identity related to place, since all aspects of identity often contain significant references to place or incorporate locations or trajectories as crucial constituents [5] [40].

For sociolinguists and discourse analysts, a place acquires its meanings by the ways it is represented, i.e. written, talked about, and photographed, as well as by the situated interactions that ‘take place’ within it [29] [37]. Language can form and transform our everyday experiences of ‘self-in-place’ [19] [39] so that places are constructed in ways that carry profound implications for who we are, who we can claim to be [10] or where we belong [36]. Through this spectrum, language should not be seen as a mere means to represent or describe external environments. It is also a symbolic resource through which constructions of place can do the rhetorical work of claiming an identity [30].

III. DATA AND METHODS

For the purposes of this study, I draw on findings from a larger discourse-centred online ethnographic project on the construction of identities on Facebook, conducted during 2010-2013 [12]. Discourse-centred online ethnography [1] combines the systematic, longitudinal and repeated observation of online discourse (Facebook profiles here) with direct engagement (face-to-face and/or mediated) with the producers of this online discourse (Facebook profile owners here) and is complementary to the textual analysis of online data. My participants were recruited via convenience sampling (i.e. they were friends of friends). Initially, they were sent a message in which I explained the purposes of my study asking them to fill in an online questionnaire, which helped me to formulate an idea on how they experience the mechanics of social media. Following this, they were invited to have their Facebook profiles painstakingly observed and to participate in a series of semi-structured online interviews via email, instant messaging and/or Facebook messages. My dataset included Facebook profile information, status updates, comments, video and article links, photos my informants have taken themselves or have found elsewhere in the internet, interview excerpts, field notes as well my informants’ comments on drafts of my analysis. My interviewees were asked to sign a consent form in which they were

assured that their material would remain confidential and would be used for academic purposes solely. Concerning the use of third-party comments in the study, I either asked for their posters' permission or asked my subjects to do so on my behalf. Throughout my dataset I have preserved pseudonymity for my informants and anonymity for other Facebook users.

The data I have selected to present and discuss in this paper come from two of my five in total informants, Helen and Carla. Table I offers a rough idea about their demographics.

TABLE I. PARTICIPANTS' DEMOGRAPHICS

Participants	Demographics
Helen	born in 1979; holds a BA in English Language and Literature, an MA in English Language and Literary Studies, and a PhD in Linguistics; works as an Assistant Professor of Linguistics; lives in Athens, Greece, and in UK for 2 months / year.
Carla	born in 1975; holds a BA in Translation and Interpreting; works as a translator of Latin American literature; maintains two Facebook profiles, one personal and one professional; lives in Athens, Greece.

IV. PLACEMAKING ON FACEBOOK

I will now turn to examples in which these two users, other than exploiting Facebook affordances,ⁱⁱⁱ localise their posts by making both direct and indirect references to particular places. The discussion will pivot around the following themes: verbal check-ins, representational locating of self, culinary experiences and placemaking, and socio-political aspects of places.

A. Verbal Check-ins

Users specify where they are, where they are heading towards or where they are departing from, namely where their bodies are, at the moment of writing the status update. With this type of contextual relevance of place, users organise their perspective and orient readers [41]. Fig. 2 offers a brief insight.

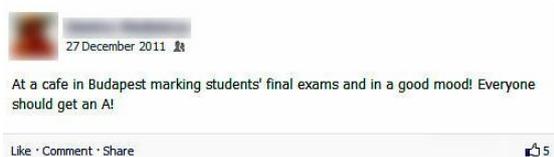


Fig. 2. Verbal check-in.

Here there is a reference to a social place, and particularly a commercial service place, a café, and a geographical place, the city of Budapest. Helen, however, is located at the café not only for the typical activity of drinking coffee but also for working. That the formulation of this place is littered with feelings of euphoria and optimism (in a good mood!) is not due to marking but to the fact that she is in her partner's home

city with him. Two things are observed in this status. First, Helen, beyond just defining where she is, she discloses how she feels while being in the specific place too. Second, Budapest triggers certain emotions in her ongoing activities, marking exams in this case.

Saying where you are going can be done in more inventive ways as shown in Fig. 3. Helen adopts an entextualising process [5] [22], namely she extracts an instance of culture (the song *First We Take Manhattan*, which includes the lyric 'First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin') and relocates it in her discourse as 'first we take Budapest' (where she will meet her partner) and 'and then we take Berlin' (where she will head afterwards for a conference presentation) to adjust it to her own situation and give us a flavour of her itinerary.



Fig. 3. Entextualising a song to locate the self.

B. Representational Locating of Self

Though text is sufficient to give a location, it is not the only mode that is used on Facebook. Uploading profile pictures with landscapes and cityscapes in the background has specific resonance for identity claims as well. It serves as a performative exercise of identity and belonging, which documents and validates the subjects' experience of being at particular places experiencing particular moments [27] [38]. Our own bodies give and give off their meanings because of where they are and what they do 'in place' [13] [35]. In this line of reasoning, this type of photographic posing constitutes a kind of placement action which indicates and locates the self [18]. The next examples will illustrate this point.

Carla in her professional profile is pictured surrounded by the sea of Havana, Cuba, in a medium long shot (Fig. 4) while Helen (Fig. 5) appears to enjoy the Hungarian countryside as a biker.



ⁱⁱⁱ A discussion of how the users exploit specific Facebook affordances (e.g. automatic check in, mapping, liking pages) to indicate places falls outside the remit of this paper.

Fig. 4. Carla's profile pic (11 January 2011).



Fig. 5. Helen's profile pic (23 August 2011).

Fig. 4 and 5 were taken during holidays. Tourism provides a strong impetus for identity construal as the processes of travelling and narrating – textually and visually – holiday stories enable people to think of and present themselves as specific types of person [8] [25]. The practice of posting tourist profile pics, albeit trite at first blush [4], forms a process of selective representation of lived bodily experience in place. Amid an array of photos, users choose to identify themselves with one depicting a place that matters – it is not just sightseeing. Carla is tied to Cuba professionally, as she has translated several books of Cuban literature, whereas Helen is tied to Hungary emotionally because of her partner.

I now shift my focus from profile pictures to place-themed photographic albums. Carla has created albums with photographs of the places she has visited both in Greece and abroad, with Athens, Cuba and France (where Carla's sister lives) taking centre stage. One of the most challenging aspects in this social networking activity is Carla's journalistic kind of writing in choosing witty intertextual titles to name her photo albums. In Table II (next page), I have gathered some of her albums together with the sources to which their titles pay dues. As can be seen, neither does Carla present the places in purely visual terms (i.e. through photos) nor in purely verbal terms (i.e. through titles and captions) but takes up a multisemiotic combination. Her heteroglossic (English, French, Greek and Spanish) and multilayered blending of song lyrics, poetry verses, film titles and lines with place images in one multisemiotically complex product points to a cornucopia of ideas, feelings, memories and trains of thought attached to the particular locations. This use of indexicality, on the one hand, puts on display Carla's linguistic and cultural capital [6], while, on the other, it offers her audience the potential of playful engagement. For example, one has to click on the album 'panic in the streets of' to decipher that the photos are indeed taken in London. By leaving the lyric 'panic in the streets of' unfinished, it is as if Carla invites viewers to reconstruct the place themselves.

The identity work done by Carla in taking these photos and then creating, editing and sharing albums

including them is twofold. On the one hand, she locates herself implicitly:

[T]he camera function[s] as extension of the body [26] enabling a kind of double location of Self: first, as a prosthetic pointing gesture (which others will often follow) and, second, as a representation (or record) of the space and one's place in it. This representational locating of Self can be explicit (i.e. when posed in front of the camera) or implied (i.e. when taking the image) [18].

On the other hand, she constructs herself not solely as a voracious traveller but also as a sharp-eyed photographer. If one browses photographs in her albums, s/he will instantly notice that from a technical perspective she is highly competent in taking photographs with a deep aesthetic appreciation of what is characteristic of a place.

C. Culinary Experiences and Placemaking

Social media, and principally Facebook, Flickr and Instagram, have played an instrumental role in the explosion of interest in food, and food photography more specifically [33]. Apart from a biological need, food is robustly interlaced with place within the geographic imagination and has become central to our lived worlds and thereby our sense of identity [3] [21]. 'Foods do not simply come from places, organically growing out of them, but also make places as symbolic constructs, being deployed in the discursive construction of various imaginative geographies' [7]. Building upon this argument, place can be viewed as both signifier and signified, namely as 'a site at which food consumption may take place' as well as 'a contingent and potentially contested set of meanings that may themselves be consumed through those practices associated with food' [23]. To explicate these points, I will provide three examples: the first relates to local cuisine, as an inextricable part of people's collective national consciousness; the second pertains to culinary tourism, as an opportunity to 'taste' the Other [28]; and the third is concerned with food as a displaced symbol of home.

Fig. 6 is a photo that Helen shot and then posted on her Timeline. It depicts a traditional Greek dish she made herself, called *gemista* (stuffed vegetables). The comments, in Fig. 7, produced by some of her international friends (I have indicated their nationality for ease of reference) underneath the picture set in motion a series of place identities confirming that places are also interactionally construed by dint of past experiences and socio-cultural knowledge [41].



Fig. 6. Helen's gemista.

TABLE II. PHOTO ALBUMS AND INTERTEXTUAL REFERENCES

Album thumbnail	Places depicted	Title of album	Intertextual link
 city sickness II 57 photos	Athens (Greece)	city sickness II	Song title by Tinderstics
 looking for a girl in a washing ... 26 photos	-Habana (Cuba) -Barcelona (Spain) -Corfu (Greece)	looking for a girl in a washing machine?	Song title by The Big Sleep
 à paris (banlieue) tombe la n... 12 photos	Paris (France)	à paris (banlieue) tombe la neige_janvier 2013	<i>Tombe la neige à Paris</i> is a song performed by Adamo
 Lisbon stories 60 photos	Lisbon (Portugal)	Lisbon stories	<i>Lisbon Story</i> is the title of a film directed by W. Wenders
 panic in the streets of 77 photos	London (UK)	panic in the streets of	<i>Panic in the streets of London</i> is a song title by The Smiths
 Habana Blues 67 photos	Habana (Cuba)	Habana Blues	Title of a Spanish-Cuban film directed by B. Zambrano
 ο ουρανός είναι επτά φορές γ... 53 photos	Monemvasia (Greece)	ο ουρανός είναι επτά φορές γαλάζιος (transl.: the sky is seven times light blue)	Verse by Greek poet Yannis Ritsos
 We ll always have Paris 106 photos	Paris (France)	We ll always have Paris	Line from the film <i>Casablanca</i>

represented in their packaging, is no longer ordinary and mundane because it is embedded into another, fresh context and therefore stands out, deserving to be captured and shared as a symbol of home. In this example, Helen manifests a dual kind of geographical knowledge [7]: first, knowledge of the origins of the olives; and second, knowledge of the meanings of place, and regional identity, evoked amongst her Facebook audience who will look at this photo (and perhaps smile), especially the Greek members.



Fig. 9. Greek olives tin in the UK.

D. Socio-political Aspects of Places

Physical environments are necessarily social environments [17]. Economic, political, and social upheavals such as unemployment, governmental instability, intergroup conflicts, and other sources of frustration can have a corrosive effect upon one's place identity [31]. The following examples tackle this matter with regard to the Greek crisis.

I. Protesting and documenting

Harking back to Helen's interview in the introduction, she says about the demonstrations in Athens that 'I was here and I participated in what was happening'. Indeed, she was an active and conscious citizen both physically and digitally. For instance, in heading to Athens Syntagma Square to protest against austerity together with the Greek Indignant Citizens (Aganaktismeni) in June 2011, she wrote on Facebook: 'off to syntagma'. Such a status update should not be viewed as a mere check-in but as a discursive practice embedded in a broader socio-political and historical context.

The same goes for the uploading of photographs she had taken herself of the places where events related to the protests took place. In Fig. 10, we see Syntagma Square, outside the Greek parliament, while Fig. 11 is shot outside Marfin Bank in Stadiou Street, Athens, where three employees died during the nation-wide strike on 5 May 2010. Fig. 12 is an instance of transgressive semiotics, namely when a sign violates either intentionally or accidentally the conventional semiotics at that place [35]. The photo depicts an empty Athenian store, probably one of the hundreds that have closed down on account of the crisis, with two labels on its window, ΠΩΛΕΙΤΑΙ (for

sale) and ΕΝΟΙΚΙΑΖΕΤΑΙ (to rent), and underneath them a poster that promotes tourism in Greece. At any moment in time these three signs would compose a transgressive semiotic system. Nonetheless, because of the socio-political situation in Greece, this triptych functions on a symbolic level: Greece (the land, its people) is available for sale to or to be rented by its creditors. In Fig. 13, which reads ΜΕΝΟΥΜΕ ΣΥΝΤΑΓΜΑ (We stay at Syntagma), the place, Syntagma Square, is represented as a symbol of resistance placed within the same contextual conditions as in the 'off to syntagma' status above.

By recording the place in crisis, Helen simultaneously represents her place in it. Since she is the one taking the images, which are powerful tokens of citizen journalism, and not posing in front of the camera, her representational locating of self is implied [18]. Her identity claim is 'I'm there, at the heart of the events, protesting and documenting'.



Fig. 10. Syntagma Square (posted on 30 May 2011).



Fig. 11. Stadiou Street (posted on 6 May 2010).



Fig. 12. Empty store in Athens (posted on 23 October 2011).



Fig. 13. Flyer in Syntagma Square (posted on 18 October 2012).

II. Responding to ‘unattractive’ places

It goes without saying that under the crisis circumstances, places become ‘unattractive’ causing stress to people, who in turn feel displaced, and as a consequence their discourses about these places become deterritorialised too acquiring an irritated style [5] [41]. Here is a simple example:

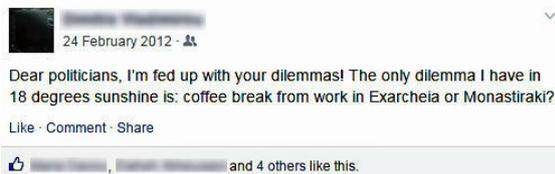


Fig. 14. Polarising aspects of place identity.

By polarising the unstable political situation in Greece, which distresses Greek people, with the sunshine that typically lifts their spirits, Helen polarises two aspects of her place identity. On the one hand, it is the socio-political place to which she does not feel attached because of its governors. On the other hand, by referring to the two toponyms, the two Athenian neighbourhoods Exarcheia and Monastiraki, she mobilises a kind of intimacy associated with the activities of strolling in pedestrian streets and sitting at outdoor cafés, meaningful only to Athenians.

In the next two examples, without mentioning any place names at all, Helen renounces her identification with Greece:

- *have stayed too long in this country...* (status posted on 25 May 2012 at 20:22 and liked by 2 people)
- *surrealand* (status posted on 16 June 2012 at 12:43)

The frustration-littered update in the first example is unpacked if we take into account that it was posted just after the May 2012 elections in Greece and the failure of political parties to form a new government as none of them had won an absolute majority of parliamentary seats. While in the interview excerpt in the beginning of the paper Helen deployed the spatial adverb ‘here’ to designate Greece, in this status update she displaces and distances herself by selecting the demonstrative ‘this country’ which in this context has a pejorative nuance seen as attitudinal dissociation and depersonalisation from the place. Her estrangement

from Greece is even more accentuated by choosing English as the language of her status.

One day before the new elections, on 16 June 2012, Helen’s status included just one coined word: ‘surrealand’. Her Greek contacts as well as those who keep in touch with the proceedings in Greece can easily deduce that the surrealand is Greece. The coined term bears the connotations of absence of rationality, co-ordination and planning in the country which Helen implicitly condemns.

V. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We are the product of the routes we have traversed [15]. In this networked era, Facebook could very well be seen as a versatile inventory of our routes as those are inscribed in check-ins, updates, and photographs. Along these lines, the argument that web and mobile technologies utterly disconnect us from physical spaces is emasculated [14].

What the analysis brought to the fore is that place identity can have several components and overlapping layers, be that geographical, social, political, cultural, emotional. With Facebook, users can bring together these components and layers from virtually anywhere. The findings provide valuable insights into the nature of place identity as unfurled in Facebook. To commence with, place identity is different for different users. For Helen especially, place seems to be at the core of her identity. The following extract is from our interview after my initial observation of her Facebook activity.

Mariza: what has struck me most is your place identity

Helen: well, indeed, now you’re saying it...

I knew it to a certain degree, but it impresses me that it comes across so strongly to someone else

Not only does it come across so strongly, to borrow Helen’s words, but also we witnessed how references to places in her posts endowed her with a sense of continuity to her identity.

Moreover, users identify with different scales or types of places [20] from micro (e.g. a café) to macro (e.g. Budapest) and from specific (e.g. Syntagma Square) to general (e.g. Hungarian countryside). The analysis also suggested that place identity differs with respect to our role in given places. It is one thing to be a traveller in Cuba (Carla) and another to be a protester in Syntagma (Helen). Another important finding is that place identity is associated with different representations of personal meanings (e.g. marking at a café in Budapest) as well as socio-political meanings (e.g. Greece as surrealand). Furthermore, it is associated with different types of discursive means (e.g. place naming, inclusive we, distancing deixis, metonymy, insinuation, intertextual links, artistic photography, protest photography, food photography).

Place identity on Facebook is found to have two intrinsic values. First, it is fluid, often divorced from where the body is physically located. Strictly speaking, the body is situated together with a portable device and posts on Facebook. As shown, however, Helen is in

England but thinks and posts about the demonstrations in Athens.

Second, place identity is an essentially interactive, collaborative task, constructed through processes of negotiation between the profile owner and his/her Facebook audience. Participants work together on place identities, picking up certain aspects and playing with them, as revealed in the stuffed vegetables photo. It is through their comments to posts that different facets of the hybridity of place identity are brought out, functioning as complementary parts of the profile owner's asserted identity.

As emerged from the data at hand, the users do not just communicate about place, but most importantly they communicate through place, that is to say, by means of the place they communicate 'something about themselves that goes beyond the descriptive characteristics of a place' [16]. For instance, they assert or eschew belonging, they communicate openness and respect to other cultures, they use different languages as a mark of affiliation with (or disaffiliation from) certain places, they make political statements, they disidentify with the stressful aspects of a place, and they raise awareness about local and national issues.

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