Changing the Way We Tell Stories: The Reception of Still Photos with Sound as Entertainment

ABSTRACT

Technology challenges the traditional paradigm of storytelling by going beyond the printed page to still images juxtaposed with text and sound on the Internet. For this reason, traditional media have started to carve out a niche in content for savvy audiences beyond traditional media logic to capitalize on dynamic design and technologies specific to the Internet. This exploratory research used a Web survey to investigate the presentation mode of still images with sound. Magnum In Motion provided the news stories and design attributes were manipulated such as text, color, and sound. Results indicate that the storytelling presentation of still images with sound was received positively and an enjoyable experience.

KEYWORDS

storytelling, Internet, images, sound, audience reception, media logic

Technology challenges the traditional paradigm of storytelling by going beyond the printed page to still images juxtaposed with text and sound on a web page or other multimodal entity (Cooke, 2005; Martinec & Salway, 2005; Pavlik, 2000). For this reason, traditional media have started to carve out a niche in providing news and information to Internet-savvy audiences beyond traditional media logic to capitalize on dynamic design and technologies...
specific to the Internet. Hypermedia provides the audience the ability not only to be informed (Vorderer, 2000), but also to take part in the news process on an interpersonal level while also being entertained (Chung & Yoo, 2008). The challenge for creators of content is producing both informative and compelling stories that have entertainment value that is both designed well and fits the story. According to Vorderer (2000), “It is indeed often expected that the audience will accept and even seek out new forms of media use if they can receive entertainment in the process” (p. 22). Although virtually no empirical work has examined the effect of presentation mode regarding storytelling on the Internet, this exploratory study takes an unconventional approach to fill this void by examining the changing way we tell stories. Specifically, this research explores whether or not the storytelling presentation of viewing still images is both an entertaining and an informational viewing experience.

VISUAL DESIGN OF NEWS

According to Altheide and Snow (1979), media logic is a way for message producers to communicate content through various formats of media. “Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behavior, and the grammar of media communication” (p. 10). Altheide and Snow believe that how content is presented is more important than the content itself and that competition influences media logic. Therefore, traditional media continually explore opportunities both in presentation and distribution to engage and interact with their audiences to stay competitive. Research has looked at the diminishing role of text on the page while the news media have increasingly relied on visuals and other design techniques to enhance presentation of content to attract readers’ attention (Cooke, 2005; Fox et al., 2004; Knobloch, Hastell, Zillmann, & Callison, 2003), as well as a tool to aid viewer’s recall and understanding of content (Fox et al., 2004; Gibson, Hester, & Stewart, 2001; Gilbert & Schleuder, 1999; Knobloch et al., 2003; Mendelson, 2001; Mendelson & Thorson, 2002; Zillmann, Knobloch, & Yu, 2001). For example, Gilbert and Schleuder’s experiment of color versus black-and-white photographs revealed that complex images are better presented in color versus black and white because color requires less mental effort to process information. Similarly, Mendelson (2001) found that the audience has certain expectations of what news looks like, including news photographs. Content novelty (i.e., subject matter, setting, people, movement, etc.) and compositional novelty (i.e., camera angles, lighting, color vs. black and white, proximity, depth of field, etc.) in news photographs attracted readers’ attention, aided in recall of information, and resulted in longer viewing times than typical news photographs. Readers also were more interested in novel photographs when they were presented independent of the newspaper.

Text with photos has also been examined as a way to draw readers’ attention to the printed page and help with recall of story content. For instance, Gibson et al. (2001) found that the design attribute of a pull-quote – pulling a quote from the text of a story – and typically placing in a larger typeface, sometimes in a different color, is a persuasive device that influences readers’ perceptions of story content. Zillmann et al.’s (2001) experiment of news magazines use of photographs to aid readers in their selection of story content showed that the use of photographs with text attracts the readers’ attention to the story than just text-only articles. Likewise, Knobloch et al.’s (2003)
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Research supported the use of photos with headlines to draw readers’ attention to news stories as part of the online display of news magazine content. In addition to the use of text with photos, Lowrey (2004) found that the nonlinear presentation of news stories on the web was received positively. Cooke (2005) monitored media logic trends of print, television, and the Internet from the 1960s to 2002. Her research revealed that changes in traditional media’s visual presentation and style of content are largely influenced by changes in technology.

Although sound is not a typical design attribute commonly associated with the presentation of news and information on the printed page, the Internet and other emerging media allow for the convergence of sound with text and still images. Sound may influence both the enjoyment and recall of news and information, as well as enhance the storytelling experience. For instance, in 2004, Lipscomb and Kerins conducted an experiment on how sound impacts the movie presentation experience. The first part of the experiment only compared two types of sound for the music-listening audience. Then, they paired the two types of sound with visuals to see if there was a positive effect on the presentation experience. Lipscomb and Kerins found that participants were not affected by the music-only listening experience; however, participants reported that music enhanced the cinematic presentation when visuals were paired with music.

Originally, the search by traditional media to maximize profits while downsizing dependencies on resources led to less innovation and unique packaging of news on the Internet (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). In recent years, however, the digital era has inspired new and imaginative ways to view and experience news and information (Chung & Yoo, 2008). Technology contributes to new formats of gathering and producing the news. Once, the media product may have been a newspaper, radio broadcast, or TV broadcast, now it is likely a news website or some other multimodal entity. According to Altheide and Snow (1979):

The association of “visualness” with “entertainment” virtually sealed the fate of the early states of television news; TV news would be used to first entertain and then to inform. Since the broader context of entertainment already has been wedded to commercialism, it was logical within this context to develop news formats more compatible with – and more directly influenced by – rules of thumb for attracting the largest number of viewers, than epistemological concerns regarding the best way to obtain the information and understanding.

(p. 76)

As much as the role of the news media is to objectively, fairly, accurately, and truthfully report the news, the visual salience and packaging of the news is also important to attract and engage the audiences’ attention (Altheide & Snow, 1979; Cupchik & Kemp, 2000). For example, most local television stations follow a quick, basic, and entertaining media logic. “The events selected for inclusion in the newscast are defined according to the same occupational logic. Not any event qualifies; only those in most cases, acquired from a handful of institutional news sources which tend to have incorporated many of the practical considerations of scheduling, visual interest, and conciseness that news people look for” (Altheide & Snow, 1979, p. 82). Therefore, regardless of the medium, profits are part of the equation, and, entertainment is part
of the mix. It is possible then, by providing alternative storytelling formats beyond traditional media logic that media continue their credibility with audiences by producing compelling and informative stories that are also entertaining thereby part of the mix considered in the drive to maintain profit.

MEDIA ENTERTAINMENT

This research is concerned with motivations for using media along the gratifications framework (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen, Wenner, & Rosengren, 1985). Within the uses and gratifications framework, research has determined there are motivations to which people actively seek out specific media content to obtain gratifications or results (Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004; Kaye & Johnson, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Motivations generally fall into one of four categories: information, personal identity, social interaction, and entertainment (Blumler & Katz, 1974; McQuail, Blumler, & Brown, 1972; Rubin, 1981; Rubin & Step, 2000). Media psychologists have examined the connection between traditional media and media entertainment (Denham, 2004; Eliashberg & Sawhney, 1994; Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Nabi & Krcmar, 2004; Perry, 2001; Vorderer, 2001; Zillmann & Bryant, 1994), and to a lesser extent have explored how newer technologies provide entertainment for media seekers (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003; Patwardhan, 2004). Klimmt and Vorderer suggest that parallels may be drawn from media entertainment studies to emerging technologies to better understand the effects of new media on the audience.

According to Vorderer (2001), there are two misunderstandings when it comes to defining entertainment. First, many often perceive “entertainment as a feature of the media offer itself” (p. 248). For example, a sitcom is perceived as entertaining, whereas the news is not. Second, media that is entertaining does not provide information. So the more information provided by the media, the less entertaining it will be, and vice versa. Therefore, the more a person is entertained, the less likely he or she will learn. Despite this assumption, Vorderer contends that the line between what is infotainment or edutainment is blurred. For this reason, entertainment is a critical part of the information process and according to Chung and Yoo’s (2008) survey of users of online newspapers, the primary motivation to use online newspapers is for information and entertainment. Chung and Yoo said, “Although the definition of news is constantly evolving in the digital age of journalism, and the human interactive features allow the audience to use the Internet as a place for conversation and interpersonal communication, online newspapers are still viewed as tools for information or entertainment” (p. 391).

The present study applies Bosshart and Macconi’s (1998) definition of entertainment, which is the gratification sought by users of most media. The individual may experience entertainment either for psychological relaxation (restful, distracting), change and diversion, stimulation (interesting, exciting, thrilling), fun (amusing, funny), atmosphere (beautiful, pleasant, comfortable), and joy (happy, cheerful). Another way to tap into understanding entertainment is to use the construct enjoyment (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004). Entertainment taps into enjoyment either of the senses, mood management, wit and knowledge, or feelings; essentially the reader or viewer has a generally positive disposition toward the media content (Bosshart & Macconi, 1998). While liking often is used to evaluate a program or character, enjoyment is appropriate to capture “the more experiential nature of the viewing dynamic. ... That
is, whereas liking reflects reactions (cognitive, affective, or both) to a media message, enjoyment can reflect reaction to both the message as well as the fuller media experience, including situational and contextual elements” (Nabi & Krcmar, 2004, p. 290). According to Nabi and Krcman, enjoyment often is captured with a single-item measure where the viewer rates how much he or she enjoyed or liked the media content; or, the viewer answers several questions about enjoyment of the media content (e.g., enjoyable, entertaining, likeable). In this way, entertainment encompasses both the evaluative and experiential components of the media experience.

**RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Barbatsis (1999) suggests, “coming to terms with a new medium of expression typically raises questions for communication scholars about how the experiential environments it creates are at once distinct from and similar to other forms of mediated communication” (p. 280). The Internet provides a change from the old media paradigm to a “new” process of bringing together a variety of media forms that may vary in linearity–nonlinearity and activate different senses when using the media. Therefore, it is possible that “media settings designed for working, learning, or other non-entertainment purposes may be very enjoyable to use” (Klimmt & Vorderer, 2003, p. 356). For this reason, experimentation with emerging technologies and how they contribute to storytelling is “a necessary and productive step in the creation of new logics for new types of media” (Lowrey, 2004, p. 94).

Photography traditionally presents a static image expressive within a two-dimensional sensory experience. Photographs on their own have the ability to attract and engage viewers, but when text is added to the message there is the potential to enhance the recall of a message’s content and provide context. Much in the same way color changed the way we looked at photography, sound is also changing the way we look at still images. It is possible then, that on the Web that sensory experience may be enhanced with sound, thus structuring a sensory world to integrate both the static nature of still photos with the depth of sensory experience to engage the viewer in a sensory modality beyond just viewing a static image. It is the contention of this investigation to suggest that in addition to providing information, entertainment, and enjoyment are reasons users engage with specific types of messages. Therefore, with the combined creative effort of still images with sound, it is expected that viewers will respond positively to this storytelling experience.

**RQ1:** Is the presentation mode of viewing still photos with sound an entertaining viewing experience?

**RQ2:** Does viewing still images with sound aide in understanding the context of the images better?

**METHOD**

A web survey was constructed to collect exploratory data regarding the changing way we tell stories. In keeping with past research (Huang & Marsiglio, 2006), participants were recruited through multiple listservs related to photography, new technology and visual communication for professionals, academics, and students through such communication organizations as the Association of Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, the
National Communication Association, and the National Press Photographer’s Association, as well as students in the School of Communication at a Southern University. According to Babbie (2010), purposive sampling is used when seeking a group of participants due to their knowledge on a particular subject. Therefore, this sample also was selected for the purpose of convenience as it represents a grouping of individuals that could readily understand visual communication and emerging technologies.

Email messages were sent to each of the listservs just listed requesting anonymous and voluntarily participation in a survey about viewing still photos with sound. Criteria were that they were members of the above-mentioned listservs. The first email was posted to the listservs in early spring 2008 and a follow-up posting was sent 3 weeks later. A link to the survey was included in the email message for those willing to complete the questionnaire. The survey took approximately 15 minutes to complete. On the home page of the survey, an introductory message was posted that informed participants a broadband connection, QuickTime, and audio capabilities were needed to complete the web survey. Those participants willing to take the survey clicked the next button at the bottom of the page that started the survey. Clicking on the button was their formal consent to participate in the survey.

A series of six stories were presented as QuickTime movies embedded in the pages of the survey. Magnum In Motion provided the news stories for the presentations and design attributes were manipulated such as text, color, black and white, and sound (see Table 3). Subject matter varied from Life in the Outback, Journey Across Australia, Taking Pictures, American Culture, Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and 9/11. Beneath each slideshow, participants were given four topics and they were asked to indicate what the story in the slideshow was about. After viewing all six slideshows, participants completed statements pertaining to the context of the news stories and how much respondents agree that design attributes helped contextualize story content better. Items were measured using a 7-point scale ranging from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree.

Participants also completed a postexposure enjoyment scale adapted from previous entertainment research that contained 24 items for individuals to rate how much they enjoyed or liked the overall media content they just experienced (e.g., enjoyable, distracting, useful; e.g., Bosshart & Macconi, 1998; Fox et al., 2004; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Mendelson & Thorson, 2004; Nabi & Krcmar, 2004). The postexposure scale was followed by a manipulation check to see if the various design attributes that were manipulated in the slideshows were noticed. Items were measured using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (very strongly disagree) to 7 (very strongly agree).

RESULTS

Included in this analysis are 95 surveys that were deemed usable. Respondents who timed out or who were unable to complete the survey due to bandwidth or other technologically related issues were eliminated from the data set. Demographic variables of the respondents indicated that just over half the respondents were women (53.7%) and 46.3% men. Just under half (45.3%) earned a PhD, 23.2% earned a master’s degree, 14.7% graduated from college, and 16.8% had some college experience. Age of respondents varied from 18 to 24 (18.9%), 25 to 34 (14.9%), 35 to 44 (22.5%), 45 to 54 (21.1%), and 55 and over (22.6%).
The manipulation check was conducted after participants viewed the photo presentations. These statements questioned participants regarding the various design attributes manipulated in the photo presentations (see Table 1). For the most part, respondents recalled that the presentations included several design attributes. Imagery presented in color as well as black and white, and those with sound were most recalled by respondents.

Research Question (RQ) 1 asked if the presentation mode of viewing still photos with sound has a significant positive affect on the viewing experience. To assess the overall positive enjoyment of viewing still photos with sound, participants completed a postexposure enjoyment rating scale based on items adapted from previous entertainment and enjoyment literature (e.g., Fox et al., 2004; Knobloch & Zillmann, 2002; Mendelson & Thorson, 2004; Nabi & Krcmar, 2004). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for this measure was .80. Top postexposure items were enjoyable (91.6%), interesting (88.4%), creative (74.7%), and entertaining (74.7%). Overall, findings show that participants were receptive to viewing still images with sound (see Table 2).

RQ2 sought to determine the extent to which viewing still images with sound makes it easier for viewers to understand the context of the images. Table 3 reports how well participants understood the context of each slideshow. For all six slidehows, respondents were asked to indicate story context from four topics listed. For the most part, participants were able to properly indicate the context of the stories displayed in the slideshows regardless of the accompaniment of sound or the manipulation of color versus black-and-white imagery. Story 1 had the fewest respondents answering correctly; closely split between 35.8% selecting Farming and 45.3% selecting Life in the Outback. The story was a three-part series pertaining to Life in the Outback and it is possible that viewers encountered confusion between what is visually portrayed in the imagery versus the accompanying narration as some of the visual content contained farming in the outback of Australia while the narration related to Life in the Outback. In the remaining stories, the majority of respondents were able to properly identify story content.

Participants also indicated the extent to which design elements aided viewers in their understanding of the context of the images better (see Table 4). The majority of respondents agreed that design elements such as text and sound aided ability to understand the context of the photos better. However, the
Table 2: Postexposure Enjoyment Items.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enjoyable</td>
<td>91.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dull</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refreshing</td>
<td>56.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>58.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frustrating</td>
<td>18.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informative</td>
<td>70.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpleasant</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humorous</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophisticated</td>
<td>50.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy</td>
<td>64.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inappropriate</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun</td>
<td>57.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confusing</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unlikable</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertaining</td>
<td>74.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distracting</td>
<td>21.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Innovative</td>
<td>47.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boring</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amusing</td>
<td>49.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Help</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Realistic</td>
<td>62.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Agree and disagree responses are collapsed, neutral omitted therefore percentages may not add to 100%.

Table 3: Slideshow Stories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story Content</th>
<th>Respondents Answering Correctly</th>
<th>Manipulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Story 1: Life in the Outback</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
<td>Both color and black-and-white images, plus narration, no text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 2: American Culture</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
<td>Black-and-white images only, plus text, no sound.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 3: 9/11</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
<td>Color images only, no sound, and no text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 4: Aftermath of Hurricane Katrina</td>
<td>84.2%</td>
<td>Black-and-white images only, plus music, no text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Story 6: Taking Pictures</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>Color images only, plus narration, no text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Story 5 is omitted due to respondents incurring technological problems viewing this story.

Table 3: Slideshow Stories.
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Design element of color received mixed results. It is likely respondents expect to view photos in color; therefore they are ambivalent when it comes to the mental effort required of images presented in color. As Gilbert and Schleuder (1990) reasoned, complex images are better presented in color because color most closely resembles how most people see the world compared to black-and-white photography; therefore, color requires less mental effort to process information. Furthermore, findings are supported by past research that found that added design elements are helpful in understanding the context of photos better (Gibson et al., 2001; Knobloch et al., 2003; Mendelson, 2001; Zillmann et al., 2001).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study explored the changing ways we tell stories on the Internet. Specifically, this research demonstrated that the presentation mode of still images juxtaposed with text and sound is an enjoyable storytelling experience. The addition of sound helps the viewer navigate the storytelling experience beyond just viewing a static image. In this way, still images with sound creates a rich media experience that provides detail to narrate meaning of the photograph, thus allowing the audience to form more vivid mental images. Although sound is not an option in the printed version of the newspaper, the addition of sound with text presented on the Internet changes how the audience views media content and provides some understanding as to why users engage with specific types of content. The viewer easily responds to the content both for minimal aesthetic appreciation and personal fulfillment of being informed, in so doing the viewer is entertained by the media stimuli. So while technologies continue to challenge traditional media with new outlets of expression, storytelling on the Internet is not only concerned with sharing information, it provides entertainment.

Popular work such as that provided by newspaper and other media Websites is salient and novel while still engaging the viewer. According to Cupchik and Kemp (2000), “In this regard, both content and the style of that content is important to the user and adds to the total viewing experience. Specifically, “style has to do with the way that the physical/sensory qualities (i.e., syntactic information) of a message are organized and affect sensory experience” (p. 249). Engaging viewers with rich media content allows the audience to “enjoy a media experience because they feel it has given them

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Text helped me understand the context of the images better.</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound helped me understand the context of the images better.</td>
<td>85.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Color helped me understand the context of the images better.</td>
<td>45.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing photos with sound helped reinforce the context of the images.</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The slideshows used multimedia to enhance the overall viewing experience.</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound helped add reality to the context of the information presented in the slideshows.</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Agree and disagree responses are collapsed, neutral omitted therefore percentages may not add to 100%.

Table 4: Context Items.
new knowledge or enriched their lives in some way, such as providing greater insight into an historical event or a philosophical problem” (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004, p. 318). Therefore, as new media continue to enter the marketplace findings indicate that audiences will be receptive to presentation techniques beyond the traditional media logic of photos on the printed page. It is also reasonable to believe that more emphasis will be placed on producing a multimodal story that is both enjoyable and informative, especially if how a media message is crafted and presented can lead to entertainment.

This study has several shortcomings. First, this study is limited by the small size and the self-selection of the participant pool. This study was intended to serve as a pilot study and used a convenience sample that is not truly representative of Internet users. Although a risky sampling technique, Babbie (2010) points out that “It’s justified only if the researcher wants to study” participants with prior knowledge of a specific subject to reveal useful insight (p. 192). The next step in the research process is to replicate this study with a larger and more diverse sample. This research should be further refined to deal with measurement issues. For example, future research might measure if there is a difference between message-related content (such as content that is evaluated positively or negatively) and experience-related content (the extent to which the consumption experience is itself enjoyable), and if still photos would be received better when accompanied by appropriate sounds. Continued research in this area would ensure more of a contribution and more clearly interpretable and conclusive findings.

Additional research on the types of tools integrated on news media Websites and accompanying special features, along with the cost of covering stories, will be insightful as the Internet, and particularly mobile media, continues to expand in society as a means of delivering news and information. Research must continue to explore enjoyment from a motivational perspective, such as why do viewers seek out these dynamic stories and if viewers seek out specific Websites for the dynamic presentation of news and information, as well as if participants that express a stronger need to keep up with the latest emerging media are more receptive toward these unconventional multimodal storytelling presentations. Future research also needs to look beyond motivations for use and explore the cognitive capabilities and psychological characteristics of individuals as predictors of media use and enjoyment of specific media.

Past research suggests traditional media follow a media logic in which they present news and information (Altheide & Snow, 1979). The Internet and emerging media offer an alternative media logic conducive to multimodal storytelling and techno-savvy audiences. The digital era allows us the ability to rethink how we tell stories. As Internet users become familiar with these unconventional presentation techniques they will be more likely to enjoy them and be entertained; in return, news media will continue to integrate these storytelling techniques into their content and design. In conclusion, media entertainment is a helpful construct to explain audience consumption and potential profit regarding the presentation techniques media employs to tell unique and compelling stories.

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REFERENCES


SUGGESTED CITATION

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