

## I Think; Therefore it's News! The Convergence of Opinions versus Facts on Cable News Networks

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### Abstract

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Research shows that Americans have a difficult time separating fact from opinion. This can lead to misunderstanding, sharing of false information on social media, and a loss of faith in reporting. This paper examined newscasts on the three most popular U.S. cable news channels (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC) from 2008 to 2018. While the study did not find the amount of opinions rose consistently, or on all networks, there were some statistically significant changes, especially with CNN. The research also noted that by using specific techniques, the consistent reliance on opinions in a newscast can easily confuse viewers from telling fact from commentary.

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**Keywords:** Cable news; CNN; FOX; journalism; MSNBC; opinions

### 1. Introduction

In June 2018, the Pew Research Center published the results of a study it conducted to see how well Americans distinguished opinions from fact. The findings of this study (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, Sumida, 2018) were the impetus of this research. According to the study of over 5,000 U.S. adults, only about a quarter of Americans correctly identified all five factual statements. Twenty-eight percent of respondents got no more than two correct. A somewhat larger portion of Americans correctly identified all five opinion statements (35 percent) and about two in ten incorrectly identified most of the opinion statements (three or more misidentified as factual). With the rise of social media, the country's political divisions, and the rash of trolls and biased websites peddling easily-shared, incorrect information via the internet, Americans' inability to determine what is fact and what is opinion is concerning. Of particular note, was that people over the age of 50 were worse than younger respondents at telling fact from opinion. Forty-four percent of younger people identified all five statements correctly, while only 26 percent of people over 50 could do the same. Fewer than 20 percent of people over 65 could identify all five statements as opinion.

Additionally, a Media Insight Project (2018) survey found that only 54 percent of respondents said they could easily sort news from opinion in their cable news coverage, while fewer than half (43 percent) struggled to sort news and opinion online. Fifty-six percent of Americans felt the media is on the wrong track when it comes to the news. Meanwhile, over 40 percent of people said that most news they see from the media is opinion and commentary posing as news reporting. And it is not just the viewers who see this as a problem. The Media Insight project found that almost three-quarters of American journalists thought most people did not understand the difference between news and opinion content.

What makes it so hard for Americans to separate fact from opinion? And why is the American media offering facts mixed with a heavy dose of opinion? Where did the rules of journalism dissolve? The search for an answer to these two questions is what initiated my examination of news. In particular, I looked into cable TV news because it has been a mainstay for my news viewing and I noticed what seemed to be a large amount of opinion in nightly broadcasts.

### 2. The Shift in U.S. Cable News

Journalism in the U.S. has had a long history of blending facts and opinions. In the early days of the country, newspapers openly took political sides. But over most of the past century, journalism in the U.S. was focused on objectivity and reporting facts. Opinions, while present, were normally placed in separate areas to distance it from actual hard news.

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However, over the past 20 years, that separation of fact and opinion in the media seems to have eroded. A RAND study (Kavanagh, et al., 2019) found that cable news outlets displayed a noticeable and significant shift toward “subjective, abstract, directive, and argumentative language, with content based more on the expression of opinion than on the provision of facts” (p. 3). The RAND study found that, overall, there had been a gradual shift in all media from 2000 to 2017 to a more subjective view of news reporting based on personal perspective. However, it was cable news that took the starkest turn in style. Compared to “old” ways of reporting (pre-2000s), cable news today is “subjective and relies on the arguments and opinions to persuade and debate” (p. 3).

Another shift in media over the past two decades is the rise in social media. Social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat offer us the ability to broadcast our own ideas. This shift in the willingness and ability to offer public opinions seems to have also affected TV news. Pundits, panels, and talking heads seem to believe that the news has also become a vehicle to share their opinions and not to report facts. “It is often hard to tell the reporters from the opinion slingers, especially when the panels bleed into the delivery of the news itself” (Farhi, 2018, para. 6). There is no better example of this than cable news. Farhi (2018) noted that the growing use of panels on cable news has conditioned viewers to expect news to come with a side of opinion and often it’s more opinion with a side of news. A 2013 State of the Media report (Jurkowitz, et al, 2013) found that 70 percent of evening cable news was commentary or opinion, while only the remaining 30 percent was factual reporting. A major reason for this shift in how “news” is defined on cable TV is shift in the business strategy. Fox News was first to recognize that taking political sides increased viewers. And bashing the other political side, seemed to increase ratings. When Fox News’ success became apparent, MSNBC soon followed suit with a liberal version of the news. As Bode (2014) noted:

Eighty-five (85) percent of MSNBC’s programming is devoted to opinion content, compared to 55 percent for Fox News and 46 percent for CNN. MSNBC is liberal, and it caters to those individuals whose frustration with the formerly dominant news networks mirrors Fox’s current audience. (para. 11)

In addition, the opinions and facts are intricately woven together, making it hard for viewers to separate one from the other. The heavy use of opinion-like phrases such as “I think” offers a prelude for pundits to offer opinion mixed with fact. The phrase also allows talking heads the ability to couch facts as opinion because they are not vouching for the accuracy of these facts; rather how they interpret the information. As Greenslade (2016) noted, we live in an era where what people want to believe will always outrank the facts.

### 3. Methodology

This research began by selecting transcripts of one leading primetime news show from each of the top three U.S. cable news networks (CNN, Fox News, MSNBC). I selected shows that had been on air during the 11-year period from 2008-2018. The selected shows were AC360 (from CNN), Hannity (from Fox, and called Hannity & Colmes in 2008), and The Rachel Maddow Show (from MSNBC, which did not go on air until later in 2008). In most cases, these shows were the top-rated show on the network, but in some cases the show was the second-highest rated on the network. Most other shows did not run for the entire eleven-year period; I wanted to be able to make consistent comparisons of the same news show as I conducted the qualitative research. I then chose transcripts from two months (one in April and one in October) from five-year spans (2008, 2013, 2018). These particular months were selected because they were perfectly six months apart and avoided significant U.S. holiday seasons (Thanksgiving & Christmas) and summers (when Congress is not in session and news tends to be quieter). I randomly selected the second full week of those months to choose as my sample. I examined the first hour of these news shows (most only lasted one hour, but in the cases where it went two hours, for consistency, I only selected the first hour of the episode).

In reviewing the transcripts of the two months from each of the three years (2008, 2013, 2018), there were some basic ground rules in my research for what would be considered opinion, what was considered fact, and what would be removed from consideration. First, in defining what constituted an opinion statement versus factual statement, I began with the definition the Pew Research Center used in their 2018 study (Mitchell et al., 2018). This is defined as statements that have “the capacity to be proved or disproved by objective evidence” (p.4). To be clear, my study was not tracking how accurate the factual statements were. I looked, line-by-line, at whether statements could be proven true objectively. If yes, (even if false) this was considered a factual statement. If no, it was considered opinion. Second, I did not include the comments of those in video clips unless those people knew they were being interviewed by a news outlet. For example, if President Obama was giving a speech to a group in Wisconsin and one of the news outlets showed a clip of that speech where Obama offered his opinion, that was not included in my tally. The reason was that the speaker (in this case the president) was not aware that this would be shown on cable news that evening and did not specifically intend for his opinion to be on air.

However, if someone was interviewed by a CNN reporter earlier in the day and offered his/her opinion, and a clip of that interview was then shown on a primetime CNN show, that would be considered in my tally because this speaker was aware this might be used by the network. Third, the opinions had to be made by employees of the network (hosts, reporters, panelists, in-studio guests) or people interviewed by the network. Fourth, I included both speculation of future events and rhetorical questions as opinion, but only if the rhetorical question indicated a clear opinion. For example, Rachel Maddow asking, “Is this the dumbest idea a president ever had?” would be considered an expression of opinion. However, a rhetorical question such as, “Shouldn’t America be doing more?” might not (depending on the context). Finally, I tracked the phrase “I think” in all transcripts for the entire months of April and October in all 11 years of 2008-2018. This includes many iterations of the phrase, including “I do think”, “I don’t think”, “I do not think”, and “I thought”. This examination is an expansion on the “opinion vs factual” statement review. In the latter, I examined one week of transcripts for three years at about five-year intervals. In the former, I reviewed the entire month’s transcripts of the one-hour cable news shows and did so for each year over the 11-year span. However, the review of “I think” comments included all uses (by host, pundit, or even video clip).

My general hypothesis was that we would see an increase in the amount of opinion in each time period for each network, however, the results showed inconsistent changes among the years and the networks.

Hypothesis 1:

Ha: There will be an overall increase in opinions on all cable news networks from 2008-2018.

H0: There will be no increase in opinions on all cable news networks from 2008-2018.

Hypothesis 2:

Ha: There will be an increase in opinions on all CNN from 2008-2018.

H0: There will be no increase in opinions on CNN from 2008-2018.

Hypothesis 3:

Ha: There will be an increase in opinions on FOX News from 2008-2018.

H0: There will be no increase in opinions on Fox News from 2008-2018.

Hypothesis 4:

Ha: There will be an increase in opinions on MSNBC from 2008-2018.

H0: There will be no increase in opinions on MSNBC from 2008-2018.

## 4. Results

In examining the findings, the number of opinion statements varied from network to network, but there were some statistically significant changes within each network individually when the data was reviewed.

As a collection, the number of opinion statements during the time periods examined --2008, 2013, 2018 - showed that 20.5 percent of all statements were opinions. In 2008, for all three networks, the total amount of opinion statements was 21.1 percent. That decreased slightly in 2013 to 18.8 percent and then rebounded a bit in 2018 to 20.7 percent. So, there was a slight decrease of opinions among all networks from 2008-2018 (though not statistically significant,  $P=0.41$ ) meaning the null hypothesis was not rejected for Hypothesis 1. Looking at the collected results of each network over the time period, CNN’s opinion statements from 2008-18 were 19.4 percent of all statements. MSNBC was 19.6 percent and Fox News was slightly higher at 22.5 percent. But, in essence, collectively, one in every five comments was an opinion in these cable news shows.

What was notable was the shift year-to-year by each network. Fox News had a lot of opinion but no statistically significant changes over the period. Fox offered significantly more opinion than CNN in 2008 but MSNBC offered significantly more opinion than both CNN and Fox that year. However, it should be noted that MSNBC had only four weeks of data compared to eight for the other networks because the specific show on MSNBC did not go on air until after April 2008. In 2013, the only significant difference was between CNN and Fox News. Fox News used more opinion than MSNBC, but it was not statistically significant however, there was a statistically significant higher use of opinions between Fox and CNN. Finally, in 2018, there was a statistically significant higher use of opinion by Fox News than MSNBC but, due to the dramatic rise of opinions by CNN, there is not a significant difference between FOX and CNN in 2018.

### 4.1. Results by Network: CNN’s Trump Effect

It was CNN who made the most notable increase in opinion usage. CNN had remained very stable from 2008 to 2013, going from a starting point of 15.7 percent to 15.9 percent in 2013. In 2018, there was a statistically significant, positive correlation ( $P=.012$ ) in CNN’s use of opinions from 2008. By 2018, 25.6 percent of CNN statements during this show were listed as opinion. That was a 61 percent increase from 2013. Therefore, the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 2 was rejected.

CNN was the only network increasing during each time period. This also coincides with the rise of President Trump and his open battle with CNN. While CNN had a modest increase from 2008 to 2013, the Trump presidency seems to have brought about a drastic change in the ways CNN reported its news.

In 2008, the Fox News data showed that 23.6 percent of all statements were opinion. In 2013, that number was 23 percent and in 2018 it was 20.5 percent. The decline was not statistically significant ( $P = 0.4$ ) therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected for Hypothesis 3. MSNBC saw the most significant decrease. It began with the highest annual total of all networks in 2008 with 28.8 percent of all comments noted as opinion (of note: only included data from October since The Rachel Maddow Show was not on air in April 2008). The data showed a significant decrease from 2008 to 2013 to 18.5 percent (a 35 percent decrease) and continued the downward trend in 2018 at 15.5 percent. Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected for Hypothesis 4 as there was actually a strong statistically significant decrease of opinion ( $P = .001$ ).

## 5. Discussion

So while experts (Farhi, 2018; Jurkowitz, et al, 2013; Kavanagh, et al., 2019) indicated that opinions on cable news have increased, especially when compared to the pre-2000 era, over the past decade the total amount of opinion on all three cable news combined appears to have somewhat consistent. Still, despite the fact that there was no steady increase among specific time periods, after reviewing the transcripts, it became clear that, over the past decade, all cable news regularly weaved opinion in with fact, making it difficult to separate the two. The blurring of opinion with fact was, at times, so egregious that it is no wonder Americans have a hard time unravelling the two. The confusion develops through many avenues, including these five common ones.

### 5.1. My Opinion is Fact

Sometimes, having an anchor or a panelists tell you something is factual when it is clearly opinion, is all that is needed. In an April 2018 episode of Hannity, the host said this: “We now have in this country what is a runaway investigation, it’s spinning out of control, it’s led by Mueller and his merry band of Trump-hating deep-state sycophants. That’s just a fact” (Hannity, Chaffetz, Carter, Jarrett, Henry, 2018, p.2). Meanwhile, that same month, MSNBC host Rachel Maddow made this statement related to how other countries will react to a U.S. military strike in Syria at the same time as the rise of the Stormy Daniels accusations:

It (the Stormy Daniels story) will affect those countries’ view of the strike it will affect their reaction to it. It will therefore affect the utility of this military strike if the president of the United States is believed to have issued the order to launch this strike tonight, even in part because people think he wanted to distract from a catastrophic domestic scandal. (Maddow, et al., 2018 p.4)

### 5.2 Blending What Is with What Might Be

Speculation mixed with facts leads to contradictions that seem to make sense when we hear them but still imply a truth that cannot be proven. On a CNN episode from October 17, 2018, the host Anderson Cooper discusses the murder of journalist Jamal Khasoggi. Cooper then blends fact with opinion (especially at the time of the broadcast which was 2-3 days after Khasoggi’s death). Cooper says, “He (Khasoggi) pulls no punches in his criticism of the Saudi government, criticism we now know might have gotten him killed” (Cooper, Zeleny, Axelrod, Griffin & Cuomo, 2018, p.4). You cannot both “know” and speculate that it “might have” at the same time. Yet the anchor does, and we accept it.

In an April 2018 Hannity episode, the host speculates about the outcry from Trump haters if the president fired the Special Investigator, Robert Mueller.

But we know if the president does (fire Mueller), imagine the political outcry, what it would be like. It would be massive. In fact, this is likely exactly what many in these five forces I talked about want, because they believe it would spark all the humiliating end of the Trump presidency that we the people voted for. After all, you know, that’s been their goal from the get-go, we’ve always known that. (Hannity, Chaffetz, Carter, Jarrett & Henry, 2018, p.2)

### 5.3 The Hypocritic Oath

At times the networks saw the danger of opinion as they themselves offered opinion. On an April 2008 episode of Anderson Cooper 360, the host discusses whether negative comments made by Barack Obama would hurt him in the latest polls. “We’ll see what kind of impact, if any, it has,” Cooper said. “That is, if it is truly an uproar and not just pundits and spinners doing what they always do” (Tuchman, et al., 2008, p. 11). The show then returns from a commercial to have Cooper discuss, with a political analyst, if the possible impact of these negative statements will hurt Obama in the polls.

#### 5.4 Truth be Damned; Too Good not to Report

On MSNBC, in an April 2018 episode, Rachel Maddow breaks news -- because it might be important -- that is not confirmed. "I'm bringing it to you tonight even though we have not yet confirmed it, because it is a source of significant discussion. And if it comes to pass, this will be a big deal" (Maddow and Wallace, 2018, p. 10). Or, after detailing the story of a NYC Trump building, Maddow admits, "I should note that one of the doorman's story (sic) has not been verified by NBC or any news organization. But there's this weird detail" (Maddow & Wallace, 2018, p. 13). Maddow then continues to detail the unverified story.

#### 5.5 "I think..." Therefore it's News.

As for the number of "I think" references, the levels for each year of an 11-year period were generally steady, ranging between a low of 16.3 references per episode on average in 2014 to a high of 29.2 references an episode in 2016. Most years, the numbers stood in the low-to-mid 20s per episode. While there was no trend in the use of the phrase, it was remarkable that when you total the use of the "I think" phrases among all networks for the 11-year span, it amounted to an average of 22 references per episode. Given that most of these shows were approximately 44 minutes in length, excluding commercials, the phrase is being said every two minutes of a primetime cable news show. When examined by network, MSNBC used the phrase the least, using it about once every 3.3 minutes (just over 13 times per hour episode) CNN used the phrase every 1.8 minutes (almost 25 times an hour) and Fox News used it every 1.6 minutes (nearly 28 times per hour). These high numbers lend credence to the idea that cable news employees feel it is important to tell you what they think, and that these opinions should be deemed newsworthy. And those "I think" comments are the news media version of a selfie -- blatant attempts to be sure you notice the pundit and value his/her opinion. The result is a twist of philosopher Rene Descartes' famous quote, "I think; therefore I am." Descartes used this to show there was no doubt of his existence. Pundits and cable news hosts seem to believe in the concept of "I think; therefore it's news," indicating there is no doubt about the importance of their opinion and, perhaps, viewers need not doubt it either. A great example of this is an April 17, 2008 CNN clip with John Allen, a Vatican analyst, discussing the sexual abuse scandal. Allen made the following comments:

Well, Anderson, I don't think it's, by any means, the end of the story, because I think what you heard from Bernie McDauid there, as powerful and moving as three -- these three individuals found this experience to be, they don't believe that you can put a period at the end of the sentence quite yet, because I think they would argue that there are some structural adjustments and some accountability measures that have to be built into the system.

But I think they would say that, if it's not the end, it is certainly a powerful beginning. I mean, I think we need to step back for a moment and realize that, when you're talking about an institution with 2,000 years of history.(Cooper, Mattingly, Crowley & Hill, 2008, p. 8)

"I think" phrases are used five times in a matter of 124 words. Allen deftly informs us what he thinks these men "don't believe," what he thinks they "would argue" and what he thinks "they would say" and he finished by telling the viewers what he thinks we all need to do. The danger here: rather than tell us what the newsworthy person argued or believed; the reporter interprets what he believes they would say -- but viewers often hear it as what was said.

## 6. Limitations

As with any qualitative research project, there are limitations with the study. First, I only examined three shows on these three networks. Additionally, I selected one week from two separate months. In fairness, these two weeks could be outliers from the other 50 weeks of broadcasts. Also, I only examined primetime episodes. As this is a popular time, the networks may lean more toward opinion shows that get higher ratings than straight news. However, a 2013 Pew Research Center study indicated that the amount of opinion during mornings and afternoons remained high, though not quite as high as primetime (Jurkowitz, et al., 2013). In addition, my definition of "opinion," and what I included as I collected opinions, could be debated by some. There is certainly some room for disagreement about what I considered "opinion" but I doubt that the data would change significantly with modifications to my definition. Finally, in my effort to capture the derivatives of "I think" statements, there were certainly some uses that seemed reasonable and not mixing opinion with fact. For example, a reporter might have said, "This bill was passed in, I think, 1976 or maybe '77" or perhaps the pundit said something to the effect of, "I think we should not rush to any judgments and just stick to the facts we know." In each of these cases, the use of "I think" seems appropriate, even for a news reporter. While there were a few examples of this, my review of the transcripts found this usage to be far less common than the use of a newscast to voice an opinion. Still, those other uses were considered when I tallied the numbers.

## 7. Conclusion

As mentioned at the start, the 2018 Pew Research Center (Mitchell, Gottfried, Barthel, Sumida, 2018) study was what instigated this research. It is alarming, with all the opinion on cable news and social media, that Americans are having difficulty telling the difference between the two, especially those over age 50. One possible reason for this is that opinions used to be clearly delineated by location on an editorial page, in the case of newspapers, or at end of news broadcasts, in the case of television, with clearly noted on-screen announcements that this was opinion. Those readers and viewers who were age 50 and over grew up thinking of news as something based in facts. This expectation might make them less prepared to look for opinion mixed with news they are viewing on current cable news. In addition, they may have more trust or expectation that what is heard on TV news is true. As Bauder (2018) said, “Cronkite, Jennings and Sawyer reported the news. Hannity and Maddow talk about the news, and occasionally make it. But you never doubt how they feel about it” (para 2). Younger Americans, growing up with the Internet, may inherently be more suspect of what they hear/see. Whatever the cause, older Americans are big consumers of cable news. According to Nielsen ratings, the median age of primetime cable news viewers is between 59-66 (59 for CNN, 66 for both Fox and MSNBC) and over 50 percent of Fox and MSNBC viewers are above 65 (Berr, 2018). Therefore, this group is most at risk of misinterpreting opinion statements by experts.

In any event, it is evident that the cable news environment blurs the line between opinion and news. Anchors sit next to panelists and when news collides with talking points and opinion, it can easily perplex the viewer. In addition, with the rapid-fire exchanges of facts and opinions, viewers are confused about who is the reporter and who is playing the role of partisan commentator (Farhi, 2017).

There is nothing inherently wrong with the concept of Opinion Journalism. Having the media offer opinion does help to provide understanding of various points of view and to provide counterpoints to common thinking. In addition, the promotion of well-developed opinion helps fuel democracy and discussion of alternative viewpoints. “An autocratic or dictatorial government seeks to suppress differences of opinion just as much, or more, than it seeks to suppress facts” (Feldman, 2018, para. 15). However, when opinion is significantly utilized in a show, cable news should not call it a “news” show. These should be marketed as talk shows or opinion shows. They are part of the lineup on designated cable news stations and are described in various places as news shows and rarely as commentaries (Farhi, 2017). Now, Hannity and The Rachel Maddow Show creatively skirt the issue of whether they are news shows on their respective websites, indicating instead that they analyze and discuss current events. The Hannity show is the only site that does indicate openly that it offers opinion. The CNN website for Anderson Cooper 360 describes itself as a global newscast. But even designating such shows as “commentary/opinion” may not be enough. According to Loker (2018), half of Americans were not familiar with the term “op-ed” and about 30 percent were unaware of the differences between editorials and news, or a reporter and a columnist and 29 percent of U.S. citizens did not know the difference between an analyst and a commentator. Loker also found that four out of five journalists believed that differentiating news from opinion would help to address misunderstanding and misinformation issues.

Another concern about this heavy use of opinion is that it devalues actual reporting while inflating the ego of the pundit. Talk is, literally, cheap. This is where the “value” of opinion has changed the definition of news. Having four panelists sit and discuss their ideas of a foreign crisis is far less expensive than having foreign offices, or hiring a reporter and crew to be on the scene in the Middle East or Asia to collect and report facts. According to Westin (2005), “Opinions offer a quick, efficient, and effective way to attract an audience in a cluttered world” (para 4). Westin goes on to say that this explosion of opinion on news networks can create the impression that everything the viewer sees is an expression of someone’s opinion. Panelists can look alike, sets look like traditional news sets, graphics mimic breaking news and audiences start to believe it is all the same. And if you are defined as a pundit, a national security expert, or a senior political commentator for a news outlet, you begin to believe your opinion is worthy of being heard by all. This is where cable news meets social media. Just as every teenager wants to use Instagram or Snapchat to let you to know how much fun they had at last night’s party, pundits want you to know how important they are and how valuable their thoughts are. After all, they are being nicely compensated to have an opinion, so theirs must be special, right?

A final concern is the consequence of an uninformed viewership and electorate. Hearing opinions and commentary may be entertaining but it does not provide all the facts needed for making a well-reasoned decision on political and social issues. If cable news networks continue to follow the belief that “ranting gets ratings,” then it is hard to see the growing divisiveness in the country getting better. This sense of tribalism among news viewers breeds a desire for confirmation bias and when newscasts scream their opinions, they make facts the enemy.

The hope for civil discussion and agreement on basic facts become all the more unlikely if reporters aim for provocative opinion to attract viewers (and thereby advertisers). Such concern has been voiced before but the potential for an opinion-based reality is coming quickly. Carl Sagan (1997), in his book *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, offered his sense of foreboding on an America that will soon be unable to distinguish what feels good and what is true.

The dumbing down of America is most evident in the slow decay of substantive content in the enormously influential media, the 30-second sound bites (now down to 10 seconds or less), lowest common denominator programming, credulous presentations on pseudoscience and superstition, but especially a kind of celebration of ignorance. (p. 28)

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