

***THE NIGERIA JOURNAL OF COMMUNICATION***

***VOL. 13, NO. 1, JUNE 2016***

***ISSN: 1596-356x***

**Preying on Platforms:  
A Comparative Analysis of Social Media and Traditional  
Mass Media Advertisements in the 2015 Presidential  
Election Campaigns in Nigeria**

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**Abstract**

In this study, a comparative functional analysis was made between social media and traditional mass media advertisements in the 2015 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria. The researchers used a modified approach to Benoit's functional theory of political discourse to identify and differentiate the themes of traditional mass media commercials from social media campaigns created during the 2015 presidential election. It was found that there were more acclaim (47.4%) campaign messages on traditional mass media platform, while social media platform had more attack (57.1%) campaigns. It was also found that due to the presence of attack (57.1 %) campaigns on social media platform, the room for campaign messages to carry third party evidence (64.3%) was more on social media than traditional mass media (42.1%) platform. The researchers concluded that themes of acclaim, attack, defend, policy and character emanating from campaigns messages in traditional mass media platform were more likely to differ from that of social media platforms.

**Keywords:** Advertising, Politics, Political communication, Content analysis, Elections



## **Introduction**

During the political campaigns of the 2015 presidential election, the mass media seem to play crucial roles in sensitising and mobilising the people for election. Key in the campaign was the use of the conventional mass media and social media. Ojebuyi and Ekennia (2013) as cited in Ojebuyi (2012) noted that "the mass media are regarded as sacred institutions that service the democratic process. They reconstruct, interpret and report issues that happen in the human society". Norris (1995) as cited by Vreese (2005) noted that the conventional media describe, explain and interpret events; they simultaneously provide the platform for the public to perceive the social reality as described by the mass media.

Chris (2013) noted that the use of social media for political campaigns grew rapidly since the 20,08 U.S. presidential election and brought the look and feel of the decades-old genre of television commercials to the Internet. This was made possible as a result of the widening availability of broadband Internet access in 2004, which gave the opportunity to create videos that could be seen online by millions of potential voters (Livingroomcandidate, 2004). Use of video on campaign websites expanded in 2008 when, for the first time ever, more than half of American households had broadband access (Networked Nation, 2007). This access creates some level of influence on the people for which, Didiugwu (2014) notes, that social media influences our actions, beliefs and perception about people and the politics of nations. This influence can either be subtle or impact filled.

It is in view of influencing voters favourably that campaign websites were used by candidates, political parties, and interest groups to extend and expand their arguments, and provide more evidence that could lead to voter persuasion. Such

sites are built to jgive room for added contents that can be clicked on for added information or personal interaction. Campaigns can use the web as a place to provide contents, such as, speeches, statements, news reports, and video blogs—not designed for television broadcast (Chris, 2013). The advantage of the web campaigns is that it creates room for content that do not need approval from APCON before it can be aired or made accessible to all. Web contents can contain detailed manifestoes of candidates, rationale for seeking political position and appeal for votes. Most Television adverts might need the approval of APCON if it is designed by organized advertising firms. This in a way limits the nature of the campaign.

Considering the fact that two platforms were employed during the 2015 presidential election, the researchers conducted a comparative analysis between social media advertisements and traditional television advertisements in the 2015 presidential campaigns in Nigeria.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is a common knowledge that the mass media play a critical role during election campaigns. The level of patronage of the media is usually on the high side during electioneering. People tend to use any. medium available to access information for their benefit; as a result, politicians and political parties seek for media that will help reach their target audience. Gbogbo and Ibukun (2014) best describe the situation when they noted that All Progressive Congress (APC), which is the strongest opposition coalition mounted against the PDF since military rule ended in 1999, gave room for high political campaigns during the 2015 presidential election.

Not minding the form of campaigns, two major platforms were used; traditional mass media and social media. These platforms create room for different types of media content. For the web based contents, convergence makes it possible to effectively combine text, audio and video materials. This is not so for the radio, television and newspaper platforms. Regulations apply on conventional mass media platforms which do not affect the social media platform. For which, Chris (2013) observed that political communication on the Internet seems to' differ from political communication on conventional mass media platform. One may ask; what are the quantitative differences between social media based campaigns and traditional mass media campaigns in electioneering issues and use of third-party information? It is on this basis that the researchers sought to examine comparatively, the differences between social media advertisements and traditional mass media advertisements in the 2015 presidential campaigns in Nigeria.

### **Purpose of Study**

The main purpose of this study is to examine comparatively, the differences between social media advertisements and traditional mass media advertisements in the 2015 presidential election campaigns in Nigeria.

### **Specific Objectives**

1. To find out how social media based campaigns differ from traditional mass media campaigns in response to acclaim, attack, or defend policies and/or character of candidates.
2. To find out whether the presence or absence of third-party evidence in social media campaign differ from traditional mass media campaigns.

## **Research Questions**

How do social media based campaigns differ from traditional mass media campaigns in response to acclaim, attack, or defend policies and/or character of candidates? In what way does the presence or absence of third-party evidence in social media campaign differ from traditional mass media campaigns?

## **Literature Review**

Initially, people thought that the advent of the new media will • force the traditional mass media to fizzle out. Several years have passed only for people to come to the understanding that the new media have come to exist side-by-side with the traditional mass media. Chris (2013) notes that the year 1990 made the Internet a rallying point for most political activities. Unlike before, political parties and politicians, including advertising firms and individuals see the Internet as a fertile ground to advance political discourse, campaigns and to communicate to their publics at a lower cost than mainstream media without ownership interference, government hindrances, heavy monitoring and allocation for air space and time. The Pew Internet & American Life Project noted that the Obama campaign of 2008 experienced the highest patronage of the social media, for which over 55% of all Americans went online for information about the campaign. The fact that Obama rejected government fund for the sponsor of his campaign made the Internet more viable as an avenue for raising fund for his campaign. During this period, 45% saw an online video related to the campaign. These online videos were signed in such a way that the Internet based commercials are different from the mainstream media commercials (Chris, 2013).

A look at the advertisements in the mainstream media and social media, in Nigeria, will also reveal a significant difference in their design, length and placement. The

social media content is not usually limited by time and space, but it is packaged to capture and retain the interest of the viewers. More information is usually given in the form of evidence provided. This is possible due to the extra pages that open when a particular advertisement is click on.

The mainstream media, especially TV has been called a "push" medium, because the viewers are passive audience. The Internet, however, has been called a "pull" medium that entails the prompt participation of users in their choice of links to click or website to visit or commercials to view. Therefore, social media advertisements need to be more interesting, persuasive, convincing and entertaining in order to attract and retain attention (Owen, 2007: Brownstein, 2008: Smith, 2010).

Tworzecki and Semetko (2013) observe that "political campaigns has long been concerned with the question of whether these campaigns result in symptoms of "malaise"- disaffection and withdrawal from politics or, alternatively, whether it can mobilize people for political activity (p. 407). The researchers, Tworzecki and Semetko (2013) investigated the "malaise versus mobilization" question of political campaigns in three new democracies; the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland. The argument behind the study was to find out whether political campaigns can lead to disaffection or malaise, as a result of the use of attack and defend campaigns, or whether it will help mobilize the people around a particular party or candidate. Their study ti tied "Media Use and Political Engagement in Three New Democracies: Malaise versus Mobilization in the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland" revealed that there was some evidence to support the mobilization hypothesis of political campaigns, which means that political

campaigns, whether attack or defence in nature, will definitely mobilize the people around a given party or political candidate (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2013).

A similar study in the area of political campaigns has indicted the changing trend in the area of political campaigns to include the use of the Internet for political purposes. The paper titled "Trends in Political Communication in Hungary: A Postcommunist Experience Twenty Years after the Fall of Dictatorship" written by Gabriella Szabo and Balazs Kiss highlights the trends of political communications (PC) that have arisen in Hungary after the collapse of communist regime (1989). The authors identified four main trends in the field of political campaigns. First is called *fragmentation which has to do with* the multiplication of political campaign channels and means, Internet, Web 2.0, fragmentation of content, amateurism in political campaigns. This means that more channels have been opened for the running of political campaigns. The second is the *post-objectivity*, which is the end of the requirement of unbiased and balanced coverage, more emphasis on the rise of opinion, on media as community focal point rather than window to the objective reality. This aspect sees the gradual decline of objectivity in most reports on political issues. The third is the *performative, which* looks at the representation of self, a strong focus on act, dramaturgy, and aesthetics. The performance of the political player becomes the focus of political campaigns. Here, the achievements or past records are used as instrument of persuasion in the political message. The last point raised by the authors is *popularization* which is the convergence of popular culture and politics, fan democracy, entertaining politics, involvement of citizens and so on (Szabo & Kiss, 2012).



Janet Takens, Wouter van Atteveldt, Anita van Hoof and Jan Kleinnijenhuis carried out a study titled "Media logic in election campaign coverage", which noted that "the content of political news is the product of news values and format requirements that media make use of to attract news consumers" (Takens, Atteveldt, Hoof & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013. p. 277). Their study tests whether three content characteristics - personalized, contest and negative coverage - manifest single media logic by analysing whether they co-vary over time. It also tests the implicit assumption underlying the media logic thesis that media adhere to single media logic as one institution. A semantic network analysis measured the degree to which television and newspaper coverage of five Dutch national election campaigns (1998-2010) contained the three content characteristics. The study shows that "personalized, contest and negative coverage form three indicators of a single logic that is shared by different media. Since the turn of the century, Dutch political news has simultaneously become decreasingly personalized, less focused on the contest and less negative" (Takens, Atteveldt, Hoof & Kleinnijenhuis, 2013, p. 277).

The differences inherent in mainstream media and social media are made manifest in the study titled "A Functional Analysis Comparison of Web-Only Advertisements and Traditional Television Advertisements from the 2004 and 2008 Presidential Campaigns", which was carried out by Chris Roberts in 2013. It was found that there could be differences in the commercials placed on mainstream media and social media. The study first sought to find out, through content analysis, if there are differences in the commercials post on the Internet and television. This, the study aimed to achieve through the use of the functional theory of campaign discourse developed by Benoit in 2007, In the course of doing this, the researcher examined 75 web-only video ads and 742 television ads created by

candidates and national parties during the 2004 and 2008 presidential campaigns. It was found that Internet based commercials were more likely to differ from television commercials on politics (Chris, 2013).

In a similar study carried out by Sid Bedingfield and Dien Anshari in 2014 titled "Thinking about Romney: Frame Building in a Battleground State in the 2012 Presidential Election" which investigated the framing of Mitt Romney in a key battleground state during the 2012 presidential election, campaign officials and political journalists contend that attacks launched by President Obama in late spring defined Romney for the remainder of the campaign. This study again places more emphasis on the problem of attack during campaigns. The attack on Romney was so heavy that he lost the election. During this campaign, Obama made heavy use of the internet and mainstream media. The results of the study revealed that partial support for this claim by revealing increased use of negative media frames after the attacks began. Specifically, framing of Romney as a "vulture capitalist" increased significantly during the Obama frame-building effort (Bedingfield & Anshari, 2014).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the functional theory of campaign discourse developed by William Benoit in 2007, which provides a useful framework to analyze and understand political advertising. The theory proposes that election periods create competing environment which forces politicians to use campaign messages to make themselves appear more comparatively advantaged than their opponents. Therefore, campaigns create political media contents with functions that (1) acclaim themselves (politicians) with positive statements about their credentials as a better candidate, (2) attack an opponent's credentials, or (3) defend with

refutations against an opponent's attack. These media contents can manifest in themes related to candidate's (1) policy or (2) character. By policy themes, it means that the campaign messages would discuss actions or ideas related to governmental action in the area of past deeds, plans, and general goals. While character themes discusses the candidate's perceived qualities in respect to their personal qualities, leadership abilities, values and/or principles (Benoit, 2007).

This theory is relevant to this study because it exposes the various forms campaign messages can take during election, as candidates jostle for position. While the incumbent candidates will focus their strength on the policies they projected and project executed (acclaim campaign), the opposition candidates will try to attack these policies and water the favourable influence of government projects on the people (attack campaign). The incumbent candidates will go further to create messages that will help counteract the attack from the opposition candidates (defend campaign) and the same process also happens between the opposition candidates and the incumbent candidates.

## **Research Method**

The study employed content analysis as its research design. Content analysis is the study of the manifest content of a published material, which in this case are the campaign messages made public during the 2015 presidential election. After thorough search for advertisements on social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, Badoo and Blogs, and traditional mass media platforms like NTA (Network and State Programmes), AIT, Channels, Silverbird, Lagos TV and some state broadcast outfits, the researchers found 52 individual, English-language campaigns for the 2015 presidential election for both PDF and APC political

parties. Some of these campaigns were representing the party stand, while the rest focused on the individuals running for a given political seat. A census of the 52 advertisements was studied as the study sample. This approach of selecting articles or advertisements for study is a common technique in content analysis (Bedingfield & Anshari, 2014; Meraz & Papacharissi, 2013; Chris, 2013).

This study adopted a single unit of analysis, advertisement. By advertisement, the researchers looked at notice, pictures or short films or drama on political messages about the 2015 presidential election persuading voters or stakeholders for or against a given political party or candidate. The advertisements used in this study were sourced from social media platforms and traditional mass media platforms.

The content categories of this study were guided by the modified approach to Benoit's functional theory of political discourse which included defend variable. For this reason, the content categories were categorized by the political discourse functions of "acclaim," "attack," and/or "defend." The topics of "policy" and/or "character" were also added to the content categories.

*Acclaim campaign:* This term is used to describe the words used by politicians, in their campaigns, to bestow on themselves the favourable credentials, track records and qualities that will make them win comparative advantage over their opponents.

*Attack campaigns:* This is a type of campaign message that tries to rubbish the image or reputation of the opponent, in terms of character, track record and personal qualifications.

*Defend campaign:* This type of campaign is produced to water the effect of the attack campaigns. In most cases, it deals with the introduction of a third party to prove that the attack by the opponent is baseless.

*Policy theme:* This refers to the past deeds or plans or actions taken by the government in power. It is the ideological frame that guided the government in power or the previous ones in the running of governance.

*Character theme:* This deals with campaign messages that look at the personal merit of a candidate in respect to their level of education, discipline, leadership abilities, values and self principles (Benoit, 2007).

In order to aid the comparison of the traditional mass media and social media, each particular campaign was analysed as a whole rather than examine the merit of individual statements made in the campaigns. Chris (2013) believed that considering the sum of each spot, instead of individual statements inside each spot, was necessary to better compare differences between the communication channels in the study.

Code sheet was used by the researchers to code the campaigns. This was done after the training process which allowed the researchers to understand the content categories. The researchers coded ten campaign messages each and made improvement on reliability where necessary. Krippendorff alpha gotten from SPSS 15.0 was used to calculate reliability, for which the following results were obtained: "acclaim" 0.89, "attack" 0.87, "defend," 0.82, "policy" 0.80, "character" 0.86 and "presence or absence" 0.80. These showed acceptable ranges of reliability.

## **Findings**

This section presents the analysis of data collected through code sheet. The collection of data for comparison purposes was made easier using Benoit functional theory. The data collected from 52 commercials are presented below.

Research Question One: How do social media-based campaigns differ from traditional mass media campaigns in response to acclaim, attack, or defend, policies and/or character of candidates?

**Table 1: Showing the analysis of campaigns by their functions**

	Acclaim Campaigns		Attack Campaigns		Defend Campaigns	
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%
Traditional Mass media (n=38)	18	47.4	12	31.6	8	21.1
Social Media (n=14)	4	28.6	8	57.1	2	14.3
Total (n=52)	22	42.3%	20	38.5%	10	19.2%

**Findings of Table One**

From the analysis in table one above, it was found that traditional mass media campaigns had more acclaim campaign messages (47.4%) than attack (31.6%) and defend (21.1%) campaigns; while on both platforms, there were more acclaim messages (22, 42.3%) than attack (20, 38.5%) and defend (10, 19.2%) campaigns.

**Table 2: Showing the analysis of campaigns by their themes**

	Acclaim Campaigns			Attack Campaigns		
	Policy	Character	Both P/C	Policy	Character	Both P/C
	F(%)	F(%)	F(%)	F(%)	F(%)	F(%)
Traditional Mass Media (n=38)	9(23.7%)	6(15.8%)	3(7.9%)	6(15.8%)	4(10.2%)	2(5.3%)

Social Media (n=14)	1(7.1%)	2(14.3%)	1(7.1%)	1(7.1%)	4(28.6%)	3(21.4%)
Total (n=52)	10(19.2%)	8(15.4%)	4(7.7%)	7(13.5%)	8(15.4%)	5(9.6%)

### **Findings in Table Two**

From Table 2, under traditional mass media, it was found that more of the acclaim campaigns are on policies (23.7%) of government, while the attack campaigns also focused on government policies (15.8%). However, on social media platform, more acclaim messages were on the character (14.3%) of candidate, hence, attack campaigns focus more on candidate's character (28.6%).

**Summary of Findings to Research Question One:** How do social media based campaigns differ from traditional mass media campaigns in response to acclaim, attack, or defend, policies and/or character of candidates?

The functional analysis of question one revealed that on both traditional mass media and social media platforms, there were more acclaim messages (42.3%) than attack (38.5%) and defend (19.2%) campaigns. However, the traditional mass media platforms had more acclaim campaign messages (47.4%) than attack (31.6%) and defend (21.1%) campaigns. Whereas, social media platforms accommodated more attack campaigns at 57.1%.

This means that there were more acclaim (47.4%) campaign messages on traditional mass media than social media. On the other hand, social media had more attack (57.1%) campaigns than traditional mass media.

The thematic analysis of question one revealed that, under traditional mass media, acclaim campaigns were more on government policies (23.7%), as a result, attack campaigns also focused on government policies (15.8%), However, on social

media platform, acclaim messages were on the character (14.3%) of candidate, hence, attack campaigns focus more on candidate's character (28.6%).

This means that, on the traditional mass media, campaigns were more on government policies (23.7%), while social media platform had campaigns that focused on candidates' character (28.6%). Hence, there was more attack on candidates' character on social media.

Research Question Two; In what way does the presence or absence of third-party evidence in social media campaigns differ from traditional mass media campaigns?

**Table 3: Showing evidence of third party present**

	Third party evidence	
	Frequency	Percentage
Traditional Mass Media (n-38)	16	42.1% n-38
Social Media (n=14)	9	64.3% n= 14
Total (iv=52)	25	%

Analysis in Table 3 seeks to bring out the extent to which media campaign messages make use of third party evidence. In this case, on traditional mass media platform, the table revealed that 16 advertisements amounting to 42.1% have third party evidence. On the part of the social media platform, 9 advertisements amounting to 64.3% have third party evidence.

The implication of this finding is that social media platform provides the room for campaign messages to carry third party evidence (64.3%) more than traditional



mass media (42.1 %). Other analysis not included in this work revealed that the third party evidence is prevalent in campaigns that have to do with acclaim and attack messages. Evidences are produced on attack issues on a candidate and programmes executed by the government.

### **Discussion of findings**

The study revealed that social media, in the 2015 presidential election had more attack (57.1%) campaigns than traditional mass media. The findings of this study is related to that of Sid Bedingfield and Dien Anshari in 2014 titled "Thinking about Romney; Frame Building in a Battleground State in the 2012 Presidential Election" which revealed that President Barack Obama used heavy attack campaign on social media to defeat his political opponent Mitt Romney. The campaign used by Obama portrayed Romney as a "vulture capitalist" and that nailed him permanently at the later part of the campaign process (Bedingfield & Anshari, 2014), This implies that the Internet provides a safe channel to display attack campaigns that would not raise any protest from regulatory bodies, thereby, help to dislodge an opponent. The media of convergence have made it easy for any type of package to be produced for the consumption of the people. The change mantra that filled the air during the campaign in Nigeria, might be the reason for the attack on the policies and character of former President Jonathan, which ultimately lead to his defeat. One might argue that social media, once again, have shown its potency as an agent of change.

On the other hand, it was found that there were more acclaim (47.4%) campaign messages on traditional mass media than social media. This finding was made clearer by Tworzecki and Semetko (2013), who investigated the "malaise versus mobilization" question of political campaigns in three new democracies of Czech

Republic, Hungary, and Poland. The study revealed that political campaigns can be acclaim or attack in nature, however, it is the acclaim campaigns that help mobilize people around a particular candidate. Because of the harmless nature of the acclaim campaigns, and the scrutiny it attracts from regulator}' bodies, the traditional mass media becomes a safe haven for it (Tworzecki & Semetko, 2013).

From the theoretical perspective, the Benoit functional theory of campaign discourse also gives a vivid picture of the findings of this study. The theory proposes that election periods create competing environment which forces politicians to use campaign messages to make themselves appear more comparatively advantaged than their opponents. In this situation, politicians reinvent themselves in such a way that will put them in good light (acclaim campaigns). In other cases, the politicians may decide to take the fight to their opponent directly by attacking their character or political antecedent (attack campaign). It is now left for the person attacked to defend him/her in any v/ay possible (defend campaign). In any way possible, it means that political campaigns must take any of these forms, and since the Internet is a less regulated channel, most candidates seek the channel to launch attack on their opponent. Hence, the prevalence of attack campaign on social media platform.

Ideally, the campaigns most candidates will like to float are acclaim. Messages are built to help convince voter to vote wisely. When this approach seems not to be working, most candidates resorted to attack on their opponent's credentials or party ideology. As experienced in the last presidential election, the candidature of former President Goodluck Jonathan was questioned heavily on the grounds of weakness and corruption, while that of President Muhammad Buhari was questioned on the

grounds of being dictatorial, heavy-handed and sectional in dealings (NTA, 2015; AIT, 2015).

Also responding to research question one, it was revealed that, on the traditional mass media platforms, campaigns were more on government policies (23.7%), while social media platform had campaigns that focused on candidates' character (28.6%). Hence, there was more attack on candidates' character on social media. Apu'n, Benoit (2007) made it very clear that media contents during political campaigns, especially commercials can manifest in themes related to candidate's (1) policy or (2) character. By policy themes, it means that the campaign messages would discuss actions or ideas related to governmental action in the area of past deeds, plans, and general goals. While character themes discusses the candidate's perceived qualities in respect to their personal qualities, leadership abilities, values and/or principles (Benoit, 2007). As observed in the findings of this study, there were more policy based campaigns on traditional mass media than social media. This may be related to the fact that advertisements on radio, television and newspaper are regulated by Advertising Practitioners Council of Nigeria (APCON), editors and internal auditors in advert firms. As a result most politicians and political party focused more on policy based issues which accommodated more of acclaim campaigns.

The social media platform had more character based campaigns which in most cases gave room for attack on candidates' character. Hence, there were more attack campaigns on social media and the character of candidates became targets. This may be attributed to limited campaigns on social media.

In research question two, it was revealed that social media platform provides the room for campaign messages to carry third party evidence (64.3%) more than traditional mass media (42.1%) messages. This means that additional information was provided for most campaigns as evidence that the argument they propose is valid. The social media platform gave the opportunity for one to search out more information on a given point through the link addresses provided. The findings here is best understood through the lenses of Geer (2006,p. 34), who noted that "negative commercials tend to use evidence more than positive ads, because negative ads rely on third-party evidence needed to boost credibility and because positive (acclaim) ads tend to contain more general references that are harder to take issue with". Furthermore, the finding of this study is related to that of Chris (2013) who also found that web based adverts are more likely to have evidence more than television. Chris noted that the most "plausible explanation for online ads being more likely than TV ads to have third-party evidence is found in the fact that many acclaim spots on the web are aimed at the campaign's followers and therefore require less evidence. An additional factor is the fundamental difference between TV and web spots. The lack of time restraints on web spots gives ad makers the opportunity to include more evidence, and the hyperlinking attributes of the web make it possible for ad producers to include links to the evidence used in attack ads.

## **Conclusion**

Considering the fact that there were more acclaim (47.4%) campaign messages on traditional mass media than social media, the researchers concluded that themes emanating from campaigns messages in traditional mass media were more likely to differ from themes in social media platforms. It was also concluded that social

media platforms were more likely to accommodate campaigns that attack the character or policy of candidates or political party in an election, since, social media platform had more attack (57.1 %) campaigns than traditional mass media.

### **Recommendations**

The researchers recommend that campaign messages be designed and posted on social media platform by advertising firms and advertising practitioners who are already conversant with the regulatory policies of APCON, as a way of reducing the incidence of attack on the credentials of candidates.

It is also recommended that political parties and candidates should make more use of social media platforms for campaigns purposes due to the room it creates for third party evidence on campaign messages.

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