Dis/engaging the 'common sense' of AI: Labor strategies from the 2023 SAG-AFTRA around data-driven technologies

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Abstract

Forecasts around AI portray its intrusion into everyday life, relationships, and work as inevitable—as an unexamined, foregone conclusion, a type of 'common sense' around this technology that does not perform functions as well its boosters promise. In this paper we unpack the common sense of AI promoted by tech owners and the press to the public, business owners, institutions, and government agencies as it manifests in discourse around and contracts focused on generative AI in the 2023 Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strike and contract. This paper draws from science and technology studies (STS), social movement literature, and critical studies of technology to develop a spectrum of engagement with the "common sense" of AI to examine discourse around the SAG-AFTRA contract, and how the contract demands themselves respond – or fail to respond – to the challenges of defining AI as a subject that can be negotiated or refused in labor contracts. This spectrum of engagement allows us to better understand how the power to challenge the common sense of AI is and is not built through this contract. It also helps us draw out suggestions for labor strategies that enact intertwined concepts of reconfiguration and care from feminist STS to enact more powerful broad-based, bottom-up policy around AI and technology deployment.

Introduction

In popular discourse, there is a type of "common sense" promoted by Silicon Valley around artificial intelligence. Buzz and panicked discourse around AI ranges from apocalyptic fear and AI bringing forward the "end of reality" as we know it (Foer, 2018), to unbridled enthusiasm where adherents of AI promise the future of "artificial general intelligence" where machine learning technologies are able to process cognitive tasks more efficiently than humans (Fei et al., 2022). AI saturates media and economic forecasts (Dandurand et al., 2023). Workplace inboxes are flooded with communications about new AI tools, workshops to improve AI skills, and directives on how to incorporate AI into workflows (Dabis and Csáki, 2024). AI is the focus of grants for research and scholarship, and the glut of AI generated proposals is a significant problem for grants foundations (Parrilla, 2023). In this discourse, forecasts of AI's impacts on various aspects of everyday life including education, artistic expression, and work are portrayed as a given—as an unexamined, foregone conclusion (Andersen, 2023). In this paper we unpack the common sense of AI promoted by tech owners and the press to the public, business owners, institutions, and government agencies as it manifests in discourse around and contracts focused on generative AI in the 2023 Screen Actors Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strike and contract.

This paper develops a spectrum of engagement with the concept of "common sense" of AI that we use to examine

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discourse around the SAG-AFTRA contract, and how the contract demands themselves respond – or fail to respond – to the challenges of defining AI as a subject that can be negotiated or refused. Reading the data through the spectrum clarifies that these contract negotiations exist in a difficult context. There is little protective state or federal regulation around AI for workers. At the same time, there are massive issues of consent and compensation for intellectual property and likeness concerns, racialized image-based pay discrimination, as well as a popular pervading sentiment that AI is "inevitable" that puts labor in a weaker position to address AI than is necessary.

The "common sense" of AI and labor

There is a "common sense" of AI and its impacts on labor that coalesces through a set of practices. Within critical disciplines, concepts of mythmaking (Barthes, 1972), ideology (Althusser, 1972), hegemonic discourse (Collins, 1990; Gramsci, 1926/1971; Hall et al., 1978) all speak to how different communication and production technologies cultivate and entrench the power of the owning class. Common sense, or a skewed perception of reality that perpetuates the status quo as normal, natural and unquestionable, is an expression of hegemonic power. The concept of common sense describes commonly held—yet nonetheless fragmented and heterogenous—knowledge that often goes unquestioned as fact (Gramsci, 1926/1971). According to critical theorist Hito Steyerl's (2023) power analysis of machine learning technologies, the power of the owning class depends on its seizure of data. Thus, the diffusion of for-profit technology, and specifically various applications that track, record, and classify user data, can never be liberatory, despite the claims of the companies, industries, and institutions promising safety, accessibility, efficiency, and sustainability (Bender and Hanna, 2025; Benjamin, 2019).

Gramsci's notion of "common sense" also points to what Dandurand and their colleagues (2023) describe in this journal as the *freezing out of AI's controversiality* as constructed through the mundane practices and labor concerns of news production by legacy media outlets, individual journalists, and experts frame AI as an inevitable force that rises above controversies that surround it, or a as a valuable tool to be exploited uncritically. Dandurand and colleagues describe how AI's controversiality is obfuscated as the political economic calculations within the news industry largely frames debates around AI in terms of its merits. This framing implicates journalists as active participants in promoting AI as "common sense," and act as an 'engine, not a camera' (Dandurand et al., 2023: 2; Mackenzie, 2017) of our current situation where AI is proselytized as a foregone conclusion.

"Common sense" comes not only from news media but within workplaces of other purportedly public-serving institutions. In public education, data driven technologies have long been heralded as answers to the financial problems that come from the defunding of public institutions since the 1970s (Feenberg, 2017) that has forced university assets to be managed as businesses subject to whims of volatile markets and technocratic rationing (Newfield, 2016). In the pandemic, educational institutions have seen a massive increase in top-down decisions around data-driven technology deployment (B. Paris et al., 2021) that have laid way to increased technocratic rationality advanced though data-driven technology. In response to this phenomenon, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) decided unilaterally that they would partner with Microsoft, one of the most influential corporate actors in the realm of generative AI as well as learning, educational, and workplace platforms, with the assumption that having a seat at the table would push Microsoft to make better decisions about the development, deployment, and use of generative AI technologies (Microsoft Education Team, 2024).This phenomenon of using technology to solve larger structural issues is not confined to education. This happens across farming, care work, and other industrial sectors (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018).

Other industrial unions have partnered with big technology firms to try to insulate themselves from the negative impacts of AI—ultimately hoping to influence the development of these technologies. The American Federation of Laborers and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and Communications Workers of America (CWA) have also partnered with Microsoft (Nadeau, 2024) for seats at the table. The International Union of Operations Engineers (IUOE) has partnered Leica Geosystems Heavy Construction to provide training with Leica GPS technology. In return, these systems improve and become more widely used, increasing their position of power (Leica Ecosystems, 2024).

As these data-driven, artificial intelligence technologies are framed, on one hand, as something new, opaque, and exceedingly powerful, avenues for dissent and the controversies around them are shut down, whilst public acquiescence encourages buy-in, network effects, and increased power for these technology firms. One the other hand, this buy-in encourages network effects and increased use further silences opposition, all the while these technologies' success benefits the owning classes. The "common sense" of AI, that is, the widely-held belief that AI is a foregone conclusion, functions as an articulation of hegemonic power. In this frame, we seek to understand how the labor movement can meaningfully intervene.

Policy and the common sense of AI

At present, apart from the organized labor and community examples above, there is very little in the way of reigning in AI to focus on people, not profit. As of 2025, Trump administration has been forceful in promoting an AI-at-all-costs agenda though executive orders to support a brittle industry (Muldoon et al., 2025; Storm, 2025). However, as we have seen, AI is a nebulous term and necessarily rests on existing

infrastructure. And while the only debates around reigning in AI in state and federal lawmaking are focused on deepfakes (Paul-Fowler, 2024), and few on generative AI in creative work at state levels (Kim, 2024), policy debates suggest reforming the ensembles of infrastructural support that undergird AI (B. Paris et al., 2023). The most well-known examples of reform advocate for US and EU regulation to weaken corporate platforms influence and Internet Service Providers that control how data flows through Internet infrastructure at the end nodes that are the pipelines for AI training data and use (Bates et al., 2016; Muldoon et al., 2024). Still others advocate for nationalizing the Internet as a public utility (Tarnoff, 2022).

However, efforts to reign in AI have been slow going. Often positioned by corporate entities as "responsible," "ethical," or "Public AI," these initiatives often serve to recuperate, rather than resist or reconfigure, the power structures that ultimately serve the bottom line for AI companies and the tech giants they are embedded in (Crawford, 2021; Greene et al., 2019; Kieslich et al., 2022; Valli Buttow and Weerts, 2022),

The limits of existing approaches are constrained by the ambiguous or piecemeal status of AI as a mandatory or permissive subject in US labor law. But, as AI is framed as requiring more training, more literacy, and different work practices, it necessarily pertains to work practices which are permissive subjects of bargaining. We argue that this ambiguity should be reconciled in contracts and need not be a barrier for enacting change in AI and technology deployment. Defining AI and technology more broadly as a permissive subject of bargaining provides opportunities for reconfiguring AI and technology deployment more broadly. Both reconfiguration and care entail a collective imagining otherwise that go against how individualism is seeded into dominant understandings of innovation and transformation.

Piecemeal ownership schema where individuals ask for rights from owners often end up benefiting those who own the means to production because they delegate and enforce those rights. Steyerl (2023) suggests that to reconfigure AI and its infrastructure to become more people-centered, "we start with a simple process of subtraction" (p. 12) to dismantle technologies as commercialized proprietary entities and mechanisms of capitalist accumulation—that is, virtually all technologies as they currently exist.

The scale of the problem

AI is not simply a discursive formation that stands as a "common sense" foregone conclusion, it also obfuscates large-scale, transnational coordination of resources, labor, and people who make up the infrastructures that are required for artificial intelligence. This matters because it broadens the base for possible coalition building to be mobilized in these "processes of subtraction" (Steyerl, 2023, p. 12).

The data that feeds AI models is produced by user actions and activities on platforms every day (Tubaro et al., 2020). Amazon has long refereed to their Mechanical Turk platform as artificial intelligence, but there have always been humans doing the often-underpaid work of classifying and sorting content of all types, increasingly in the Global South (Crawford, 2021; Gonzalez-Cabello et al., 2025). This hidden labor has been referred to as "ghost work" (Gray and Suri, 2019; Muldoon et al., 2024) and "human-fueled automation" (Irani, 2019), drawing attention to the people who power AI systems. Workers automated fields like farming, care work, and retail have seen dramatic restructuring and increased workloads with decreased pay as they train the data-driven technologies to do the work that an entire department, like cashiers at a grocery store, used to do (Mateescu and Elish, 2019).

As theorists ranging from Safiya Noble (2016) to Kate Crawford (2021) have documented, minerals like lithium, coltan, nickel, and copper necessary for building out the massive networked computational models that undergird AI must be mined and refined by workers largely outside of the Global North, who are severely underpaid for such backbreaking and dangerous work. While minerals and obfuscated labor are the backbone of AI infrastructure, electricity is its lifeblood. At present, computational activity is beginning to be considered in terms of fossil fuel and water usage (Hogan, 2018) that affects everyone who lives on this planet. The seemingly ubiquitous nature of AI—one can access various applications of AI from anywhere—further obfuscates this pipeline of labor, resources, and political power that flows through its "immaterial" and ephemeral application (Hu, 2016).

Although AI is framed as coming for white collar workers who have long thought themselves safe from automation (Gelles-Watnick et al., 2023), transnational, cross-sector workers are also implicated in the infrastructure of AI. This is why labor organizing matters. Organizing entails building mutual education, care, and support that results in solidarity and action (McAlevey, 2016). As the daily toil, activities, time, and attention of workers across the world produce economic value for people who don't have our best interests in mind, we can envision possibilities for fostering relationality and solidarity that will be further described in the next subsection.

Reconfiguration: combining labor with care to challenge the common sense of AI

Feminist scholarship across disciplines provides grounds for a reconceptualization of labor that includes humanistic and affective relations of care that refuses capitalist notions of productivity and gestures toward the collective labor that goes into producing the commons—sustaining community and shared humanity (Campt and Coleman, 2018; Terranova, 2000). In this definition, labor is not a service supporting capitalism but rather "the work we do to be able to feel or not feel in relationship to one another" (Campt and Coleman, 2018: 216).

In the sphere of technology, this act of care and organizing is in line with what feminist science and technology studies (STS) scholars call "reconfiguration" that focuses on *how* technology is made and unmade through "ongoing, collective practices of sociomaterial configuration, including reconfigurations effected in use" (Suchman, 2020). Reconfiguration opposes dominant understandings of what it means to act, and the capacity to act within structures of hierarchical power (Suchman, 2020). Work within feminist STS views agency as relational—occurring between people, artifacts, entities, and the environment—eschewing individualism, exceptionalism, and teleological innovation that underlie dominant understandings of technology (de la Bellacasa, 2017). As feminist STS regards agency as relational, the concept of reconfiguration is closely connected to that of care. More than the act of supporting others, care is "a critically disruptive doing that can open to 'as well as possible' reconfigurations engaged with troubled presents" (de la Bellacasa, 2017). Black feminist scholar Tina Campt describes care as the close consideration of relationality and structural power in commons-based organizing to necessarily include "the work of feeling done both in spite and because of these differences and choosing to feel across that difference rather than with or for someone living in very different circumstances" (Campt, 2019: 2).

The wealth of evidence that demonstrates the inability of regulation to meaningfully flow from policy, and from the industry itself, suggests that an activism rooted in collectivity, or a notion of an organized technological commons (Terranova, 2000) is most likely to bring effective change to infrastructure—particularly in *how* and *for whom* it functions. Social movement scholars McAlevey (2016) and Piven and Cloward (1978) stress that effective movements across history have used this commons-based approach. In recent tech industry organizing, workers and community organizers have mobilized to exposed Palantir's, Amazon's, and LexisNexis' involvement with US immigrations and customs control (ICE) through harmful data-driven technologies (Mijente, 2018), which prompted some white collar tech workers' to refuse their labor around these products (Haskins, 2022). The Athena Coalition has been drawing together community organizations, civil society, and workers to oppose Amazon's massive power in localized contexts around data center construction, worker exploitation, and other concerns (Athena, 2025). Others have reconfigured technology for smaller scale configurations of development, deployment, and use, such as in Marisa Duarte's (2017) and Fernanda Rosa's (2023) work around network and data sovereignty movements, and Stop LAPD Spying, and the Detroit Community Technology Project focus on refusing surveillance technologies in their communities, while building technology that promotes local flourishing around racial, economic, and health justice (Benjamin, 2019).

Unions have negotiated AI and other data-driven technologies out of their workplaces in their contracts. In October 2024, 45,000 port workers on the East and Gulf Coasts from the International Longshoremen's Association (ILWA) shut down ports from Maine to Texas asking for an end to automation in logistics that include the use of generative AI and a host of other technologies for shipping. After three days of the strike and a deal on wage increases, workers and port operators agreed to extend their contract to January 15th, 2025, while talks around automation continue. "Workers are challenging automation because they know the negative effects that disappearing jobs have on our families and communities," an ILWU Coast Longshore Division spokesperson said to Reuters in October 2024 (Oladipo, 2024). And several unions from Communication workers of America's call center workers, to air traffic controllers (National Air Traffic Controllers Association) to healthcare (National Nurses United) have effectively bargained for worker decision-making and control around data-intensive technology, and the ability to refuse technologies in parts of professional practice and the right to redress for harms brought through these technologies (Kresge, 2025)

As proposed in this work, commons-based reconfigurations of AI entail cooperative approaches to challenge how AI technologies and their accompanying narratives obscure the human relations that sustain them. Commons-based reconfiguration embraces Suchman's (2020) provocation for "new reconfigurings of the technological, based not in inventor heroes or extraordinary new devices, but in mundane, and innovative, practices of collective sociomaterial infrastructure building" (p. 372).

In practice, commons-based reconfiguration entails solidaristic organizing across sectors impacted by AI. Commons-based reconfiguration entails organizing across ability, race, and gender, and across different classes of workers, white collar, gig work, and blue collar, that work across multiple sectors including data workers, arts and cultural workers, tech workers, manufacturing and logistics workers, workers in semiconductor plants, call center workers, nurses, doctors, and educators. Social movement scholars have long noted the potence of solidaristic mass movements (McAlevey, 2016; Piven and Cloward, 1978). In the case of commons-based reconfiguration, this could entail worker-led actions including occupations, mass strikes, and work stoppages that are intentionally cross-occupational and transnational in terms of their participation and scope. In the face of the planned UAW 2028 general strike, these ideas are not outside of the realm of possibility (Lazare, 2024). Commons-based reconfiguration also challenges dominant narratives that ultimately cede to corporate interests by seeking redress through copyright and maintaining a narrow focus on workers in the context of the United States and the Global North more broadly. Within these narratives, potential solidarities between workers are often overlooked, especially those across the Global South and Global North. Additionally, they maintain an approach to workers' concerns around generative
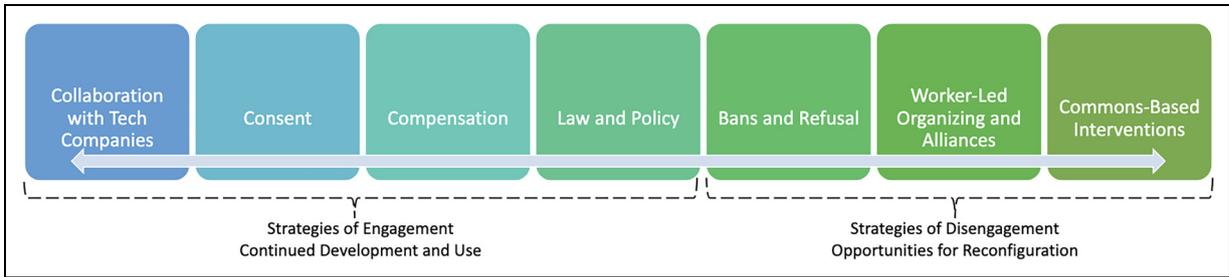
Figure 1. Spectrum of (dis)engagement.

AI that embraces further expansion and enforcement of copyright and intellectual property legislation. Arguments for advancing copyright ignore how such mechanisms operate within corporate logics that support the overall privatization of public goods.

Implicit in our notion of commons-based reconfiguration is the shared and worker-led governance of AI infrastructure and broader technology infrastructure. However, the point is not to work towards the current status quo of efficiency, which serves to obfuscate labor and relations, but to upend and reconfigure the technology infrastructure and the exploitative labor conditions that they fortify (Eglash et al., 2024).

Theoretical model: Spectrum of engagement with the "common sense" of AI

These interventions and theories above around AI and commons-based technological change suggest a schema of shared governance or even worker-governance of technology infrastructure, including that which undergirds AI. In the interest of promoting commons-based interventions around governing AI from the perspective of labor organizing, we propose the following model (Figure 1) to better understand what important organizing concerns towards commons-based technology are addressed and left unaddressed. We later apply this model as we analyze SAG-AFTRA contract language and the discourse around it to learn important lessons about possible organizing goals and how to achieve them.

Spectrum of engagement with the "common sense" of AI

Based on the literature and events described within organized labor above, we have developed a spectrum of (dis) engagement for workers across sectors impacted by AI technologies. The four strategies on the left negotiate with the common sense of AI, giving it power and weight, as these strategies work with AI as it is, instead of disengaging with the common sense of AI, and pushing these technologies to work that are commons-based or people-centered.

Starting at the far left, engagements with promoting uncritical "common sense" with AI can be seen in the *collaboration with tech companies*, wherein workers and unions work together with tech companies to develop and regulate technologies. Unions such as American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) have already partnered with tech companies such as Replica, Microsoft, and OpenAI in AI development and implementation endeavors. This is common among industrial unions, such as the IUOE partnership with Leica Geosystems Heavy Construction to provide training with Leica GPS technology (Leica Ecosystems, 2024) where the union's work force is training and improving the AI models developed by these companies, under the auspices that use of these technologies is improving the workers' skill sets.

Next from the left, common sense of AI involves *mechanisms for consent*, which includes notifying workers and unions with clear description of the intended use of computer-generated assets based off a person's own likeness or work, as well as consent for use of computer-generated assets based off a person's own likeness or work. Consent is a step better than no consent, but as we have seen time and time again in technology practice, consent may be co-opted if workers aren't given the ability to meaningfully negotiate opting out, one may also consent to one use and not another, but in this schema, there is only a blanket consent to all uses.

Compensation, the third strategy of engagement, involves payment for the use of computer-generated assets based off a person's likeness or work. Similar to consent, compensation is closely related to intellectual property and copyright law. One-time payment for use of a person's likeness or work that makes value for a firm limits the financial benefits for the consenting individual. Being paid for one's creative activity, labor, or their own likeness, is similar to consent, once you give a blanket consent, you no longer have the ability to negotiate your consent, further being paid for your assets not the same as controlling these goods.

Law and policy are interrelated strategies of engagement that include policy making efforts and the expansion and enforcement of legislation to place guardrails on AI as seen in California (Levine, 2024) and Tennessee (Leibfreid, 2024) to

protect white collar workers from AI impersonation (Kim, 2024). Law and policy approaches often coincide with other strategies of engagement including those such as collaboration with tech companies, consent, and compensation (Hickok and Maslej, 2023).

Law and policy solutions can also include *bans and refusal*. As shown with the CWA's worker-led organizing for pre-emptive rights on generative AI technologies in call centers, the CWA showed that AI actually constituted a mandatory subject, that intervened in job security, wages, work intensity and time, discipline and monitoring, and affected how customers treated workers, all of which could be bargained against (Doellgast et al., 2023). It was effectively halted. It is this type of disengagement with the "common sense" of AI that provides possibilities for commons-based reconfigurations of AI. Moving from the left, the first strategy of disengagement includes outright bans and refusal. This allows for worker-led possibilities question and collectively reconsider whether AI and other technologies in their current configurations should exist at all. But refusal does not have to be negative, it can be incredibly innovative and present the ability to re-imagine what workers need and want.

Worker-led organizing efforts and *commons-based interventions* harness collective power to jointly reconfigure technology infrastructure. These collective processes of reconfiguration could occur across sectors and center those directly impacted by such technologies—organizing, creating, and sustaining infrastructure in solidarity with one another—that do not gloss over difference but directly address differential lived experiences and their sociomaterial outcomes (Campt, 2019; Campt and Coleman, 2018; Suchman, 2020) In the case at hand this would account for transnational labor struggles, race, class, gender, as well as the environment. In a moment captivated by technologically-driven "innovation" and "transformation," commons-based reconfiguration disengages the uncritical common sense of technology infrastructure, and its devaluation of labor, people-centered flourishing, and our shared commitments toward each other.

Research design: policy and discourse analysis to understand contract demands around technology

Case selection

The 2023 SAG-AFTRA contract was selected as a case for this study due to its widespread coverage in US news media and how served as a key concern and catalyst for labor organizing. The strike occurred from July 14th, 2023 until November 9th, 2023. SAG-AFTRA represents over 160,000 actors, musicians, dancers, announcers, voiceover artists, and stunt performers (SAG-AFTRA, 2024). Overlapping with the 2023 Writers Guild of America (WGA) Strike,

wherein screenwriters advocated for regulations around generative AI use by film and television studios, SAG-AFTRA membership mobilized around similar concerns with the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP)—the trade association that represents major US film and television producers (Barnes et al., 2023). At 118 days, it was the longest actors' strike in Hollywood history (Maddaus, 2023a). The contract, which was ratified by membership on December 5th, 2025, is the first include "AI protections" for actors (Maddaus, 2023a).

Data collection and analysis

Given that labor is an important part of the infrastructure that enables and is affected by AI deployment, we have focused on labor as a locus of change worthy of analysis. As researchers, we are influenced by our longstanding academic and personal interest in labor as it has manifest in digital fora over the last 20 years. The first and second authors are heavily involved in labor organizing with the AAUP-AFT Local 6323 at Rutgers University, their home instiution. The third author is involved in the same local union and has a deep background in community organizing against the carceral state. We acknowledge that our positionality influences our perception of the problem, our selection of the topic, literature, and cases, as well as our analysis. The technofeminist methodological frameworks we follow value researcher positionality in the research process as a crucial tool for discerning how power works within technology infrastructural concerns (Haraway, 1991; Harding, 2004; B. Paris et al., 2023).

Our study examined policy documents as data sources, which is common in information and technology policy scholarship (Krarup and Horst, 2023) critical legal theory (Zalesne, 2013), and standpoint epistemology (Collins, 1990; Shelby and Henne, 2022). We combine policy analysis with discourse analysis (Dandurand et al., 2023; Stevens et al., 2018) to compare policy document language. Past work has employed this combination of methods for instance to understand how actors and the organizations they represent–or that represent them – develop and enforce policy (Allan et al., 2009; Dandurand et al., 2023; Krarup and Horst, 2023), as well as how the larger public and Union members view such policy decisions as expressed in discourse of popular media like news outlets and op-eds, and on social media (Stevens et al., 2018). To ensure an appropriately grounded approach, and a diverse evidence base, we collected documents from multiple sources (Mcculloch, 2004). For this our policy document is the SAG-AFTRA contract, and the discourse analysis is drawn from 94 individual data sources from the union website, union documents, and popular news pieces, initially using key word searches on the Union website including "artificial intelligence" "AI", and "digital replicas", and selecting results uploaded between January 2023 and June 2024 to account

contemporaneous discussion of the strike, which occurred from July 14th to November 9th, 2023. Popular press coverage from publications such as *The New York Times, Axios, Rolling Stone, Prism,* and entertainment industry-focused outlets such as *Variety* and *Deadline* were included in analysis as specific exemplars of the dominant discourse around the strike as it was discussed within major national news outlets with large circulation and industry publications that provide news and analysis for those in entertainment professions. The search strategy for popular press articles consisted of key word searches including the phrases: "SAG-AFTRA artificial intelligence," "SAG-AFTRA AI," "SAG-AFTRA strike," and "SAG-AFTRA digital doubles" within the date range of January 2023 to June 2024 to locate articles related to the Union, the strike action, and AI technology more broadly. The date range was selected to account for concurrent discussion of the strike. A sampling of these documents that are explicitly referenced in this paper are provided in Table 1 below.

As is common in small-scale qualitative studies, we coded and analyzed documents individually and discussed our coding collectively. We considered and reflexively discussed our subject positions and roles as researchers as they relate to the inquiry (Glesne, 2014). We first conducted a policy analysis to identify what the particular contract terms were and then we engaged in a critical discourse analysis of the data collected to understand how these contract demands were understood negotiated, and how they were communicated both within SAG-AFTRA and outside, especially noting critical voices within membership reported in the press. From there, we further categorized the controversies, debates, and narratives that arose from the contract. These themes around how contract demands and people's understanding of them relate to the strategies of dis/engagement model, which analyzes the 94 documents, a small sample of individual sources – indicated by superscript corresponding with data source number in the table – that are quoted because they are exemplar and encapsulate overall tensions, details, and information found in the larger corpus. Full data is available upon request to corresponding author.

Overall our thematic analysis based on the theoretical model of the spectrum we developed from the literature that we leave for the discussion is what is and is not articulated in the SAG-AFTRA contract and the discourse around the contract terms on generative AI, and what this tells us about the possibility for building better organizing processes around technology.

Limitations

Our study has some limitations. Here we use interpretative technofeminist analytical methods to examine recent deployments around labor activities that have not been written up in scholarly literature yet, even in labor studies. Labor studies and technology research typically examine adoption patterns over extended periods (many years even decades), while our investigation captures labor organizing around technology as it is unfolding in the present (that is, circa 2023-4). Here we use what some positivistic researchers might call a "convenience sample" drawn from publicly available contract language and news sources that we analyze critically, but while some may argue this is a limitation, it is common in the field and in this journal regarding recent technological developments (Dandurand et al., 2023). While we might have collected other data, such as interviews with members to substantiate some of the data we had already collected, this is beyond the our scope.

Finally, interpretative studies are not generalizable often provide a small-scale giving us a snapshot from situated position. Nonetheless, they are a means to rich, in-depth knowledge of a particular phenomenon, situated in its context, and provide a foundation for further empirical work. The work we have done here sets the stage for subsequent data collection and analysis in this topic area, using different methods, such as interviews with participants and policymakers.

## From guardrails to reconfiguration: strategies of engagement and disengagement

Our examination of contracts and official union communications reveals how dominant deterministic narratives around the inevitable rise of AI influenced and ultimately overshadowed some members' concerns about the value of creative labor, racial inequities, and the lack of enforceable regulation around AI and its use in the industry. The discourse on AI was limited to appropriate implementation rather than the structural conditions that underlie them or whether such technologies in their current formations should exist at all. Echoing the dominant discourse, narratives of AI in the SAG-AFTRA contract assign the technology a certain ambiguity and inevitability that foreclose any other options outside of its continued expansion. Our analysis reveals a tension between potential strategies of engagement and disengagement with the status quo of "common sense" technology deployment across the labor sector.

Strategy of engagement: contract terms, consent, and compensation

SAG-AFTRA member and public communications emphasized what performance and creativity, as well as larger creative pursuits as core to what it means to be human and to live a good and meaningful life. However, Figure 2 shows where in the spectrum the contract and its language is situated, and how it assumes the continued use of AI

Table 1. Quoted sources from data corpus.

Data source no.	File name	Source	Source/ type	Medium	Link
1	2023_FAQs_graphic.pdf	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Document	https://www.sagaftra.org/files/sa_documents/AIFAQs.pdf
2	2023_TVTheatricalContracts_webpage	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Webpage	https://www.sagaftra.org/contracts-industry-resources/contracts/2023-tvtheatrical-contracts
3	20231129_TentativeAgreement_news	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Union magazine article	https://www.sagaftra.org/tentative-agreement-reached-0
4	2023_RatificationSocialMediaToolkit_toolkit	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Document	https://www.sagaftra.org/files/sa_documents/SAG-AFTRA%20Ratification%20Member%20Social%20Media%20Tool%20Kit_1.pdf
5	2023_SummaryTA_document	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Document	https://www.sagaftra.org/files/sa_documents/TV-Theatrical_23_Summary_Agreement_Final.pdf
6	2023_DigitalReplicas_graphic	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Document	https://www.sagaftra.org/files/sa_documents/DigitalReplicas.pdf
7	20230517_MemberStrikeAuth_webpage	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Webpage	https://www.sagaftra.org/member-message-strike-authorization-vote
8	20230809_LAVotersGuide_document	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Union voter's guide	https://www.sagaftra.org/voters-guide-2023-los-angeles-local-election
9	20230719_NewEnglandVotersGuide_document	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Union voter's guide	https://www.sagaftra.org/voters-guide-2023-new-england-local-election
10	20230726_SanFranNorCalVotersGuide_document	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Union voter's guide	https://www.sagaftra.org/voters-guide-2023-san-francisco-northern-california-local-election
11	20230718_Axios_press	Axios	News media	News article	https://www.axios.com/2023/07/18/hollywood-strike-sag-aftra-wga
12	20231205_Prism_press	Prism	News media	News article	https://prismreports.org/2023/12/05/sag-aftra-contract-falls-short-ai-protections/
13	2023_RegulatingAI_graphic	SAG-AFTRA	Union	Document	https://www.sagaftra.org/files/sa_documents/AI%20TVTH.pdf
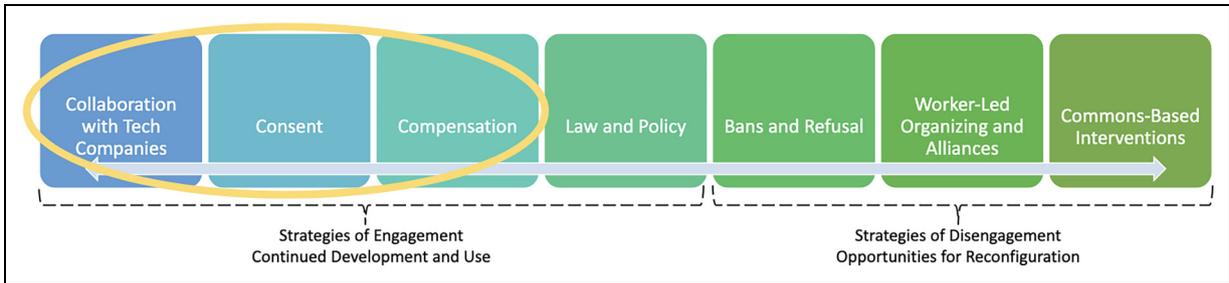
Figure 2. Strategies of engagement with the 'common sense' of AI.

technology and includes various loopholes. The contract mainly develops and defines terminology around generative AI and digitally-produced performers, as well as set guidelines for their creation and their use. The contract includes specific language that "acknowledge[s] the importance of human performance in motion pictures and the potential impact on employment."[5] The Codified Basic Agreement (CBA) also includes a definition of generative AI as: as: "a subset of artificial intelligence that learns patterns from data and produces content based on those patterns (e.g., ChatGPT4, MidJourney, Dall-E2)."[6] According to this definition, generative AI "does not include 'traditional AI' technologies programmed to perform specific functions (e.g., CGI and VFX), such as those already used during all stages of motion picture production (e.g., pre-visualization, pre-production, production, post-production, distribution, marketing)."[6] With regards to concerns about training data, the contract includes an "agreement to meet regularly to discuss remuneration, if any, for use of work produced under [this agreement] to train GAI [generative AI] system for creation of Synthetic Performers"[5] (i.e., entirely digitally-produced performers created through generative AI).

The contract establishes guidelines around the creation and use of "digital replicas" and "synthetic performers." Digital replicas are digital reproductions of an actor's voice or likeness. The contract described two types of digital replicas: "employment-based digital replicas" and "independently created digital replicas." Employment-based digital replicas are those that are created during the actors' physical participation in work through methods such as scanning, which can then be used to depict the actor in scenes they did not actually perform. Independently created digital replicas are made without the actor's physical participation and can perform in scenes that they did not perform. The parameters of consent and compensation vary depending on the type of technology utilized.

The guidelines for synthetic performers created through generative AI are less robust than those for digital replicas. Synthetic performers are entirely digitally-produced performers created through generative AI that do not resemble a recognizable actor and are not voiced by a person. The contract requires that studios who want to use a synthetic performer must notify and provide the union with opportunities to

bargain over the usage of a synthetic performer in lieu of hiring a human performer. A document drafted by the union with frequently asked questions on AI notes that "for wholly synthetic assets, [studios] cannot use them without notifying the union and bargaining. Had we not done that, there was nothing stopping them from using these synthetic assets without anyone's consent."[1] The contract also notes that if studios create a synthetic performer through prompting a generative AI system using a performer's name and their "principal facial feature"—the mouth, nose, eyes, or ears—that is recognizable, studios must bargain with the performer and obtain their consent. However, for synthetic performers and independently created digital replicas, there are exceptions for consent with regards to uses protected by the First Amendment. A summary of the tentative agreement lists these exceptions as "comment, criticism, scholarship, satire or parody, use in a docudrama, or historical or biographical work."[5] In the aforementioned types of projects, studios do not need to obtain consent from performers to use their digital doubles.

The guidelines around AI in the contract primarily focus on consent and compensation for the creation and use of digital replicas and synthetic performers. While the language around consent provides performers with some semblance of choice regarding whether digital replicas of themselves are created and how they are used, performers may lose out on work if they refuse to consent to the terms laid out by studios. While guidelines for consent and compensation give an illusion of choice for performers, they make it difficult for performers to refuse the use of AI and present additional barriers for less established performers. Guidelines for consent and compensation grant studios further power, as producers can choose not to hire a performer if they do not consent to the terms in their contract regarding AI use. Early career performers or those who are financially struggling may be pressured into accepting contracts that permit AI use because they need the work. Further, in line with dominant discourses around the ongoing expansion of AI, the language of consent and compensation imply that AI will enjoy continued implementation and growth in entertainment fields.

Technological determinism and technosolutionism shapes industry transformations. Union documents emphasize that
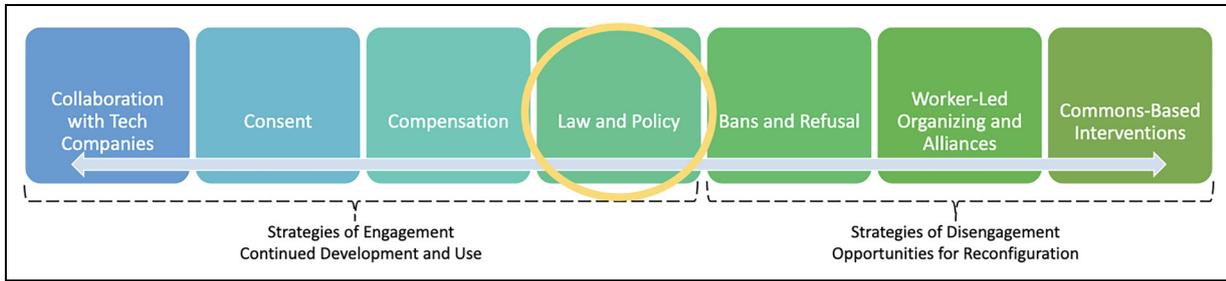
Figure 3. Strategy of engagement: law and policy.

technology has brought about widespread changes in the slow-reacting film and television industry. A message to members from Duncan Crabtree-Ireland, the Union's National Executive Director and Chief Negotiator, prior to the strike authorization vote notes that "the business model of our industry has changed significantly. We have fully entered a digital and streaming entertainment industry, and that demands a contract that is relevant to the new business model and must be contemporary to meet the financial needs of our members today."[7] The document notes that "our members are governed by contracts that reflect the business of 30 years ago."[7] The document continues that technological "advances" such as AI and streaming have "coupled with a steep increase in the cost of living…while studio profits and executive pay rise meteorically."[7] These statements attribute technology with the power to create and exacerbate existing inequalities in the industry.

Local election candidate statements at the time of the strike also include language regarding AI and technology more broadly as catalysts for industry-wide changes. For example, a candidate statement for the Los Angeles local election read, "with the seismic changes brought on by the streaming services, self-tape auditions now the new norm, and the threats posed by Artificial Intelligence, a strong and unified SAG-AFTRA (working in solidarity with our fellow unions) has never been more crucial."[8] A candidate statement for the Northeast local election states that "it is imperative that we elect someone who understands the challenges our Union faces with Artificial Intelligence and changing technology, and will prepare us for it."[9]

Narratives that situate technology as a catalyst for industry-wide change obfuscate broader inequalities and neglect the role of those in power to create and maintain these conditions. Ever-growing pay inequity, lack of control over one's likeness or labor, and increased cost of living are not a result of AI or other technologies. Rather, they are issues that workers—across sectors—have long organized around. Moreover, focusing on solutions that include the expansion and enforcement of intellectual property legislation and avenues for consent and compensation do not address the root causes of inequality within the industry.

Such solutions accrue additional power for studios and tech companies to set the terms of these agreements. Further, union communications and contract language ignored how systemic inequalities including racism, sexism, and classism are connected to AI.

Strategy of engagement: legislative and intellectual property challenges

The documents highlighted several challenges to implementing regulations on AI that refer to the faultiness of existing laws and lack of legislation around AI and technology and the shifting role of tech companies with respect to these issues. Figure 3 shows where on the spectrum we understand the repeated mention of legal obstacles, which include lackluster legal protections and limited opportunities for legislative action, ultimately overshadowed concerns around how interconnected racial and economic inequities materialize within—and are exacerbated by—AI.

The limits of existing laws and lack of concrete legislative action were cited as challenges within union communications. A document produced by the union with frequently asked questions about AI-related negotiations states, "even if we wanted to ban all AI, Federal Labor Law constrains what we can bargain, limiting it to mandatory subjects of bargaining—those that affect wages, hours and working conditions—and permissive subjects— those that are allowed if the parties agree to bargain them."[1] The document notes that AI includes mandatory subjects and permissive subjects of bargaining, and therefore "it isn't entirely clear where the line is given the current state of technology."[1] In other words, under current US labor laws it is unclear where AI falls in terms of a subject of bargaining—whether it directly impacts work (i.e., it is a mandatory subject of bargaining) or departs from concerns around wages, working conditions, or hours (i.e., it is a permissive subject of bargaining). Making the case that AI includes mandatory subjects and thus requires worker oversight would be imperative in a fulsome address of AI in any industrial union.

Official union communications also stress the need for federal law and public policy to enforce "AI protections" around intellectual property rights. A statement by

SAG-AFTRA President Fran Drescher boasts that "we have forged the biggest deal in industry history which broke pattern, established new revenue streams and passed a historic $1 billion plus dollar deal with the most progressive AI protections ever written, I feel pretty confident in saying this is a paradigm shift of seismic proportions!"[2] Another statement on the tentative agreement reads "this victory is everyone's victory. In the face of artificial intelligence technology potentially changing the entertainment landscape, protections for performers mean the preservation of tens of thousands of jobs in the entertainment community."[3] A webpage summarizing the contract notes that "while SAG-AFTRA's new contract has protections around AI, legislators still need to make AI protections and intellectual property enforcement a matter of public policy."[2] The lack of adequate legislation around AI were mentioned as obstacles for the union—and the expansion and enforcement of intellectual property and copyright laws were heralded as solutions to these concerns. Echoing dominant discourses around AI, Union communications adhere to narrative of the inevitable expansion of AI, by emphasizing the importance of protections as the "most progressive ever written", or the best that they could do. Other, more progressive, possibilities for more meaningful oversight around or even refusal of the technology in the industry are obfuscated or even delegitimized in this narrative.

Racial and economic inequalities. While some members' concerns about how AI enables and reproduces racist and classist inequalities are discussed in mass news media, these issues remain unaddressed within Union communications on AI. Members who disapproved of the tentative agreement argued that early career actors may feel pressured to consent to the use of AI as a condition of their employment. A union member who works three jobs in addition to taping and auditions emphasized that "this isn't a fight about only actors versus studios. It's a fight about the right to work and dignity to work in a world where technology is used against us."[11]

Members have also stressed how economic implications intersect with racist inequalities in the industry. In the *Axios* article, a member is quoted commenting on how AI impacts issues of intersecting racial and economic inequalities in the profession, "we have to ask ourselves how are we going to be able to make a decent living in this industry and make sure people of color […] are represented […] As it is, we only get a few jobs." Some members were concerned that AI would curtail opportunities for people of color and reverse progress made in recent industry-wide efforts in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion. An article from the online news outlet *Prism* about potential contract loopholes and limitations quoted a union member who expressed concerns about how racial and economic inequalities are exacerbated by AI. The union member noted that "with things like generative AI, there's no longer need to engage the everyday working actor, folks like myself, who work as actors full time, who aren't recognizable. And a lot of those folks are often people of color." A disabled union member expressed concerns around the use of AI "as a shortcut to check a box of representation."[12] A union-produced graphic on regulating AI notes how the contract establishes guidelines for "regular meetings" between the union and producers to discuss "current and future use of AI in projects" as well as "to make sure that the AI does not create or reinforce any unfair biases."[13] A summary document of the tentative agreement describes the same guidelines as "semi-annual meetings between union and each Producer (subject to NDA) related to use and intended use of GAI [generative AI] in motion picture development and production, which may include discussion of efforts to ensure that use(s) of GAI mitigate against biases."[5] In these cases, systemic inequalities are not explicitly named (i.e., racism, sexism, and classism) and are reduced to issues of bias.

It is important to note that there were contract gains around "equity and inclusion" that include access to gender-affirming healthcare, translation services, as well as hair and makeup services for all skin tones and hair textures.[5] The agreement also includes section with guidelines around the prevention of sexual harassment. However, AI is not positioned as an issue related to racism and sexism within the wider swathe of union communications—despite some members articulating the connections between these issues in popular media, including the above-mentioned articles from *Axios* and *Prism*.

Strategies of disengagement with the common sense of AI

The contract terms on AI and its surrounding discourse offer little in terms of strategies of disengagement shown circled in the spectrum in Figure 4 Overall the terms fell short of providing opportunities for solidaristic alliances across sectors and cooperative interventions that challenge the common sense of AI (Gramsci, 1926/1971). Members who voted against the tentative agreement—many of whom had reservations about loopholes in the contract language around AI—were characterized by the union president as "naysayers that have exploited this momentum of ours…to gain a voice for themselves" (Maddaus, 2023b). From the outset of the strike, a ban on AI was not an objective of leadership. As a frequently asked questions document from the union explains, "although there are members who took the concept of banning AI to the picket lines, it was our goal to put guardrails around AI, not wholly ban it."[1]

Though SAG-AFTRA was explicitly *not* working towards bans, they might have, as have other sectors across organized labor like the ILWU and CWA mentioned above. Existing strategies such as bans exemplify how a solidarity-based, worker-led movement towards refusal and worker
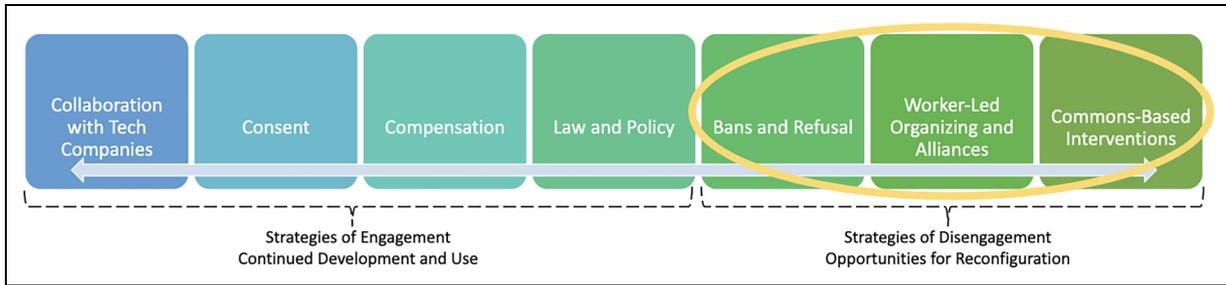
Figure 4. Strategies of disengagement with the 'common sense' of AI.

collectives around AI departs from the common sense of AI. These modes of disengagement with the common sense of AI could be developed and amplified to focus on acts of care to build solidarity and reshape technological systems and hold relationality, difference, and humanity as crucial components of labor. This can be seen as wielding the "collective work of feeling" (Campt, 2019, para 2) across differences, including race, class, gender, and ability, to sustain community and focus on a shared humanity that can be seen as a mode of reconfiguration that holds care at the core of these activities (Suchman, 2020; Campt and Coleman, 2018; Terranova, 2000). At present, there are not many complete or successful examples or organizing around technology across the U.S. but across the world, there are more. All of the examples that do exist, do so at smaller scales, which is something to consider. Transnationally, The Brazilian government have nationalized components of Internet infrastructure expressing solidarity with others in transnational labor networks. The Trade Union Congress in the United Kingdom and the American Association of University Professors have suggested workers' collectives around technology, as well as cross sector organizing around technology (B. S. Paris et al., 2025; Trade Union Congress, 2025). Mijente and the Athena coalition, mentioned in the introduction also does a good job of bringing these concerns together to create stronger solidaristic alliances around refusing technology. All of these are steps in the right direction towards true commons-based reconfiguration of technology.

Conclusion

This work has shown how collective bargaining around AI offers some promising ways forward. In the well-known case of SAG AFTRA's 2023 contract, the "common sense" of AI is addressed, which is a good first step, but it is engaged in a way that serves the class of technology and AI owners while they gleefully argue that "jobs are going away full stop" (Andersen, 2023). More broadly, this paper suggests that learning from across sectors and engaging with communities might be a productive step towards building power around technology demands.

This work draws from social movement and STS literature to develop this spectrum of dis/engagement with the common sense of AI to understand organized labor's address of these data driven technologies. This work contributes an understanding of how labor has and could intervene into unbridled hype around AI and in the development of formal and informal labor policy and discourse. By creating a spectrum of how contracts engage with concepts of reconfiguration and care, this work argues for the possibility that wider swathes of people are—and can be—more meaningfully involved in organizing to push back. Organized labor might provide pathways to push for reconfiguration in the form of workers collectives to control technology development and deployment within and across localized contexts, as well as both within and across formal union locals and industrial and white-collar sectors and possibly forge solidarities with transnational labor. In the future, this activity might create the political conditions to diminish the power of big tech firms, and push policymakers to develop better people-centered policies that affect and support those who are not involved in organized labor. But for this to work, organized labor must rise to meet the moment and take its power seriously.

Future work in this area might use other methods, and might consider and more meaningfully combine, compare, and contrast subsequent labor activities, resultant contracts from other sectors and unions, and broader based organizing around AI, both within and outside of the US context, to see if the categories in the spectrum above hold or require amendments. An important piece of this work might be focused on building solidaristic relations in global technology supply chains across the Global North and South (Greene, 2022). Further, even as this paper has been in the publication pipeline, there have been many policy and economic developments that affect AI and labor that might be analyzed in conjunction with this topic area.

Organized labor has been defanged and disempowered through the twentieth century, and has seen further loses in the second Trump administration, and indeed organized labor was still on its heels despite gains in the Biden era. Yet organized labor is more powerful than it has been in a lifetime (Levinson, 2024).There is a common assumption that organized labor and contracts exist in a necessary

relation of compromise (McAlevey, 2016). That is true, by the examples listed, but it might be otherwise. Labor, as it represents a large bloc of people who can enact their power through organized shortages and stoppages, and is one of the most powerful levers that is available to enact the will of the people in the current moment when AI and technology are tied to every other fight to retain public goods and services.

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