



ANALYSIS

The Myth Of ‘Fact-Checking’: How Facebook Created The World’s Largest Censorship Operation

By Mark Hemingway

DailyWire.com



The 2020 presidential election resulted in something I never thought I’d see — widespread, Soviet-style political censorship in American media. This censorship still dominates our discourse a year later, with no end in sight. There’s a lot to be said about how we got to this place, but it’s worth zeroing in on the two particular mechanisms for how this censorship is being enforced. The first is the rise of politicized media “fact-checkers,” and the second is Facebook. The fact these two entities have now joined forces means speaking freely online without an algorithm slapping a warning label on your opinion or psychoanalyzing your potential for extremism is becoming difficult.

While I confess I didn’t see this censorship regime gaining power so quickly, as a reporter in D.C. for over 20 years, I did see plenty of warning signs. One, in particular, was hard to ignore: In the summer of 2018, I was sitting in a staff meeting at the now-defunct magazine, The Weekly Standard, when an editor at the publication started yelling at me.

At the time of the argument, The Weekly Standard was four months away from being shuttered, and though no one in the meeting knew we were facing the axe, a profound sense of unease had descended on the place. A hardline opposition to Trump wasn’t universally shared by the magazine’s staff, but for the two years following his election, top editors at the magazine regularly lambasted Trump and indulged in some regrettably erroneous Russia collusion reporting. This approach was not appreciated by our regular subscribers who had overwhelmingly voted for the president.

And the argument that led to me getting yelled at was another Exhibit in prosecuting the case for how things at The Weekly Standard had gone wrong: We had gone from being an outlet that regularly published hard-hitting media criticism to enabling the worst media innovation in decades — so-called “fact checking.”

The staff meeting started, as usual, with some informal chatter about the big news of the day. In this case, Facebook had just announced it was banning conspiracy theorist Alex Jones and his media outlet InfoWars from the platform for “glorifying violence” and “hate speech.” None of us were fans of Jones. InfoWars content ranged from harmless tabloidy supposition about aliens to genuinely upsetting conspiracies about the Sandy Hook shooting. However, there was some consensus in the meeting that Facebook banning entire publications from the platform was a bad omen for free speech. And it didn’t make anyone feel better that Facebook’s decision to ban Jones came shortly after a pressure campaign launched by CNN, a network that, ironically enough, had spent the last few years indulging in nonstop Trump-Russia reporting that wasn’t any less conspiratorial than many of Jones’ rantings.

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That’s when The Weekly Standard’s on-staff fact-checker spoke up and all hell broke loose.

Now, it helps to understand the fact checker we employed at The Weekly Standard had his salary paid for by Facebook. Less than a year before, editors above my paygrade decided we were going to be one of a handful of media outlets that agreed to partner with Facebook for the social media giant’s “fact checking” program. In exchange for a few crumbs from a company with a \$1 trillion market cap, we would write “fact checks” taking politicians and pundits to task for spreading “disinformation.” Facebook would then use those write-ups to make content moderation decisions. In addition to writing fact check columns for our website, the Facebook-funded fact-checker would also be serving as a traditional in-house fact checker, going over magazine articles pre-publication to root out errors. The editors saw this as a win-win.

I was never consulted by the editors about this decision to partner with Facebook for several obvious reasons. In 2016, I wrote a piece for the magazine's website bluntly calling Facebook's plan to partner with outside media organizations to fact check content on the platform "a terrible idea." And years before that in 2011, I had written a cover story for the magazine headlined, "Lies, Damned Lies, and 'Fact-Checking.'" It was the first major – and deeply critical – examination of media "fact checking" organizations such as PolitiFact and The Washington Post Fact Checker.

The article made a splash and I'd spent years afterward writing tens of thousands of words inveighing against the dishonest tactics of corporate media fact checkers who were now working for Facebook. I thought I'd done a pretty good job over the years demonstrating media fact checkers were demonstrably biased, employing dishonest contextual arguments to disproportionately claim with pseudo-scientific objectivity that the rhetoric employed by anyone right-of-center was a "pants on fire" lie or worthy of "four Pinocchios."

The actual track record of media fact checker malpractice and dishonesty wasn't up for debate. Long before Trump, there were critical university studies showing that fact checkers accuse Republicans of lying three times as often as Democrats. Further, fact checkers' reticence to fact check Democrats was pretty clearly tied to helping Democrats win elections. PolitiFact rated Obama's famously dishonest 2012 campaign promise about the Obamacare law — "if you like your health insurance, you can keep your health insurance — as "true" six different times. When the law phased in after Obama had lied to secure his reelection, millions of Americans were suddenly kicked off their health insurance plans as a result. PolitiFact then disingenuously made it "lie of the year" in 2013, one year after telling the truth about the law might have made a difference in the election.

Once upon a time, editors at the magazine would have agreed with me about how corrupt it was that Facebook was now paying PolitiFact to produce these partisan hatchet jobs, but now we had taken Facebook's money and hired our own "fact checker." The editors presumably thought as a conservative publication, we would bring some balance to the endeavor. I felt like they should have known better.

As it happens, the guy they hired as our fact checker was a diligent, hard working, and intelligent journalist in a relatively thankless job. But he was also in his early 20s, comparatively inexperienced, and had written at least one fact check column where I'd disagreed with his conclusions — and conservative blogs had a field day blasting The Weekly Standard for what he had written.

But to his credit, he seemed to know his limits, and this prompted him to speak up in our staff meeting. Even before the Alex Jones ban, he said he was growing concerned about his job because of the growing power of Facebook. He explained that whenever he did one of his fact checking columns, part of his gig involved going into a special portal in Facebook's backend created for its fact checking mercenaries, where he entered details about his fact check. When he entered a claim of "false," he was asked to enter the URL of the story where he found the claim – at which point Facebook, according to their own press releases, would then kill 80 percent of the global internet traffic to that story. Our fact checker explained this was making him uncomfortable. Some of these fact checks were complicated, and he felt his judgment wasn't absolute.

It was a record scratch moment in the staff meeting. After a beat, I spoke up and said something to the effect of "you mean to tell me, that a single journalist has the power to render judgment to nearly wipe a news story off of the internet?" Where our publication had once taken pride in challenging the dishonesty and bias of the corporate media, it dawned on me — and more than a few others in the room — that whatever influence our failing publication had was now being leveraged to act as part of a terrifyingly effective censorship regime controlled by a hated social media company run by one of the world's richest men.

And that's when the editor started yelling. I don't harbor any resentment over his brief burst of anger. It was a stressful time and we were all on the verge of losing our jobs. I don't recall much of what he said in the moment, except that to my astonishment, he said Facebook needed to ban even more people.

The origins of Facebook's fact checking program are not a mystery: Trump won in 2016.

Naturally, Russian election interference, a narrative served up on a platter by Hillary Clinton and the Democratic party to explain their 2016 loss, was swallowed whole by the FBI, and regurgitated by the media.

However, it was the uproar over Facebook's alleged role in the 2020 election that really sowed the seeds of the media's complete implosion. This was quite the fall from grace. In 2012 the Obama campaign maximally exploited Facebook's data to reach out to voters, and this was greeted with a chorus of hosannas from the press, eager to praise this technologically savvy electioneering. Carol Davidsen, the analytics director on Obama's campaign, later admitted the campaign had access to Facebook's data and that Facebook "allowed us to do things they wouldn't have allowed someone else to do because they were on our side."

But where Facebook was eager to be credited for Obama's victory, almost immediately after Trump's election the knives were out internally. "Facebook employees have formed an unofficial task force to question the role their company played in promoting fake news in the lead-up to Donald Trump's victory in the US election last week," reported BuzzFeed in November of 2016. The employees were operating in defiance of CEO Mark Zuckerberg, who said the idea that Facebook had unfairly tilted the election in Trump's favor was "crazy." And by all accounts the suggestion Facebook as a company wasn't in the tank for Democrats was, in fact, crazy. Earlier in 2016, former Facebook workers told Gizmodo employees at the social network were actively suppressing Conservative news so that it didn't trend on the site. Trump had run a savvy digital campaign, for sure, but there was no way they were given the access to the platform the Obama campaign had been given.

The media and Democratic politicians continued to pounce on post-election reports about trivial amounts of Russian propaganda appearing on Facebook and other social networks. It didn't matter these claims were usually overstated and fueled irresponsible speculation that Trump's election was illegitimate. Zuckerberg was facing mounting public pressure to do something, anything to convince liberal America it was taking the problem of disinformation at Facebook seriously.

Still, the response to growing complaints about "fake news" on Facebook went well beyond kicking off a few foreign troll farms. How could Facebook institute the kind of sweeping censorship that would be necessary to placate their angry critics and dissenting employees?

Thanks to the infamous section 230 of the Communications Decency Act, Facebook was spared legal liability for any harmful content that appeared on its site on the understanding it was a neutral platform for third-party content. The belief that Facebook and other social media sites weren't exercising the same kind of sweeping editorial judgments that made traditional publishers subject to libel laws was always a bit of a farce, but Facebook didn't want additional legal exposure or scrutiny that would come with telling political organizations and media outlets what they could and could not say on a website that, fairly or not, presented itself as public forum. Facebook needed to bring outside media organizations in to help them in their quest to censor the news.

Once upon a time, the media would have seen Facebook's decision to bring them in as outside censors as an indecent proposal – but by 2016, media organizations were thoroughly compromised. The internet had largely killed off direct subscription business models, so they were all dependent on social

media platforms such as Facebook for revenue. And if the American media once had a classically liberal reverence for the First Amendment that enabled their business, America's newsrooms were now so politicized they were happy to choose the form of their destructor if it meant keeping Republicans out of power. It took no time at all to get the media on board with Facebook's grand censorship plans.

In December of 2016, Facebook announced it was partnering with media fact checkers "to combat and bury 'fake news,'" according to Business Insider. That this program was launched just two months after Trump won should make the motivation of the program abundantly clear. The media and big tech oligarchs had been unable to play a decisive role in the 2016 election. Now they were teaming up to exert even more control over what information voters would be allowed to see and hear. And sure enough, under Trump the normalization of censorship occurred much the same way that Ernest Hemingway described how bankruptcy happens – slowly then all at once.

After taking some time to ramp up, the Facebook fact checking partnership started to flex its muscles. In March of 2018, after being flagged by Facebook fact checking partner Snopes, Facebook threatened to deplatform the popular Christian satire site The Babylon Bee. The offending article fact checked by Snopes was "CNN Purchases Industrial-Sized Washing Machine To Spin The News Before Publication." The Babylon Bee would be repeatedly harassed by Facebook as a result of Snopes doing dozens of fact checks on their humor pieces over the next two years. The inevitable result was, according to the Bee, Facebook began dramatically throttling traffic to the site, even though it has over one million followers on Facebook.

And while CNN, unlike Snopes, was not an official Facebook fact checking partner, their successful pressure campaign to get Alex Jones removed from the platform further put everyone on notice. At one point in 2019, Facebook blocked all links from Zero Hedge, a popular site known for its edgy takes on political and financial news. Dozens of smaller sites that published political content soon found themselves placed in Facebook purgatory, and without staying in the good graces of a website that has nearly 3 billion monthly users, their influence and online ad revenue could be all but eradicated. It was becoming clear that Facebook's fact checking program was being used to suppress internet media upstarts which threatened the credibility of the legacy news outlets by offering a different point of view than the left-leaning corporate media.

By the time 2020 rolled around with a global pandemic, nationwide riots, and a presidential election, the desire of the media to police the discourse reached

new heights.

Starting in early 2020, Facebook banned not just a few dodgy articles, but almost all discussion that the communist Chinese government was lying about the origins of the COVID-19 outbreak. Despite the fact the Wuhan Institute of Virology was doing research on coronaviruses a few miles from the source of the outbreak, pointing out these basic facts was dismissed as a racist conspiracy theory by Facebook's fact checking partners and the media broadly.

This was always a leading possibility for the origin of the virus, but acknowledging the dishonesty of China's communist government would reinforce Trump's longstanding warnings about the dangers the country posed. Once Trump was out of the White House, it was announced publicly America's intel agencies were relaunching the investigation into the lab leak. Facebook turned on a dime and admitted the evidence was sufficient to allow for the possibility of discussing the lab leak hypothesis. Facebook's fact checking partner, PolitiFact, which had sanctimoniously made "coronavirus disinformation" its lie of the year in 2020, ended up retracting its harsh "pants on fire" fact-check of the "debunked conspiracy theory." COVID-19 may have come from a lab.

There was a hint of introspection when the truth came out, but it soon passed. "I think a lot of people have egg on their face," said ABC News's Jonathan Karl in May 2021. "This was an idea that was first put forward by Mike Pompeo, secretary of state, Donald Trump. And look, some things may be true even if Donald Trump said them."

Even now Facebook still maintains an exhaustive policy regarding what you can and can't say online regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. As part of that policy, Facebook maintains that they will "remove misinformation when public health authorities conclude that the information is false." That's right – even now you're not allowed to question the authorities on Facebook, which is after all, the entire point of exercising free speech rights. Facebook maintains this policy even after emails revealed U.S. health officials, including Dr. Anthony Fauci, apparently knew all along the lab leak hypothesis was a likely explanation for the outbreak, and at the same time they appeared to be hiding their own involvement in the research at Wuhan Institute of Virology.

The implementation of Facebook's aggressive new policies for censoring information also served as a template for other social media companies. Censorship would be tolerated provided that a "fact check" was conducted to determine the information was false. And so in May of 2020, Trump sent out

two tweets that included the contention that there “There is NO WAY (ZERO!) that Mail-In Ballots will be anything less than substantially fraudulent.”

Pressure had long been building for Twitter to censor Trump, and now for the first time in the middle of an election year, the company added to both tweets an exclamation point followed by a link to “Get the facts about mail-in ballots.” That link led to a short statement from Twitter that “Trump makes unsubstantiated claim that mail-in ballots will lead to voter fraud,” with a short summary of “facts” about mail-in voting.

But Twitter’s contention this is unsubstantiated just wasn’t true. For one thing, the election hadn’t happened yet, and they were fact checking conjecture. It is commonly acknowledged that mail-in ballots were more susceptible to fraud than voting in person. In 2008, the CalTech/MIT Voting Technology Project recommended states “restrict or abolish on-demand absentee voting in favor of in-person early voting,” due to fraud concerns. A 2005 election reform commission chaired by former president Jimmy Carter also warned that mail-in ballots were the largest source of potential voter fraud. Tens of millions more mail-in votes were expected in 2020 because of the pandemic, without a corresponding increase in security measures.

As the censoring of Trump was being cheered on, the media quite literally chose not to fact check the most damaging allegations against Joe Biden. After years of speculating about Trump’s collusion with Russia, it was revealed in September of 2020 that a firm founded by Hunter Biden received a \$3.5 million wire transfer from the wife of the former mayor of Moscow for a vague “consultancy agreement.”

The New York Times, Washington Post, MSNBC, CNN, and most media outlets didn’t cover the wire-transfer story at all. When Joe Biden was finally directly asked about the story by Trump in the first presidential debate, Biden said the story was “Totally discredited. Totally discredited.” Naturally, PolitiFact declined to issue a ruling on the veracity of the claim even though it was backed up by Treasury department documents reported in an official report issued by the U.S. Senate. Had they ruled the accusation true, that meant the Biden campaign’s dishonest denials would have been flagged as fake news on Facebook, which surely would have damaged his campaign.

The fact checking farce reached its apotheosis in October of 2020 when the New York Post obtained damning information from Hunter Biden’s laptop detailing Biden family corruption. Twitter immediately blocked the link to the New York Post story, prohibiting it from being shared by anyone. And Facebook immediately announced they weren’t going to bother with the

charade of waiting to fact check the story before censoring it. “While I will intentionally not link to the New York Post, I want to be clear that this story is eligible to be fact checked by Facebook’s third-party fact checking partners,” wrote Facebook’s Policy Communications Director Andy Stone. “In the meantime, we are reducing its distribution on our platform.”

It bears mentioning that Stone formerly worked for California Democratic Senator Barbara Boxer and the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. Usually, the Democratic party had to indirectly feed its agenda to a sympathetic press, but here we had the remarkable spectacle of the partisan snake eating its own tail: A Democratic political operative, employed by the largest social network in the world, was announcing the decision to bypass Facebook’s allegedly impartial fact checking process, and unilaterally censoring a story damaging to a Democratic presidential candidate in the middle of a close election.

Was the decision to bury such a damaging story about corruption involving the man who’s now President of the United States decisive in an election that was essentially decided by 40,000 votes out of 159 million cast? Well, journalists seemed to think so.

“According to Biden campaign metrics, online chatter about the Hunter Biden story during the election’s last week was greater than it was around Hillary’s emails during last month of ‘16,” observed Politico editor Sam Stein shortly after the election. “The difference: it never spilled over into mainstream outlets.”

A month after the election, Hunter Biden publicly announced he was under investigation for corruption. Since then, a raft of information has emerged to confirm the information the Post obtained from Hunter’s laptop was genuine. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey told Congress earlier this year it was a “mistake” to ban the New York Post story.

This past June, left-wing Journalist and free speech crusader Glenn Greenwald asked Andy Stone if there was “any news on the fact-checking process you claimed Facebook was undertaking on the Hunter Biden documents in the weeks leading up to the election when – as a life-long Dem operative – you announced for FB that the reporting on this story would be algorithmically suppressed?”

Stone and Facebook have yet to answer the question.

What happened after the 2020 election should obviously be concerning to anyone who cares about the truth in public debates. Even with dubious

conspiracies about the election being stolen circulating widely, an irresponsibly politicized media establishment lacked the credibility to rebut them effectively. Even for the Trump voters who didn't believe the election was stolen, it was hard to argue that it was a "fair election" given the double standards and stranglehold on information that had been applied in the years leading up to and through the 2020 election. Voters are clearly angry about all this manipulation of the facts.

Apple and Amazon's immediate deplatforming of the Trump friendly social network Parler following the January 6 Capitol riot was also unprecedented – and revealing. Subsequent government charging documents would reveal that Parler played almost no role in facilitating the organizers of the January 6 riot. Most of their coordination was done on, yes, Facebook. Yet, the response from these other big tech corporations was to wipe one of Facebook's competitors off of the internet.

For their part, Facebook and Twitter immediately banned Trump from using their platforms and he has not been allowed back. Outside of the discourse governed by America's liberal elites, this has been alarming. Even German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who made little attempt to disguise her contempt for Trump, expressed concern about tech overlords banning elected leaders.

Similarly, the establishment media is trying to strangle any form of media that allows news consumers the chance to opt-out of the legacy media ecosystem that has increasingly gone all-in on outright censorship of anything that exists outside liberal political narratives. Earlier this year, Glenn Greenwald chronicled how journalists were "demanding Substack censor its writers." You can probably guess why they're not fond of a popular newsletter service that enables writers to send their thoughts directly to readers without the typical corporate advertising pressures or liberal editorial imperatives imposed on reporters at big media outlets: It makes it harder for the press to control our elections.

Similarly, The Poynter Institute – PolitiFact's parent organization – expressed concern about Clubhouse, the social media app that allows people to have actual voice conversations with each other. Poynter ran an entire column fretting that "live audio and no recording might complicate the work of fact-checkers on this new platform." Poynter is apparently operating under the assumption that the ability of private citizens to have conversations with each other over the phone without being spied on by journalists should be an aberration, rather than the norm.

Most recently, in September Frances Haugen, a former Facebook employee, has emerged as a “whistleblower” providing damning documents purporting to detail how the company harmfully manipulates children. Haugen has received a hefty amount of attention from 60 Minutes and other high profile media outlets, and this media attention culminated in a congressional hearing where Democratic senator Amy Klobuchar said she hoped Haugen’s testimony will be the “catalyst for action.” Whatever concerns you have about social media’s effect on children, the fact Haugen’s anti-Facebook campaign is being orchestrated by top Democratic party operatives endorsed by Democratic politicians is revealing.

Speculation or not, it’s perfectly rational to assume political pressure from Democrats on Facebook is ultimately about making sure that Facebook continues to control information in ways that benefit them politically.

Three years ago when I was getting yelled at for questioning Facebook’s ability to fairly adjudicate political disputes, I don’t think anyone in the room anticipated what the next few years would bring. From the media and big tech censoring the President of the United States, to the broad suppression of legitimate reporting on political scandals and the wiping of entire sites off of the internet. And yet, I have seen very little in the way of self-awareness from journalists such that they would stop enabling this dramatic erosion of free speech.

Suffice to say, I have since parted ways politically and professionally with the editor who yelled at me that day in defense of Facebook. Since then, he’s very publicly and unironically argued in favor of “MOAR Censorship!” on multiple occasions.

And after we all lost our jobs, The Weekly Standard’s former fact-checker, the one who dared to express concern about Facebook becoming an engine of global censorship, got a job as a fact checker for CNN – the very news outlet that instigated Facebook’s Alex Jones ban.

The editor-in-chief of The Weekly Standard who signed off on our Facebook partnership has since gone on to start a new publication called The Dispatch that still participates in Facebook’s fact checking program. Last year, just before the election, a fact check from The Dispatch got a pro-life group’s ads banned from Facebook. Their fact check said it was unfair to claim Joe Biden supports late-term abortion. The Dispatch would later admit their fact check was “published in error.”

Facebook's third-party "fact checking" program has also grown extensively since then. Facebook now funds more than 80 different fact checkers and has spent over \$84 million on the program to date. "We know this program is working and people find value in the warning screens we apply to content after a fact-checking partner has rated it," says [Facebook's website on touting their fact checking program](#). "We surveyed people who had seen these warning screens on-platform and found that 74% of people thought they saw the right amount or were open to seeing more false information labels, with 63% of people thinking they were applied fairly."

In sum, the evidence that people are happy with Facebook's censorship program is that Facebook says they are. Even if Facebook touting its own internal surveys was credible, they're still admitting 37 percent of Facebook users don't think their misinformation warnings are applied fairly. That's a huge number, and Facebook's own surveys should be telling them their misinformation policies are creating distrust among a very large segment of the population. But bizarrely, Facebook is touting this as if it's reassuring. To quote [one of the more incisive critiques of modern journalism](#), "They've done studies, you know. Sixty percent of the time, it works every time."

Facebook's indefensible justifications can't just bulldoze past the reality Americans now face. In just a few years, we went from concerns about disinformation that were vague and hysterical in equal measure, to allowing one of the world's largest corporations wide latitude to capriciously censor the news with the goal of influencing elections on behalf of Democrats. The press, the one group that is supposed to warn us about the dangers of this kind of fascist arrangement, is totally fine with submitting to and enabling this unprecedented exercise of power. And no, that's not hyperbole – despite all the howling about "Drumpf," the actual definition of fascism put forth by Mussolini himself is the merging of corporate and state power, typically achieved by alliance with a political party. It seems to accurately describe the situation.

Given the lines that have already been crossed, history doesn't suggest a lot of examples of people restoring a culture of free speech once it's been taken from them. The good news is that the big tech-corporate media censorship regime is still fairly new, and after the last several years, many more authoritative surveys show voters are increasingly distrustful of both big tech and the media, even if they don't fully understand exactly how this corrupt alliance is controlling what news they see and hear.

But if you do understand what's happening, the censorship that's been forced on us really is dire – and it's time we started yelling about it.

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The views expressed in this opinion piece are the author's own and do not necessarily represent those of The Daily Wire.

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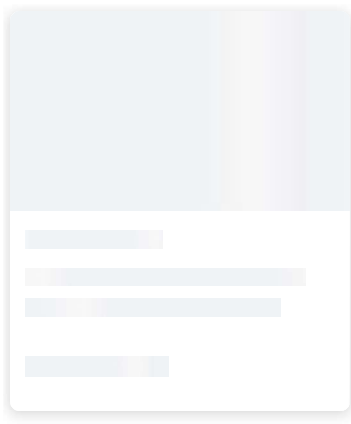
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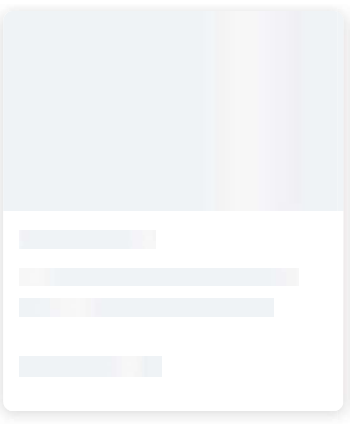
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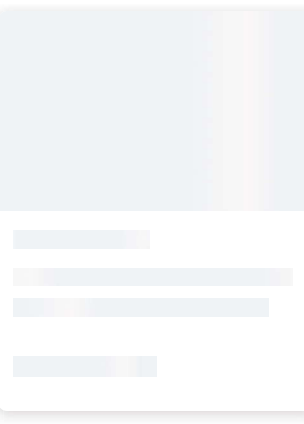
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