

# Putting the pieces together: connectivity, content and confidence

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***Abstract:***

*Providing connectivity to public libraries has been a State Library of New South Wales priority since 1997. Without content and the skills for effective use of this content, connectivity is of little value. This paper explores initiatives to enhance the use of online content. Building skills and confidence in staff and clients are important elements in maximising the benefits of enhanced connectivity.*

## Background

Broadband connectivity and the growth in digital information have changed the way that libraries do business. The rate of technological change is staggering. As a result, there is no complete picture for meeting the needs of a connected community. This has serious implications for forward planning. Effective use of online content requires three major constituents:

- Connectivity - how to connect communities to fast, reliable and effective Internet services
- Content – providing authoritative, relevant online content to library users and staff
- Confidence – developing library staff skills and confidence to make the most effective use of online content.

Connectivity, content and confidence are parts of a jigsaw puzzle in meeting the online information needs of a connected community. In Australia, each State and Territory has handled this in their own way, to suit the differing needs and circumstances of their community. Connectivity, content and confidence cannot be dealt with in isolation; each has an impact on the others. This paper looks at the way these issues have been addressed by the State Library of New South Wales.

## Connectivity

When starting a jigsaw puzzle, we start with the edges to provide a framework from which we can work to complete the jigsaw. Connectivity is the framework within which we work. New South Wales has a population of over 6.6 million covering an area of approximately 802,000 square kilometres with 97 library services and 264 branch libraries. Library services in New South Wales are funded by local government, with the State Library of New South Wales responsible for distributing state government grants and subsidies. There is a high degree of inequity between library services and technology in NSW. Some library services have excellent resources and connectivity whilst others have very poor infrastructure and resources.

In 1997 the State Library of New South Wales established the NSW.net project to address connectivity needs of the NSW community. It was funded by connect.nsw, the NSW Government's vision for networked communities and electronic service delivery. Its objectives were to:

- Increase community access to online services across the whole of NSW
- Support the development of a statewide communications infrastructure to allow public libraries and councils high speed and 'always on' access to the Internet
- Promote access, use and sharing of information at both a local government and community level to enhance the lives of all

By providing connectivity, NSW.net provides a wealth of opportunities for the community to capitalise on the benefits available on broadband networks. The project phase ran from 1997 to June 2003 during which there has been a growth in services available via NSW.net.

From 1999 to 2003 the project was able to:

- Provide an 'always on' high speed connection to the Internet for a set subsidised cost per year for numerous councils and libraries across the state
- Distribute 700 PCs to be used as public access Internet terminals in public libraries addressing digital inclusion for the people of NSW
- Provide access to commercial online databases free to all public libraries and their communities in NSW, ensuring equitable access to quality electronic resources

The underlying philosophy of NSW.net is equity and participation and supports the State Library of New South Wales Mission Statement from the Library Act 1939:

*'To promote, provide and maintain library and information services for the people of New South Wales through the State Library and through cooperation with local libraries and other libraries and information agencies.'*

NSW.net aimed to increase the efficiency of access to the Internet and online services across New South Wales and to eliminate any inequality of access between metropolitan and rural New South Wales.

In 2001, in conjunction with NSW.net, the Rural Link Project was established. An initiative of the State Library of New South Wales, funded by the Commonwealth Networking the Nation Program, it aimed to provide the 'last mile connectivity' that was often lacking between remote communities and the broadband networks. NSW.net managed the Rural Link Project, which established high speed Internet and online access for public and/or not-for-profit community institutions in at least 70 small towns across rural and remote NSW.

In July 2003, NSW.net moved from the project phase to recurrent funding. From initially offering 2 free databases only available to those councils that chose to use NSW.net services, there are now 6 commercial databases freely available to all public libraries in New South Wales. The high-speed connections have not only been maintained but expanded, providing a mixture of ADSL, ISDN and satellite links as well support in setting up VPN networks.

## **Content and confidence**

Having completed the borders of our jigsaw, the connectivity, we now need the content. Working with our jigsaw we gather together pieces of a similar colour. Databases are our content, our coloured pieces. Authoritative, quality content is provided to the people of NSW in the form of commercial databases. These are selected by the Consortium Content Evaluation Working Party, a user group consisting of representatives of public libraries and the State Library of New South Wales that consider which online resources best meet the needs of the community and should be purchased. These databases are evaluated each year to ensure that they meet the needs of the library community. NSW.net provides training to support these products. At the time of writing NSW.net currently offers free access to Australian Standards Online, Health & Wellness Resource Center, Science Resource Center, Literature Resource Center, Factiva and ANZ Resource Centre/MasterFILE Premier. NSW.net has also established a consortial buying group, whereby public libraries can get preferential pricing on over 20 different databases.

However, providing databases at no cost to the libraries does not guarantee usage and a better library service. A common issue for staff is that they do not have time to work out how to use the databases and what they contain. This is where training comes in. Training is what gives us confidence to use databases and is the last piece of our puzzle. The approach taken by the State Library of New South Wales has been to provide a combination of training provided by staff and the vendors. Vendors know their own product very well and are able to show its full potential but are unlikely to see the use in the context of other library resources. State Library staff as trainers have a better idea where the database fits within the other library resources and the types of questions which the database can be used to answer.

Training takes place at the State Library of New South Wales. State Library staff also travel to regional centres to conduct training courses. People who have to travel from rural areas are able to obtain financial help to cover transport and accommodation. Regional training reduces the time that staff have to be absent from work to attend training in the use of the databases, often a very important consideration with limited staff resources and in one person libraries. Not only are training materials handed to those attending courses but additional materials and updates can be downloaded from the NSW.net website. (<http://www.nswnet.net/> <12 December 2005>)

In 2003 TNS Consultants prepared *'An Evaluation of the Services Provided by NSW.net: A report of the survey of recipients of NSW.net services'*. A summary of library managers' views on database training sessions concluded:

- Three out of four Library Managers had themselves attended NSW.net run database training sessions, or had had staff that had done so.
- These sessions were felt to be helpful -12% of library managers felt they were 'very' helpful and 83% felt they were 'helpful'. The challenge for the NSW.net service therefore lies in changing the conviction with which Librarians feel such sessions add value to their roles.
- In terms of the improvements suggested by Librarians for these training sessions, 41% of those who had attended them said that the sessions were 'fine' as they were. There were some calls for these sessions to be held in more regional locations, and offering advanced sessions supplemented by detailed notes.

Providing training does not necessarily lead to high database use and the information needs of the community being met. Sometimes those attending training are not always in a position to use the resource in the workplace or may be unable to see where it sits amongst other resources. The nature of the public library workforce is also a factor in the effective use of online resources. A State Library of New South Wales Public Library Service survey in 2001 (Public Library Statistics 2001) illustrates that library workers are not a homogenous group. There were 630.5 Librarians, 392.97 Technicians and 568.91 Assistants and others. Approximately one third of the staff (many of them in customer service positions), had no library qualifications. How do you ensure that all staff in customer service positions have the skills and confidence in using online resources to provide a quality service to the public? The State Library of New South Wales believes in structured learning programs and 'developing people's skills from the ground up'. Two courses address this need - Strategic Searching and Skills.net NSW.

## Strategic Searching

Early in 2004 a working party of State Library of NSW staff involved in training library workers was established. Trainers were noticing that quite a few people attending training courses lack what were considered prerequisites for effective online searching. These skills include:

- Browsers – including, definitions, navigation, printing, favorites, customisation
- Boolean – an understanding how AND OR NOT can be used effectively in both databases and the Internet
- Search engines and directories – how they differ, what sort of information they contain, how to use them effectively
- Databases – what they were, when and how to use them

Individuals lacking these skills did not benefit from training courses and the group as a whole could be held back explaining basic concepts that it was assumed all would understand.

It was decided that there was a need for an integrated approach to education and training programs related to online content and eResources for the library and information profession, particularly the staff of public libraries. Strategic Searching aims to fill skill and knowledge gaps in a diverse public library workforce of professionals and paraprofessionals, many of whom work in isolation. As a result, they often have little contact with their peers, few opportunities to update their skills and even more limited access to formal education and training. In recognition that it is often difficult to remain abreast of developments, the course also suggests ways in which staff could update their skills.

Strategic Searching was written by UTS Training and Development Services to specifications developed by stakeholders at State Library of New South Wales. Taking advantage of a large pool of professional and paraprofessional expertise and awareness of resources, State Library of New South Wales staff were canvassed about ideas for content. The course was developed to be run as 4 half-day sessions covering the following areas:

Strategic Searching Basics 1 – the World Wide Web  
Covers definitions, browsers, and directories

Strategic Searching Basics 2 – Search engines and databases  
Covers Boolean, search engines, advanced searching and introduction to databases provided by NSW.net

Strategic Searching Basics 3 – other databases  
Looks at Factiva, Health and Wellness Resource Center, Australian Standards

Strategic Searching Basics 4 – Search Strategies

Strategic Searching aims to increase knowledge of the Internet and databases, improve participants' skills in using them, and build their confidence. The course has been designed to assist participants to integrate their learning with the day-to-day requirements of their work. Each module has an illustrated manual with examples and exercises, designed not only to support learning but also serve after the course as a reference tool. With improved

knowledge, skills and confidence, not only can public library staff better serve their clients, they can also more effectively assist their clients to use online content themselves.

One pilot was run in January and two in May 2005. The participants had worked in their respective libraries from between one and 25 years, had varying levels of skills and included a number of librarians responsible for staff training.

Feedback has been sought from participants and their supervisors about the course and the impact on their work. The supervisors and managers reported that the participants were very positive and enthusiastic about the course and felt that it had been a valuable experience. One of the more experienced participants reported that although she had initially been sceptical, she had learnt more on this course than any other recent course. During the two pilot courses run in May, staff responsible for training staff within various public library services participated. They were very enthusiastic about the course and were eager for staff from their library to attend.

The responses of participants were remarkably uniform and positive. They felt:

- They were more confident in their use of the Internet and databases after completing the course
- Their skills had improved
- The training booklets were useful reference source
- They had a greater awareness of what resources were available for them to use in their day-to-day library work

Most had been able to share some of what they had learnt with others. Some indicated that they would have liked more time to practice between each module. Unfortunately, some were limited in their ability to practice the new skills due to their nature of their position.

One of the real strengths of this course is the inclusion of practical exercises, which reflect the types of questions that staff are asked in the public library. The resources used are common to every library throughout New South Wales. Participants are taught to identify and select authoritative and relevant web resources. It is envisaged that participants would have 'homework' exercises to complete after each session. The course is delivered as a shared learning experience, helping to build confidence. Participants are encouraged to share their knowledge and ask the opinions of staff back in their workplace.

It is hoped the Strategic Searching can be offered to all public library staff throughout New South Wales. If a majority of staff attend the course, it should then offer a minimum skill set available to all services throughout the state. Reader Services at the State Library of New South Wales have adopted the course for their staff training. Some observers who have looked at the course material have suggested that the level is pitched too low and simplistic. This criticism has been levelled by those who have not attended the course. All experienced trainers and participants who have actually been involved in the course refute this suggestion. The course starts with basics and builds up to more complex searches. The reality is that most of us have not had formal training in using the Internet or browsers. The process of self-discovery and learning in a non-structured way does not necessarily mean the user knows the most effective way to use these tools. Strategic Searching addresses this issue.

More trials are being run to explore different models of delivery. With each library service having a different environment it is important to offer options and explore other options for delivery such as:

- 4 half day presentations
- 2 full day presentations
- Train the presenter
- Splitting some modules into 2 pieces
- Training at the State Library of New South Wales
- Training in regional centres

Other considerations are:

- Do we run a refresher course and how?
- How are staff selected to attend? e.g. selected by managers, self selection
- How are materials updated? .e.g. when NSW.net free databases are changed
- How are changes and updates communicated to past participants?
- Issues of quality control and consistency in delivery of the course.

Strategic Searching can also be used as a vehicle to keep library staff abreast of new developments and resources. Part of the course covers RSS feeds (Really Simple Syndication) as a way of keeping abreast of developments. Many people no longer subscribe to email newsletters, as they do not have time to read them. The State Library of New South Wales, with a staff larger than most library services, has been able to gather a sizeable directory of quality authoritative Internet resources. The course can be used to raise awareness of these resources amongst the library community.

Considerable effort is being put into the atmitchell website (<http://www.atmitchell.com/> <12 December 2005) (Fig 1.), with the HSC Navigators and many of the unique treasures of the library being digitised and being made publicly available. Strategic Searching can be used as a vehicle to inform library staff throughout the state about this valuable resource. Strategic Searching is an easily updated program that will be able to address other issues as they arise.

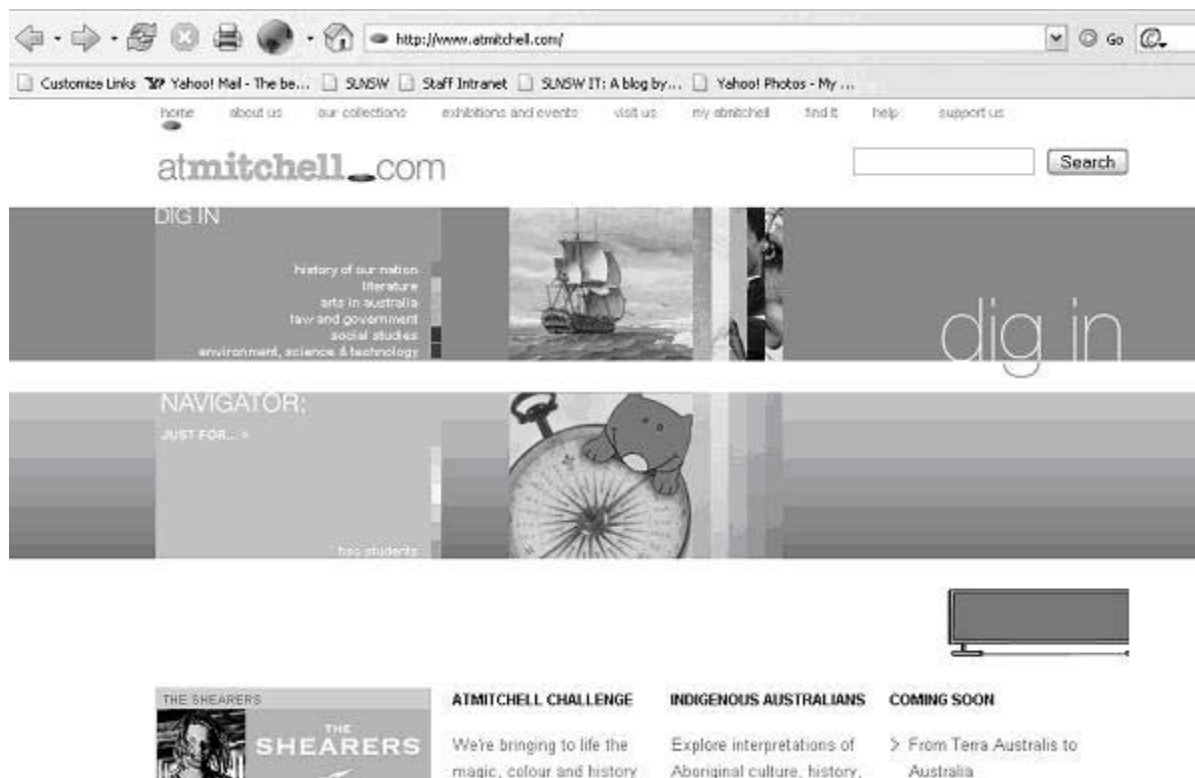


Fig 1. atmitchell.com website.

## Other pieces of the puzzle

### Skills.net NSW

Not all our resources have been put into one program. Another part of our jigsaw puzzle providing content and confidence is Skills.net. Many of you will be familiar with Skills.net programs as models exist in Victoria, Queensland and WA. The State Library of New South Wales has adapted Skills.net to suit the needs of the people of NSW, and is a part of our approach to providing the profession with the skills and confidence to meet client needs in an online environment. The pilot phase took place in 2002, with the aim of the project to provide participating rural New South Wales public libraries with services to support and improve their capacity to deliver Internet training to their local communities. The target audience was initially 100 rural and remote communities with populations less than 5000.

Skills.net NSW provides a website containing a number of online courses purchased from the State Library of Queensland and adapted to local needs. The course was initially funded by BHP Billiton and the State Library's Rural Link project. Participating libraries are offered a number of options. The New South Wales Skills.net version uses a 'train the presenter' model to equip public library staff with appropriate Internet and presentation skills to deliver a suite of Internet courses to local communities. 'Train the presenter' courses are delivered at the State Library of New South Wales and regional centres. Libraries selecting staff to attend the training sign an agreement. The State Library of New South Wales agrees to train a presenter; pick up costs associated with training such as transport to the venue, overnight accommodation and catering; provide support and training materials; funding to cover the

cost of replacing staff and advertising. In return the participating library agrees to run at least 6 workshops over an 8 month period, where a workshop is defined as having more than 3 participants.

The website Skillsnet Website (<http://www.Skills.net.sl.nsw.gov.au> <12 December 2005>) (Fig 2.) is maintained at the State Library of New South Wales. The website resources include web-based courses, training manuals, participants' materials, promotion materials and suggestions and certificates.



Fig 2. Skills.net NSW Website

Feedback and evaluation of courses run in 2002 and early 2003 demonstrated that it was not one size fits all. In May 2003, as well as the 'train the presenter' model, participating libraries were given the option of having State Library staff come to the community to deliver courses. This second option was enthusiastically adopted by some library services and proved beneficial in developing working relationships between rural communities and training staff drawn from the State Library of New South Wales Reading Rooms. Workshops were refined to ensure a strong focus on information literacy.

Regional trainers provide continual feedback about the courses enabling course materials to be updated and courses added or deleted where they were not seen to meet a community need. Trainers reported that some participants found the initial course Researching on the Internet: General Information was too long. As a response it is now available as a two part course. There was a lot of community interest in *e-bay*. As a result *e-bay* was included in Internet in Everyday Life. To facilitate communication, listservs have been established. Trainers are encouraged to make suggestions and all changes and updates are communicated to the group via the listserv.

The website now includes an anonymous participant feedback form. The data collected is gender, age, evaluation of the course content, the trainer and an option to comment on the course. Trainers are able to request the data collected on the feedback form for sessions they deliver. Data can be displayed in an Excel format or displayed as a graph as illustrated in Fig 3.

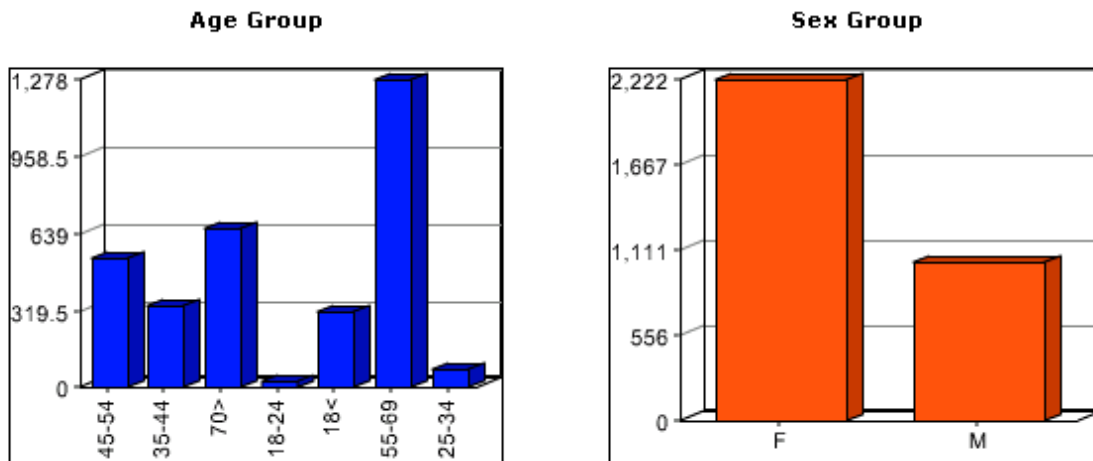


Fig 3 Ages and Gender of participants of Skills.net NSW courses

There have been a number of local collaborations with other organisations including the Country Women’s Association, Smith Family and local CTCs (communication and technology centres). Targeted courses have been presented to meet local needs such as local history, senior citizens and vacation day care groups.

## Evaluation of Skills.net

In December 2004 State Library of NSW Policy and Research completed an evaluation of the program (*BHP Billiton Skills.net NSW Program Evaluation*). Information was gathered by in-depth telephone interview, face-to face interviews and by email correspondence with participating libraries and Skills.net staff. Prior to participation in Skills.net, delivery of courses to participating libraries was largely ad-hoc or non-existent. The capacity to deliver courses was limited by staff resources and time. Participants asked why they participated in Skills.net gave the following responses

*‘It meant we could commit the staff to being trained, the content was already given to us. It was good content. It was easy to follow. It was what our target group was asking for, the email and the basic Internet. So it was just perfect. It gave us the impetus to then commit staff time to doing that’*

*‘I was attracted to the structure and especially the resources, having someone to do the preparation and the organising into the workshop structure and especially providing the online resources and training’*

The advantage of the Skills.net program was that it was a ready-made package of programs, course materials, promotional and evaluation resources, and presenter training and support. Many libraries lacked the resources to design learning programs or prepare promotional strategies. Some expressed the opinion that the resources exceeded their initial expectations.

Libraries that did not participate were surveyed. The following reasons were cited - limited staff numbers, periodic staff shortages, additional staff costs for Council, full workloads, inadequate training facilities, unwillingness to close the library for training, or directions to not compete with local fee-for-service providers.

Staff attending the presenter training included reference librarians, library assistants, permanent and casual staff. With differing skills, attendees obtained different benefits from the training. Some were learning about the Internet, course content and presentation, whereas others were familiarising themselves with the course content and refreshing their presentation and group management skills. Not all those attending would have made suitable trainers, which suggests that maybe there should be greater care taken in selecting staff to attend the course.

There was very positive feedback about the presenter training. Those with previous training experience or who were currently delivering Internet skills training were reassured that they were on the right track. Most gained new ideas and renewed enthusiasm. Participants with little or no training experience were less confident. They expressed a desire for more hands-on practice with a follow-up workshop that focused on running programs, delivering training and solving problems.

More presenters were trained than participated in course delivery. The reality of limited resources back at the workplace is a partial explanation, but there were those who did not have a natural preference for training delivery. Having few staff and many services, there is a limited choice in who can be sent.

Course materials, workshop structure and content were well received by all respondents. They particularly appreciated the time saved in not having to plan and design a workshop.

Other perceived benefits were that libraries that previously delivered infrequent and ad hoc Internet training were able to introduce consistency and quality to their training programs. Local staff gained skills in assessing computer skills and knowledge, organising a program schedule and training skills. They also saw a flow-on benefit to client assistance and reference service delivery as staff applied their wider knowledge of the Internet.

The evaluation concluded:

*'Skills.net NSW is a well-conceived program that offers public libraries in rural and regional NSW an efficient and cost-effective means to provide basic Internet training to their community. It assists them by offering consistent and quality Internet training programs, and enhancing Internet and training skills and knowledge of the staff involved. Participating libraries have welcomed the training materials, staff development and grant resources provided by the program, and can readily identify the benefits the program offers to them.'*

The report also concluded that some presenters required more support, and that libraries wishing to participate should carefully consider whether they have the resources to meet the compliance requirements and deliver regular courses. These additional resources include staff time for preparation, promotion, liaison, and course delivery, replacement hours and access to reasonable facilities and equipment. Many libraries cannot meet all these requirements.

Skills.net NSW has continued to evolve and develop since the evaluation report. It now offers the following courses

- Researching on the Internet: General Information
- Researching on the Internet: General Information Part 1
- Researching on the Internet: General Information Part 2
- Family History on the Internet
- Internet for Kids
- Internet in Everyday Life
- Advanced Internet Searching - Finding What you Want
- Email and Communicating on the Internet

Current funding arrangements ended in June 2005. Skills.net NSW is considered an important piece of the puzzle in providing content and confidence to public libraries in NSW. The State Library of New South Wales is funding the program again in 2005/06. The program will continue to run in rural communities and a pilot is being run to look at running it in Metropolitan libraries and larger rural communities that have expressed interest in the course, thus extending the service to all NSW public libraries.

## **Past, present and future**

Our jigsaw puzzle is taking shape but is unlikely to ever be complete. Due to the rapidly changing nature of the information landscape there is no quick fix, we have to constantly add and subtract pieces to meet those changing needs. Databases selected by the NSW.net Consortium Content Evaluation Working Party go a long way towards providing content that meets the library communities' needs. Courses such as Strategic Searching and Skills.net go some way towards providing library staff with confidence to use the current resources. New resources and technologies arise all the time. However we do not know what is just over the horizon. Tomorrow we have to be prepared to take apart the jigsaw puzzle and start all over again... or start a completely new jigsaw.

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