

Assertion, Repetition, Contagion: Generative Mechanisms and Responses to Social Death

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Abstract. Online public opinion gradually evolves into a phenomenon where opinion leaders guide the digital public to commit cyber violence against the public opinion target, eventually leading to the social death of the public opinion target. The role of each opinion subject in the social death of individuals can be analyzed through the mechanisms of assertion, repetition, and contagion transmission proposed by Gustave Le Bon. Opinion makers shape specific events and characters, utilizing assertions to enhance the narrative power and satisfy the psychological image of the media and the public. On this basis, opinion leaders, mainly the media, direct the psychological tendency of the public by spreading assertions more widely through repetition. The participants in public opinion fix assertions on the cross of their moral judgment through the implication of assertion and repetition. Breaking this mechanism requires proprietary measures aimed at the three subjects. First, reduce the power of assertions by identifying ambiguous information and blaming the rumormonger afterward. Second, control the degree of repetition by increasing the responsibility of online media and clarifying effectively. Third, avoid the spread of contagion by improving the quality of Internet users.

Keywords: Social death; Generative mechanisms; Assertion; Repetition; Contagion.

1. Introduction

In the online events of social death, online public opinion has become the wheel of groups crushing individual voices. The rapid dissemination of information and the high degree of freedom of speech in the online society enable online public opinion to quickly spread to society and form a consistent trend of public opinion. In online public opinion, the two parties involved often cannot equally adduce evidence and objectively state the events. Therefore, the digital public is easily influenced by the views guided by opinion makers and opinion leaders, bringing in imaginary victim experiences and emotional venting or moral condemnation of the targets of public opinion. Regardless of the truth of the incident, this mode of online opinion development often leads to the social death of the opinion target, specifically, privacy leakage and stigma solidification. In other words, the public opinion target suffers from cyber violence driven by opinion leaders. Even if the incident is eventually reversed, it is difficult to undo the label given to the person concerned by the public opinion violence. Moreover, such public opinion power can cause bad social influence and affect judicial procedures' regular operation and execution. In order to avoid, possibly, the malignant and irreversible outcome of social death caused by online public opinion, it is necessary to clarify the whole chain of formation and development of social death. Therefore, this paper explores the generative mechanism of social death caused by online public opinion and the countermeasures for this phenomenon.

2. Literature Review

The famous definition of "social death" in the sociological sense is the "condition of people not accepted as fully human by wide society," as described by O. Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death*. Social death under this definition refers to the social fact that the parties (usually a group) in the relationship between rule and power are systematically and comprehensively excluded and oppressed. Today, "social death" is more often used to describe the state of an individual's disrepute and severed interpersonal contacts after suffering cyber violence. Regarding how prejudice arises, previous studies attribute the formation of public opinion mainly to applying the Spiral of Silence Theory to online public opinion. The Spiral of Silence Theory points out that before expressing their own

opinions, people will first judge and compare others' opinions. If their opinions are consistent with the group's, they will decisively express their own opinions and enthusiastically participate in the discussion. On the contrary, when they find that their views are not in line with those of the majority and they belong to the "minority" or are at a "disadvantage," the fear of being "socially isolated" will prompt them to choose to remain silent. In online public opinion, the dominant opinion is usually that of the "victim" (public opinion maker); the "victim" apparently defends his or her rights through the Internet but tries to incite public sentiment to guide public opinion. The digital public will also empathize with the victims and condemn the targets of public opinion from the standpoint of the victims. If there is a dissenting opinion, it will be considered immoral. The individual or group will be condemned, abused, or even subjected to cyberbullying. Therefore, in a fierce online opinion war, groups with inferior viewpoints will choose not to speak out for personal safety reasons. The silence also intensifies the singularity of public opinion; ultimately, the victim's view is the direction of public opinion. In other words, the rapid accumulation of emotions and the high presence of other people's reactions on the Internet eventually create a public sanction of unprecedented speed and intensity, stripping the "dead" people of their original role and function labels and replacing them with the labels of transgressors.

However, many incidents have been reversed after complete official investigations, and the opinions of the "victims" are not the truth. While all incidents should be objective and trustworthy, online public opinion is as indistinguishable from the truth as Rashomon. This ambiguity is also the core reason for the social death of public opinion targets. Regarding the imbalance of truth, previous studies have pointed out that inciting public opinion is essentially an act of private law enforcement. The subjective descriptions of the event by the "victim" are the beginning of the bias that leads to public opinion. It is also a moralized sentimental determination in which a single party acts as a cyber judge to declare a fact directly and the other party illegal or unethical. In this situation, where one is both a party and a judge, the position can easily be problematic because it does not give the prosecution and the defense an equal opportunity to debate, present evidence, and cross-examine as in a courtroom. At the same time, most netizens will directly rely on this "fact" to convict the accused party. This large surface of public opinion makes the public acquiesce to the truth. Combined with the Spiral of Silence Theory, the other side will become more challenging to prove and vulnerable to attack when the mainstream opinion is formed. The "law" is no longer more important than the "emotions." Therefore, arguments and opposing voices will disappear passively. In conclusion, the reason for the lack of truth in online public opinion is the inequality of evidence between the two sides of public opinion, which makes the opinion of the "victim" who speaks first become the mainstream opinion and the absolute suppression of the opposing opinion by the mainstream opinion.

Scholars have concluded the causes of social death in online public opinion. However, most of the existing studies lack multi-level analyses of the causal links and are supplemented with specific cases for illustration. For example, how does the dominant viewpoint mentioned in the Spiral of Silence Theory form in online public opinion? Online society is an important space and time for events to occur, and opinion makers, leaders, and participants all play a role in the evolution of public opinion events. The author believes that only by splitting the roles of each subject, sorting out the entanglement and interaction among the three, and extrapolating through specific events can we truly explore the causes of prejudice.

Specifically, the three subjects of opinion makers, opinion leaders, and opinion participants all lead to the social death of the opinion parties, i.e., privacy leakage and stigma solidification. In "The Ravens," Gustave Le Bon mentions assertion, repetition, and contagion as the three effective means of communication. This means that the more straightforward an assertion is, the weaker the evidence and proof appear to be, and the more powerful it is. Assertions have a tangible impact through constant repetition. When the assertion is repeated a certain number of times, everyone unanimously accepts it. At this point, contagion kicks in, and in groups, ideas, feelings, passions, and beliefs are as contagious as germs. It can be found that these three links correspond to the functional roles of opinion makers, opinion leaders, and opinion participants. Only by exploring the functional links

among the subjects of online public opinion can solutions be found for the psychological mechanisms of the three. Therefore, in this paper, the model of assertion, repetition, and contagion proposed by Gustave Le Bon is applied to the roles of the three subjects of online public opinion. Likewise, the case of Kris Wu's alleged sexual assault is employed to explore the generative mechanisms of social death caused by online public opinion and propose solutions accordingly.

3. Generative Mechanism: How does prejudice arise?

One of the typical cases of the death of an individual in online public opinion is Kris Wu's alleged sexual assault. The case was started by Du Meizhu (after this, referred to as Du), a self-proclaimed "victim" of Kris Wu's rape. Du said in a Weibo post that Kris Wu had raped her and several other females. The article sparked unprecedented controversy, and Kris Wu was roundly denounced and blocked and has now been criminally arrested. Later, Du admitted that Xu, a writer, fabricated the long article and contained much false information. The case investigation released by the police also differs significantly from the facts described by the "victim," and much evidence is lacking. The case of Kris Wu's alleged sexual assault has not yet been decided, but Kris Wu has been labeled as a "rapist" in the online public opinion on the case and is now notorious and socially dead. Therefore, this typical case can concretely reveal the role of the three subjects of online public opinion in the social deaths of people caused by online public opinion.

3.1 Opinion maker: assertion

Assertions can be decisive for the direction of events and immediately preempt the initial impression of events portrayed by opinion makers in the minds of the general public. To achieve their personal goals, public opinion makers usually use powerful, vivid statements to describe the events, highlight the moral cracks of their targets, and build up their image of victims. The public will quickly be attracted to the prominent moral gap of the "victim" like a magnet, ignore the objective evidence, accept the assertion into their perception, and feel great sympathy and moral justice for the "victim."

In the case of Kris Wu's alleged sexual assault of a minor, the opinion maker Du and her friends first published a blog post claiming that Kris Wu had raped Du after being deliberately plied with alcohol until she became unconscious; they also claimed that Kris Wu had sexually assaulted 18 minors. In the article, Du created topics such as "Kris Wu Rape," a form of assertion. The words "rape," "underage," and "18 minors" are highlighted in the article. The article also used a lot of intensely subjective, pornographic, and entertaining phrases to condemn and convict Kris Wu. After the release of this article, the terms "Kris Wu rape" and "Kris Wu rape underage" quickly reached the top of the hot search and triggered a heated debate. At this point, the opinion makers unveiled the prologue of public opinion and labeled the spearhead (Kris Wu) as a transgressor. The powerful assertion that "Kris Wu Rape" is as accurate and robust as a spear to society. These assertions can be easily spread among the group not only because they are absolute and firm but also because of the extraordinary misinterpretation of the event in the crowd's imagination. The numerous vague, pompous expressions in Du's article unintentionally stimulated the public to imagine the dark points of society and to add their picture of the event; thus, they were further enraged and gradually accepted that Kris Wu had committed a crime. No one delves into how much empirical evidence there is in the publisher's entire article and whether the logic is straightforward; asserting words and other resolute and pure words are enough to become anchor points that quickly attract attention and bind them to Kris Wu; at this point, the stigma of the public opinion target is generated, and the social death begins.

An assertion is indeed the best weapon for public opinion makers. There is often a disparity in social power between the two sides of an incident. For example, it is challenging for Du, a young woman with no name recognition, to gain attention by trying to confront Kris Wu, who has a high social status. Therefore, tightly grasping the nature of the assertion and maximizing the image of personal weakness and victimhood are its only options. The creator of any narrative can use the Affective Disposition Theory to enhance the mass emotional evocation in that narrative. By applying

the steps of the Disposition Model, the creator can enhance the experience of the narrative, create a strong characterization of the characters, and give the audience an emotional expectation of the story's direction and ending based on the context of the story. This value expectation will inspire the public to show solidarity with the heroic protagonist. This mode of vocalization is necessary for disadvantaged groups to harness the power of public opinion. Thus, the assertion of the opinion maker has a robust preemptive effect, which can create momentum for the "victim," powerfully rally the public, and throw the truth created by the "victim" into society like a bomb in high profile.

3.2 Opinion leaders: repeat

When the assertion sets off public opinion, repetition can capture the timeliness of public opinion to spread the assertion more widely and deeply. Although the opinion maker is the pioneer, whether the assertion can convince the public depends on the performance of the opinion leader in the repetition process. This subject can rapidly and widely disseminate information and use its influence in the dissemination process to lead the public to a particular attitude toward public opinion events and change others' behavior. In online society, official media, self-media, and users with a large fan base play the role of opinion leaders to some extent.

Opinion leaders have their groups of recipients. When group leaders repeat the assertion, i.e., report and repost an opinion event, they will increase the number of views and attention to the event. For example, in the case of Kris Wu, platforms such as Phoenix Weekly, Headline News, and Sina News all attached topic tags and reported the event with the assertion as a news headline. Such reports relayed the opinions of opinion makers in the name of officialdom, expanding the coverage of public opinion and enhancing the credibility of the assertions. However, they could have helped reveal the truth of the case. In the post-truth era, eye-catching expressions appear in complex events descriptions. As a result, many news media are only concerned with hot spots and grabbing traffic, without regard for the principles of journalism or the impact of guiding public opinion. When media outlets compete with each other for profits, they compete to be the first to focus on the critical points of public opinion and use repetitive tactics. Such repetitive assertions by opinion leaders increase the number of assertion audiences, make assertions searchable keywords for opinion targets, and help opinion makers' opinions become mainstream opinions.

If there is still a rational group in the simple repetition, another part of opinion leaders will provide the public with ready-made "evidence" through corroborative repetition so that they will not struggle for rational arguments. In an online world where opinions are already lacking in truth, redundant opinions make it easier for the public to be confused. After Du's post, more than a dozen bloggers posted screenshots of their chats with "Kris Wu" under the hashtag, implying that Kris Wu had an intimate relationship with them. The emergence of numerous "parties" has reinforced the public's impression of Kris Wu's chaotic private life and continues to confirm the label "Kris Wu Rape." However, a rational consideration of these chat screenshots reveals that virtually none of the chat logs have any clues or evidence pointing to Kris Wu's rape or other transgressive behavior. Some of the chat screenshots have been quickly admitted as being made of P-art, some of the chat logs are only related to Wu's friends, and all of the parties involved are unrelated to the victims mentioned by Du. However, with the assertions already clouding public opinion, the public will barely look into the veracity of these parties' statements. When the topic of "Kris Wu XXX" (the nickname of the person who posted the chat screenshots) appears on the hot search one after another, the public will only acquiesce to another victim. The opinions of these opinion leaders are hard to stimulate on their own, but when they are connected to the big story, they become the firewood for the assertions to burn. Through such repetition, the assertions stabilize in the public's minds; these declarations become "proof" so that skeptical groups fully accept the assertions.

Although Kris Wu, the target of public opinion, has responded on his social media platforms, firmly denying all the accusations made by Du and all the other "informers," not only has the digital public ignored them but, most importantly, there are no media leaders to support him. When the private domain becomes the public domain, opinion leaders and the digital public make consistent

emotional value choices, drowning out unethical voices with repetitive assertions. Moreover, the PR mechanism of public opinion targeting can no longer cope with the "mainstream opinion" of the disparate power of public opinion. As a result, the public opinion target is gradually removed from the social network, forming an island and approaching social death.

Generally, the explosive and fragmented output of information provides an environment for generating public opinion hotspots and negative public opinion. Although public opinion represents public opinion to a certain extent and is a concentrated expression of public sentiment in society, the public cannot screen and discern the authenticity of information and cannot think and digest the whole process of events rationally and logically. Suppose public opinion leaders make official repetitions of assertions, create firm evaluations, and add ambiguity to them. In that case, the public will pay more attention to the assertions and gradually acknowledge their truthfulness. At the same time, repetition will drown out the opposing voices, isolate the public opinion target from the digital public, penetrate the assertion into group thought, and characterize the event based on the assertion.

3.3 Public opinion participants: contagion

The first two types of instruments create and consolidate public opinion, completing the two steps of building momentum for and characterizing events. Their core is the elimination of popular dissent through the power of opinion makers and opinion leaders; the more powerful contagion mechanism internalizes public opinion and brings about the social death of the public opinion target.

When the assertion is effectively repeated, public opinion can no longer be confined to the part of the network society built by opinion makers and opinion leaders but becomes an "objective existence" in the public perception. When the digital public accepts the implication of assertion and repetition, they will recognize the assertion's truth. Furthermore, open the second layer of Affect Disposition Theory (ADT): the audience expects events to have an outcome consistent with their moral judgment and emotional disposition, i.e., the hero to have a positive outcome and the villain to have a negative outcome. In order to fulfill this expectation, a powerful contagion mechanism is activated. The activation of the contagion mechanism means that group beliefs are formed. Group beliefs possess characteristics inherent to religious emotions, such as blind obedience, fierce bigotry, and the need for fanfare. Specifically, after the digital public recognizes the truthfulness of the assertion, it gets the result of moral judgment, creates the urge to spread it actively, and acquires the motivation and justification for moral judgment from the target of public opinion. Moreover, according to the "Online Disinhibition Effect", the sense of responsibility of the digital masses in cyberspace is significantly reduced, and the excitement and satisfaction obtained by participating in instant entertainment are significantly enhanced; therefore, violent and carefree emotional venting and even cyber violence are induced. For example, after the Kris Wu incident, public flirtations, curses, and personal attacks on Kris Wu were seen everywhere in online and real society; his photos were scandalized and maliciously picturized. All endorsements were canceled, social media accounts were blocked, and all works were shut down. According to the moral line, these actions were "rationalized" responses by the public after internalizing the assertion and a feast of entertainment brought by the high level of unity in public opinion. Meanwhile, the internalized group beliefs further consolidate and spread the assertions. In the contagion process, truth details will be further distorted without truth; truth-seeking will lose meaning, and questioning will be completely submerged.

The most important thing is that when the idea penetrates the group's thinking in many ways and has an irresistible power and a series of effects, it is useless to fight against it. This explains why when Kris Wu's studio released time- and logic-based rebuttal evidence, such as chat logs, screenshots of money transfers, and itineraries, the public paid no attention or wavered and directly blocked the "second look" of the public opinion. On July 31, 2022, Beijing Chaoyang police released an official investigation report stating that Kris Wu and Du met only once and had consensual sexual relations. There was no alarm from Du or any of the victims. However, Kris Wu has been arrested pending further investigation. Public opinion, however, did not change because of this; instead, the topic "Kris Wu Was Detained" rushed into the media. The public also took the new assertion as evidence of Wu's

crime and the end of the incident. Public opinion currently does not need to be increased; the target of public opinion is already tightly bound with the most eye-catching label, penetrating the concept of the whole society. Its image completely collapsed and was replaced by the transgressor; the stigma and social death hide personal identity.

4. Countermeasures: How should prejudices be corrected?

Cyberspace allows people to express their opinions and attitudes about an event without thinking, ignoring the truth, or caring whether it might cause harm to the person concerned. Many of the incidents that cause "social death" are often personal ways to vent personal grievances, with some netizens initially condemning those exposed and then denouncing those exposed after things have turned around, forming a network of violence. In the post-truth era, "keyboard damage" is sometimes called "digital murder." In the post-truth era, the truth is scarce in online society. The lack of truth is also a key reason for the social death of people caused by online public opinion. In many cases of online violence, it can be found that when the truth is investigated, and the events are reversed, even if disinformation is conducted, it is difficult to remove every piece of false information about it. It is even more challenging to change the public perception, and the influence of public opinion on the person concerned has been formed. In order to avoid such harmful and irreversible effects of online public opinion causing social death, there should be countermeasures against the assertion-repetition-contagion chain in the whole process of public opinion development.

4.1 Reducing the power of assertions: flagging ambiguous information and holding rumor-mongers accountable after the fact

The combination of public opinion targets and stigma labels begins with the vocalization of opinion makers. Assertions determine the degree of influence of online public opinion on public opinion targets. Therefore, information distribution platforms should promptly monitor and supervise socially significant online assertions and flag information and news headlines of uncertain truth or falsity. For example, users should be reminded that the information is not confirmed, so please look at this information sensibly. This can reduce the arbitrariness of the assertion and prevent the uncontrolled entry into the group's brain to a certain extent, so that the public will not fall into the emotional, moral trap. Secondly, the platform should also establish a monitoring mechanism for assertive phrases, such as "Kris Wu Raped A Minor." Specifically, when opinion makers create socially significant terms and titles, the platform should review them based on specific factual evidence to determine whether they are eligible for publication and meet the publication standards. It should also be marked with the indication that "the phrase has not been confirmed."

The fabrication of false information to make others experience "social death" essentially tramples others' right to reputation. However, in practice, such defamation of others on the Internet is rarely pursued afterward. Most rumormongers hide behind the incident, allowing netizens to attack the central figure of the incident indiscriminately, and they are complacent in venting their anger. Therefore, the author believes that some "social death" cases that have caused terrible effects can be turned into public prosecution cases, and the rumormonger should be held accountable to ensure the victims' rights and interests and warn others who intend to circumvent the law by public opinion.

4.2 Control the extent of repetition: increase the responsibility of online media and clarify the truth effectively afterward

Opinion leaders represented by the media spread ambiguous information and make one-sided comments about traffic and heat, disregarding the principles of news reporting. This action contributes to the social death of public opinion targets and can even interfere with justice. Therefore, clarifying the responsibility of online media is the first step. Mr. Luo and Mr. Yong have the following proposals on delineating the reasonable boundaries of press supervision of justice: First, the scope of press coverage should be clarified; second, the media should not go beyond judicial procedures to

pre-empt reports, let alone publish tendentious comments and exert pressure on the trial activities of the judiciary; third, the media should adhere to the principle of objectivity and impartiality when commenting on reported cases, and should not be biased. Only by strictly implementing the media's responsibility for guiding public opinion and imposing effective punishments, such as banning the defaulting media, can the unhindered contact between rumors and the public be strongly prevented. Public opinion leaders should improve their news literacy, fully respect the facts, screen rumors, rationally forward and comment on articles, provide correct guidance in crucial aspects, and improve the social responsibility of news media.

Secondly, after finding out the truth, if the person concerned suffers from injustice, public opinion leaders and the platform should work together to clear it effectively. First, the "assertion + repetition" method should be used equally for clarification. Create a factual article and call on opinion leaders to disseminate it. Second, remove "social death" information on time. In the digital age, human behavior will be "permanently stored" to a certain extent due to the cloud's dissemination of data and storage properties. Even if an event is disproven or someone disproves it, false rumors and malicious statements about that person will be stored in the network. Once they are retrieved, these words still cannot disappear completely, causing a negative psychological impact on them. Therefore, in future network information security, the right to be forgotten should be prioritized to appease the victims and restore their reputations.

4.3 Avoiding the spread of contagion: Improving the quality of digital public, and the platform imprisoning offensive words and actions

The final link in the chain of social death is the contagion of public opinion. The purpose and function of contagion are to internalize the public's cognition and honestly complete the binding of public opinion goals with social labels. Much digital public is easily disturbed by the overwhelming remarks, especially the highly emotional catharsis and moral judgment remarks when they participate in heated discussions; coupled with the anonymity of the Internet and the psychology of lawlessness, bystanders eventually join in the public opinion discussions, abusive attacks, and even provocations. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to improve the Internet literacy of Internet users to avoid rumors and malicious remarks. First, we should strengthen the awareness of the bottom line of civilized Internet access among Internet subjects and raise the legal awareness of Internet users and the access threshold of social media platforms. Strict real-name systems for social media users strengthen the crackdown on violations of the bottom line of the law, especially for personal attacks, online violence, human flesh searches, and other severe violations of personal privacy and portrait rights. Secondly, the platform should introduce a monitoring mechanism and prompt users to pay attention to the comments when abusive remarks are made on hot topics. If necessary, delete the nasty words and impose bans and penalties on the speaking account.

5. Conclusion and Outlook

Individual social death almost always follows the same trajectory. The mechanisms of assertion, repetition, and contagion subtly reveal the contribution of each subject of public opinion to the social death of an individual. When opinion makers attract the public's attention with powerful and concise assertions, opinion leaders will rush to repeat the most attractive part of the assertions. Assertions are consolidated and amplified through repetition. After the public is guided by assertion and repetition, they will admit the assertion, make emotional value choices, and generate psychological imagination for the event. When the repetition reaches a certain degree, the implied public opinion participants will believe that the assertion is a fact and will violently attack the villains. In this process, the target of public opinion gradually loses the power of refutation, and his voice will be submerged in mainstream opinion, lose personal information, and become socially dead. However, there are traces of mass psychology at work behind all the mechanisms and theories. This invisible, unified mass psychology can inspire opinion makers, give clues to opinion leaders, and evoke expectations in

opinion participants—the paranoia and arbitrariness that are always present or potential in the crowd. This highly subjective quality should be the last thing that should be present when judging events, but online society has created a good opportunity for such private law enforcement behavior. The Internet amplifies the individual's voice but obscures the individual's name.

Anonymous communication greatly diminishes respect, condoning the spread of frivolous speech and unburdening rational thought. In disrespectful Internet culture, the moral fires within the public can be ignited to the fiercest and most extreme extent. All netizens can become matches, intentionally or unintentionally, and opinion leaders can add fuel directly; those who try to put out the fire will only set it on fire. When the fire is extinguished, only the target of public opinion is left; its original identity is unrecognizable. The righteous arsonist has gone away without leaving a trace. This behavior transforms violence from the real world to the virtual world. It is essentially the same as actual violence but can easily be overlooked as violent due to its apparent virtual nature. The violence is not simply an emotional outburst, nor is it merely a matter of taking pleasure in it; the cyber-violent person attempts to destroy the object mentally and physically. This evil in human nature is perilous.

Internet public opinion can cause irreversible effects on the person concerned, incite the public to vent their emotions, and destroy social harmony by transmitting misleading information. Most importantly, the deliberate use of online public opinion to achieve personal goals is evil; once more people follow this law, the social atmosphere and judicial process will be disrupted. The loss of control over Internet public opinion will also allow the expansion of human evil and make it difficult to promote positive social psychology. The Internet, a convenient way to ask for help and help others, will also become difficult. Creating a rational and peaceful way of disseminating information in an increasingly developed online society is difficult but necessary. Future research should aim to test the effectiveness of solutions to mitigate social death through empirical studies and propose improvement solutions accordingly. The causes and solutions of the social death of individuals due to public opinion bias are critical issues in today's society, which requires in-depth research by scholars in multiple fields and an early and significant breakthrough.

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