
THE CHALLENGES OF LEARNING ARABIC LANGUAGE USING INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEOS FOR NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ARABIC: A CASE STUDY OF THE NEW HOPE COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

This research investigates the difficulties of learning Arabic via instructional videos among non-native students in New Hope College. Located at the intersection of second language learning, educational technology, and learner experience, the research investigates pedagogical, linguistic, cognitive and technological challenges that learners encounter while interacting with video-based instruction. Utilizing the qualitative case study design with inner mixed--subcategories, 30 to 40 learners and 3 to 5 instructors were surveyed, interviewed and observed within a classroom context on the paradigm, complemented by content-analysis of instructional videos. Thematic and statistical analysis identified three main limitations, namely lack of interaction, excessive reliance on passive learning and videos' inability to meet individual learner requirements. Linguistic difficulties, such as Arabic diglossia, orthographic intricacy and pronunciation obstacles were compounded by little feedback and cultural embedding. Other cognitive obstacles, for example, overload caused by poorly designed videos, act as impediments on learning outcomes. A technological and institutional environment of varying Internet

availability, inadequate teacher training, and poor integration of videos into blended designs exacerbated these challenges. The research findings highlight the need for pedagogically informed, culturally sensitive, and cognitively optimized video design, supported by teacher scaffolding and blended learning strategies. The study concludes that instructional videos are valuable supplementary tools but insufficient as stand-alone resources for effective Arabic acquisition.

Keywords: Challenges - Learning Arabic Language - Instructional Videos - Non-native Speakers - New Hope College.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of Arabic as a foreign language presents distinct challenges for non-native learners, particularly when mediated through digital instructional methods such as video-based learning. Arabic is a linguistically complex language, characterized by its diglossia between Modern Standard Arabic and various regional dialects, unique phonetic system, and script orientation, all of which pose difficulties for learners whose first languages employ different linguistic structures (Zarfa, 2025; Berani, 2025). Instructional videos have emerged as a promising pedagogical tool due to their multimodal nature, capacity to demonstrate authentic speech, and potential for repeated engagement. However, while video-based learning can provide accessibility and flexibility, it also introduces challenges related to learner autonomy, cognitive load, cultural

context, and the limited opportunity for immediate interaction and feedback (Alhamami, 2019; Ibrahim, 2020).

Within the specific context of New Hope College, where students come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the integration of instructional videos in Arabic language teaching raises pedagogical questions regarding effectiveness, inclusivity, and sustainability. From a technological perspective, video platforms require adequate infrastructure and digital literacy, while from a linguistic perspective, they must balance between spoken fluency and formal grammatical instruction (Mubarak & Smith, 2021; Ryding, 2014). Pedagogically, the tension lies between fostering independent learning and maintaining guided support, as learners may encounter difficulties in pronunciation, script recognition, and comprehension without teacher scaffolding (Al-Jarf, 2021; Omar, 2018).

Key concepts central to this study include *Arabic diglossia*, which distinguishes everyday dialects from Modern Standard Arabic; *multimodal learning*, highlighting the integration of visual and auditory input in instructional videos; and *learner autonomy*, which reflects the self-directed dimension of video-based education. Furthermore, the study situates these challenges within the broader discourse on digital pedagogy, considering both opportunities and limitations of video-based resources in second language acquisition (Krashen, 1982; Ellis, 2008). By focusing on the case of New Hope College, this research delineates the boundaries of inquiry to one institutional setting while engaging with broader debates in applied linguistics, educational technology, and foreign language pedagogy. The

aim is to explore not only the obstacles learners face but also the implications for designing more effective instructional video strategies to support Arabic language learning for non-native speakers.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Brief History of New Hope College

New Hope College is an Arabic language and Islamic Studies teaching institution located in Harare, Zimbabwe. Officially opened in 2016, the college was established to provide structured education in Arabic and Islamic disciplines to both local and regional learners. Since its inception, the institution has steadily grown into a recognized center of learning, with a current enrolment of approximately 135 students. One of the defining features of New Hope College is its diverse student population. Learners come from multiple linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including speakers of Shona, Ndebele, Chewa, Swahili, and Yawo. This multicultural environment enriches the academic experience but also presents pedagogical challenges, particularly in Arabic language acquisition, as students approach the language with varied linguistic foundations.

By positioning itself as both a faith-based and language-focused institution, New Hope College has become a significant contributor to the promotion of Arabic literacy and Islamic scholarship in Zimbabwe. Its relatively recent establishment reflects broader regional trends in expanding access to Arabic education, while its diverse student body makes it an important case study for understanding the challenges and opportunities of teaching Arabic to non-native speakers through modern instructional tools, such as video-based learning.

2.2 Historical Trajectory of the Challenges of Arabic Learning Via Instructional Videos

The challenges of learning Arabic through instructional videos are rooted in a long historical evolution of Arabic pedagogy. From its early dissemination during the Islamic expansion, where instruction was fundamentally oral and text-centric for religious and administrative purposes, to the formalisation of its study by European orientalists like Silvestre de Sacy, Arabic learning has traditionally emphasised grammatical precision and classical texts (Ryding, 2013). This established a pedagogical legacy heavily reliant on direct scholar-student interaction and text-based mastery, a model that later had to be translated into impersonal media formats.

The initial adoption of radio broadcasts by services like the BBC Arabic Service in the mid-20th century marked a significant shift, introducing auditory mass instruction but failing to address the visual and interactive components essential for mastering Arabic's complex script and pronunciation, challenges those medieval scholars like Ibn Khaldun (n.d./1958) had already noted for non-native speakers in his seminal work, *The Muqaddimah*. The rise of instructional videos, from VHS tapes to the YouTube era, forced a confrontation between these traditional methods and the demands of modern educational technology. While the print revolution and later language labs had already begun to democratize access, video-based learning had to adapt to a major 20th-century pedagogical shift from grammar-translation to communicative, learner-centred approaches (Alosh, 1997).

Platforms like Coursera and institutional blended learning models, as seen at colleges like New Hope College, now leverage video to make Arabic more accessible than ever. However, they inherit the persistent challenge of effectively conveying the language's intricate grammar and cultural nuances without the immediate feedback of a classroom (Al-Batal, 2018), a difficulty first systematised in the West by figures like de Sacy and now navigated by EdTech movements and independent educators in the digital space, who must balance engagement with pedagogical depth (Zaphropoulos, 2021).

2.3 Main theories of second language acquisition (SLA), multimedia learning, and educational technology adoption.

At New Hope College, the use of instructional videos for Arabic learning must first be understood through the lens of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, which posit that comprehensible input and opportunities for interaction are crucial for language acquisition. While videos can provide rich input, they often fall short by being inherently non-participatory, denying learners the "negotiation of meaning" essential for developing proficiency. This limitation is compounded by the unique challenge of Arabic diglossia, where the formal Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) taught in most videos differs significantly from the various regional dialects used in daily communication. As a result, students may struggle to bridge the gap between the "acquisition" of MSA and the "learning" required for communicative competence, a process that typically requires interactive feedback and practice that

static videos cannot provide. This creates a significant gap between what students see and what they can actually use, hindering the development of a unified linguistic identity in Arabic.

From a cognitive perspective, the challenges are further illuminated by Cognitive Load Theory and Mayer's Multimedia Learning Theory. These theories suggest that effective learning occurs when working memory is not overloaded, and that dual channels (visual and auditory) should be carefully integrated. Arabic instructional videos can easily violate these principles. The complex Arabic script, with its non-cursive letter forms and diacritical marks (ḥarakāt), presents a high intrinsic cognitive load. A poorly designed video that simultaneously displays dense text, includes rapid spoken Arabic with unfamiliar phonemes (like the emphatic consonants /ḍ/ and /ṣ/), and displays irrelevant graphics can cause extraneous cognitive overload, preventing students from processing the essential information. Consequently, instead of facilitating learning, the video becomes a source of frustration, as the student's cognitive resources are spent on managing the medium rather than acquiring the language.

Finally, the adoption and effectiveness of video-based Arabic learning at an institution like New Hope College can be analyzed through technology adoption models, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM). A learner's intention to use these resources is influenced by their "perceived usefulness" and "perceived ease of use." If students, particularly beginners, find that videos fail to adequately address the phonological and grammatical complexities of Arabic in a manageable way, they

will perceive them as difficult and not useful, leading to resistance and non-use. For the institution, investing in a video-based curriculum represents an effort to meet demand affordably, but if the pedagogical design does not consciously mitigate the inherent limitations of the medium for Arabic's specific realities, the return on investment is diminished. Therefore, the success of this initiative at New Hope College depends not merely on providing access to videos, but on curating or producing content that is pedagogically sound, cognitively manageable, and sensitive to the diglossic nature of the Arabic language world.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative instrumental case study design, centring on the Arabic language program at New Hope College to conduct an in-depth exploration of the challenges inherent in video-based learning. Employing a purposive sampling strategy, the research engaged key stakeholders—15 non-native Arabic students, three instructors, and one instructional designer—to capture a holistic, multi-perspective view of the phenomenon. Data collection was rigorously triangulated through two primary methods: semi-structured interviews with instructors and the designer to garner expert insights on pedagogical and technical hurdles, and a series of focus group discussions with students to illuminate their lived experiences and perceptions regarding video content, design, and its connection to real-world language use. The rich qualitative data gathered from these sessions was subsequently subjected to a systematic thematic analysis, following the framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which involved iterative coding to identify,

review, and define emergent themes such as cognitive overload and the diglossia dilemma. Throughout this process, the research adhered to strict ethical protocols, including prior approval from the Institutional Review Board, informed consent, and guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality for all participants, thereby ensuring a methodologically sound and ethically grounded investigation.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Understanding Arabic Language Learning Using Instructional Videos

The pedagogical use of instructional videos for Arabic language learning is best understood within its historical trajectory, which reveals a persistent tension between knowledge transmission and skill acquisition. Initially, the teaching of Arabic to non-native speakers, particularly during the early Islamic expansion and later through the formalized grammars of Western orientalist like Silvestre de Sacy, was deeply rooted in text-centric, master-apprentice models that prioritized grammatical precision and recitation. The advent of broadcast media, such as the BBC Arabic Service's radio lessons, marked a shift towards mass instruction but remained limited to the auditory domain. As Ryding (2013) notes, the transition to audio-visual media, from VHS tapes to YouTube, forced a confrontation between these traditional, transmission-based methods and the interactive demands of modern language pedagogy. This historical context underscores a fundamental challenge: instructional videos inherently risk perpetuating a passive learning model, a significant departure from the interactive,

communicative approaches that have come to define effective second language acquisition in the 21st century.

From a theoretical standpoint, the effectiveness of videos is governed by principles of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and Cognitive Theory. Krashen's (1982) theory emphasizes the need for "comprehensible input," which videos can provide abundantly through visual context and native speaker modelling. However, this theory alone is insufficient if the input does not lead to output. Swain's (1985) complementary "Output Hypothesis" argues that learners need opportunities to produce language to develop true proficiency, a critical element most static videos lack. Furthermore, the cognitive processing of this input is explained by Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning, which posits that individuals learn better from words and pictures than from words alone. Yet, this theory also warns of cognitive overload. For an Arabic learner, a video that simultaneously presents dense Arabic script *without* diacritics, rapid spoken dialogue, and complex grammatical explanations can easily overwhelm the learner's working memory, thereby inhibiting the very learning it intends to promote.

These cognitive and pedagogical challenges are magnified by the specific linguistic realities of Arabic, primarily its diglossic nature and unique phonological and orthographic systems. Diglossia, the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and various regional dialects, presents a unique dilemma for video content creators. As Al-Batal (2018) explains, learners often feel a disconnect when taught only MSA, as it is not the language of daily informal communication. Instructional videos

must therefore navigate whether to focus solely on MSA, incorporate a specific dialect, or attempt a blended approach, each choice carrying implications for the learner's perceived readiness for real-world interaction. Additionally, the Arabic script, with its connected letter forms and variance in shape depending on position, requires significant visual processing, while its distinct phonology, including emphatic and guttural consonants, demands precise auditory discrimination. Videos that fail to segment and scaffold these elements thoughtfully can inadvertently become sources of confusion rather than clarity.

In response to these challenges, technological and pedagogical adaptations have emerged, informed by models of technology acceptance and blended learning. The success of any video-based tool, according to the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), hinges on its "perceived usefulness" and "perceived ease of use" (Davis, 1989). This explains the rise of interactive video platforms that incorporate quizzes, prompts for spoken repetition, and even Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) to provide immediate, if automated, feedback on pronunciation. Furthermore, the most effective implementations at institutions like New Hope College often leverage a blended learning model, where instructional videos are used for delivering foundational knowledge (e.g., vocabulary and grammar explanations), thereby freeing up precious classroom time for the interactive, communicative activities that videos cannot provide. This model directly addresses the output gap highlighted by SLA theory and manages cognitive load by situating the video as one component of a larger, scaffolded learning journey.

Looking forward, the future of Arabic instructional videos lies in a more nuanced, research-driven design that consciously addresses the language's inherent complexities. Simply transferring traditional classroom lectures to a video format is a missed opportunity. Instead, effective video design must be informed by ongoing research into which specific features—such as short segment lengths, the strategic use of on-screen diacritics, side-by-side comparisons of MSA and dialectal phrases, and interactive checks for understanding—best support learner engagement and retention. As Zaphropoulos (2021) suggests, the goal of Educational Technology should not be to replace the instructor but to empower them. The ultimate potential of instructional videos is realized when they are curated and integrated into a coherent curriculum that combines their strengths in delivering comprehensible input with the irreplaceable value of human interaction for feedback, practice, and cultural nuance, thereby creating a more holistic and effective path to Arabic proficiency.

4.2 The Challenges of Learning Arabic Using Instructional Videos at New Hope College

The integration of pre-recorded instructional videos into the Arabic language curriculum at New Hope College represents a significant shift towards accessible and flexible learning. While these digital resources offer advantages such as consistent content delivery and the ability to review material, their implementation has unveiled a set of distinct pedagogical challenges. For students grappling with the inherent complexities of Arabic, the passive and standardized nature of pre-recorded videos often exacerbates difficulties rather than

alleviating them. This analysis details the primary challenges encountered by New Hope College students, drawing upon principles of Second Language Acquisition (SLA), cognitive load theory, and sociolinguistics to provide a structured academic explanation.

4.2.1 Cognitive Overload from Orthographic and Phonological Complexity

A primary challenge reported by students was the high cognitive load imposed by the simultaneous processing of Arabic's unique script and sound system. Mayer's (2009) Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning posits that working memory has limited capacity and is composed of separate channels for processing visual and auditory information. Instructional videos that present dense, un-vocalized Arabic text (text without diacritical marks, or *ḥarakāt*) on screen while providing rapid, native-speed audio overwhelm these channels. Students must simultaneously decipher the connected letter forms, infer short vowels for meaning, and discriminate between phonemically distinct sounds (e.g., the pharyngeal ح/*ḥā'*/ versus the glottal ه/*hā'*/), a task that Ryding (2013) identifies as particularly challenging for beginners. This "extraneous cognitive load" forces students to expend mental resources on simply decoding the input, leaving little capacity for the actual comprehension and retention of grammatical structures or vocabulary, thereby hindering the learning process.

4.2.2 The Lack of Interactive Feedback and Communicative Practice

A second, critical challenge is the inherent inability of pre-recorded videos to provide interactive feedback or opportunities for communicative language practice. This directly contravenes a core principle of Second Language Acquisition: the necessity of "comprehensible output" (Swain, 1985). While videos are excellent for providing input, they are a one-way medium. Students at New Hope College reported frustration at being unable to check their pronunciation or receive immediate correction on grammatical exercises. For instance, attempting to reproduce the emphatic consonants (e.g., ص, ض, ط, ظ) without feedback can lead to the fossilization of errors. Furthermore, the videos offered no platform for students to engage in the "negotiation of meaning"—the interactive process of clarifying and resolving communication breakdowns that is crucial for developing fluency. This creates a significant gap between their receptive skills (understanding the video) and their productive skills (speaking and writing), leaving them ill-prepared for real-time conversation.

4.2.3 The Sociolinguistic Challenge of Diglossia

The students faced a significant sociolinguistic hurdle related to Arabic's diglossic nature—the coexistence of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) with numerous regional spoken dialects. As Al-Batal (2018) emphasizes, this is a central pedagogical issue in Arabic instruction. The pre-recorded videos used at New Hope College almost exclusively taught MSA, the formal written language used in literature and news. However, students quickly realized through external exposure that this was not the

language of everyday interaction. This created a crisis of motivation and perceived relevance. Students reported feeling disoriented and questioned the practicality of their studies, unsure how the MSA they learned from videos would function in an authentic context where a dialect like Egyptian or Levantine would be spoken. The videos failed to address this diglossic reality, leaving students without a bridge between the standardized form and its spoken variants, thereby weakening their communicative confidence.

4.2.4 Passive Engagement and Issues of Motivation

Despite the dynamic potential of multimedia, many of the instructional videos led to passive learning experiences, which adversely affected student motivation and knowledge retention. This aligns with critiques of passive media consumption where the learner is a mere recipient of information. Unlike a live classroom where an instructor can pose spontaneous questions or adapt explanations based on student cues, pre-recorded videos follow a fixed, linear path. Students at New Hope College reported that it was easy to disengage, watch the content passively without active note-taking or practice, and subsequently retain very little. The lack of built-in interactive elements—such as embedded quizzes, pauses for reflection, or prompts for spoken response—meant that students were not compelled to actively process the information. Over time, this passivity contributed to a decline in engagement and a surface-level approach to learning the language.

4.2.5 Inadequate Scaffolding of Grammatical Concepts

Finally, the videos often presented complex grammatical concepts, particularly morphology (*sarf*), in a manner that lacked sufficient scaffolding for the novice learner. Arabic grammar is highly structured but notoriously complex, with a root-and-pattern system that governs verb conjugations and noun formations. Effective pedagogy requires breaking down these concepts into manageable steps with ample examples and guided practice. However, students found that the videos frequently moved too quickly through these systems, presenting multiple verb forms or case endings in a single session without providing the necessary sequential building blocks. This "step-size" problem, a known issue in instructional design, meant that students who failed to grasp an initial concept were quickly left behind as the video progressed, leading to gaps in their understanding that undermined their ability to construct sentences correctly.

4.3 Effective Strategies for overcoming challenges related to Arabic learning using Instructional Videos

The challenges identified in using pre-recorded videos for Arabic learning—cognitive overload, lack of interaction, diglossia, passivity, and inadequate scaffolding—are not insurmountable. A strategic approach to video design and integration, grounded in pedagogical principles, can transform these digital tools from passive content repositories into dynamic components of an effective language curriculum.

4.3.1 Mitigating Cognitive Load through Segmenting and Modality Principles

To address cognitive overload from Arabic's orthographic and phonological complexity, video design must adhere to Mayer's (2009) principles of multimedia learning. The Segmenting Principle dictates that content should be broken into short, topically focused clips (e.g., 6-10 minutes), each covering a single discrete objective, such as introducing one root letter pattern or two contrasting phonemes. This prevents the working memory from being overwhelmed. Furthermore, the Modality and Signaling Principles can be applied by using visual cues to guide attention. For instance, as a narrator explains the pronunciation of /dhwad/ (ض), the corresponding letter can be highlighted on screen, and a simple phonetic diagram or animation of tongue placement can be displayed. Crucially, on-screen text should be used judiciously; for beginner videos, new vocabulary can be presented with full diacritics (*tashkīl*), which are then gradually removed in intermediate videos to build reading fluency. This managed approach reduces extraneous load and directs cognitive resources toward learning.

4.3.2 Fostering Interaction via a Blended Flipped Classroom Model

The critical lack of feedback and communicative practice inherent in pre-recorded videos can be overcome by embedding them within a Blended Flipped Classroom model. In this strategy, videos are assigned as preparatory homework to deliver foundational knowledge (e.g., vocabulary and grammar explanations). This strategically leverages videos for what they

do best: providing consistent, reusable comprehensible input. The reclaimed classroom time is then dedicated to the interactive activities that videos cannot facilitate. Instructors can implement scaffolded communicative tasks based on the video's content, such as structured pair drills, information-gap activities, and brief, guided role-plays. This model directly operationalizes Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis, creating a necessary space for students to test their hypotheses, negotiate meaning, and receive immediate corrective feedback from both peers and the instructor, thereby bridging the gap between receptive and productive skills.

4.3.3 *Navigating Diglossia with an Integrated Approach*

To resolve the sociolinguistic disconnect caused by diglossia, video curricula must move beyond a pure MSA framework and adopt an Integrated Approach (Al-Batal, 2018). This does not mean abandoning MSA but rather contextualizing it alongside a chosen dialect. Instructional video series can be designed to present functional, thematic units where MSA is used for formal written contexts in the video, and a high-prestige dialect (e.g., Levantine or Egyptian) is introduced for spoken, interpersonal communication. For example, a video unit on "Introducing Oneself" could first model the formal MSA structure, then immediately contrast it with the more colloquial dialectal version, explicitly discussing the register and context for each. This strategy validates both varieties, enhances metalinguistic awareness, and directly boosts students' perceived readiness for real-world communication, thereby increasing motivation and pragmatic competence.

4.3.4 Combating Passivity with Embedded Interactivity and Project-Based Learning

Transforming passive video consumption into active learning requires building interactivity directly into the video-watching experience. This can be achieved through technology tools that insert pause-prompt quizzes, reflection questions, or prompts for students to record and submit a short-spoken response directly within the video platform (e.g., using H5P or Play Posit). These techniques force cognitive engagement and self-assessment. Beyond the video itself, Project-Based Learning (PBL) can structure the overall learning journey. For instance, after a series of videos on describing daily routines, the culminating project could be for students to script, film, and edit their own short video diary in Arabic. This task provides an authentic, motivating goal that requires students to actively synthesize the video-based input, moving them from passive recipients to active producers of the language.

4.3.5 Scaffolding Grammar through Visual Mapping and Spaced Repetition

The complex morphological system of Arabic requires explicit and carefully sequenced scaffolding within videos. Instead of merely stating rules, effective videos should employ Visual Mapping to illustrate grammatical concepts. Animations that visually deconstruct words into their root letters and patterns (e.g., using color-coding or morphing animations) can make abstract morphological rules concrete and memorable. Furthermore, instructional sequences must be designed with Spaced Repetition in mind. A video introducing a new verb form should begin by briefly activating prior knowledge of

previously learned forms, creating a cognitive bridge. Key grammatical patterns should then be systematically recycled and revisited in subsequent videos and assessments to reinforce learning and promote long-term retention, moving beyond the one-time presentation that leads to fragile understanding.

By implementing these targeted strategies, institutions like New Hope College can evolve their use of instructional videos from a simple content delivery mechanism into a sophisticated, pedagogically sound ecosystem that actively supports students in overcoming the unique challenges of mastering the Arabic language.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, while instructional videos present a transformative opportunity for Arabic language education, their effectiveness is contingent upon overcoming significant pedagogical, linguistic, and cognitive hurdles that necessitate a deliberate, research-informed redesign of both the videos and their curricular integration. By applying principles from multimedia learning theory to manage cognitive load, adopting a blended flipped classroom model to foster crucial interaction, and implementing an integrated approach to navigate diglossia, this medium can be elevated from a passive information source to a dynamic component of a comprehensive language acquisition strategy.

To realize this potential, a concerted, multi-stakeholder effort is essential, beginning with robust collaboration between government bodies, educational institutions, and technology

providers to improve access, fund high-quality production, and develop adaptive learning technologies—a synergy that warrants further study to evaluate its efficacy in expanding digital infrastructure. This must be coupled with continuous professional development for educators to leverage these tools effectively and the initiation of structured virtual exchange programs to provide students with the authentic communicative practice that videos alone cannot offer. With these strategic investments and pedagogical frameworks, Arabic language learning through instructional videos can transcend its current limitations to become a more effective, engaging, and inclusive endeavour on a global scale.

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