

Transgenerational Trauma

The role of warrior talk

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the relationship between warrior talk and transgenerational trauma. Research findings from an extensive study of warrior talk within a lengthy modern conflict is used to explore the ways in which trauma is transmitted across generations. A trauma-informed approach for understanding transgenerational trauma is outlined, and the case for a somatic focus on trauma healing is introduced.

Keywords: transgenerational trauma, Northern Ireland, warrior talk, somatic healing

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The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between warrior talk and transgenerational trauma while drawing on a case study of a modern extended conflict. The views in this article are supported by research into the use of warrior talk during a lengthy conflict in Northern Ireland (1969-1998), and a subsequent peace process (1998-2022). Evidence for the impact of warrior talk was drawn from republican speeches, press statements, commemorations, interviews, and funerals from 1969-2022. Significantly, in the 1990s, there was an observable shift in republican political discourses, towards the language of peace, forgiveness and transformation. During this period, the republican leadership acknowledged that their goal of Irish unity was better served through political and peaceful means, rather than through ongoing violence.

The political evolution of republicanism in Northern Ireland is well charted, but the continued application of warrior talk is a phenomenon worthy of further examination. Research findings reveal a link between warrior talk and the transmission of trauma across generations of republicans. Paradoxically, warrior talk remained part of republican discourses despite an overt engagement with

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the peace process, and a major transition in mainstream politics. The case study material revealed an ancient code embedded in republican warrior talk, which legitimizes and brings meaning for several generations exposed to conflict, war, and both direct and indirect violence.

Introduction

Warrior talk has a key role to play in the perpetuation of human conflict. It facilitates the demonization of opposing groups as enemies, and sustains a collective belief that one party or position will, over time, dominate the outcome. Warrior talk exists across a wide spectrum of human interaction from violent conflict on a global/national scale to the sports field, and it is also linked to the vicarious thrill of imaginary heroes in Hollywood films.

Warrior talk emphasizes difference, and plays a role in polarizing a situation and the responses of the participants involved. Warrior talk is deeply embedded in everyday language and interaction, frequently manifesting as aggressive behavior and bullying within organizations. An interesting rationale for aggressive behavior, for example in schools and offices, can be observed in terms such as “harmless fun” and “letting off steam.” From a neuroscience perspective, any form of threat, whether real or perceived, will be experienced somatically as a unique and individual survival response. Where there is a low-level threat encountered by a well-regulated nervous system, activation is likely to return to steady state, and the individual goes about their day. High-threat environmental conditions, such as war, extended conflict, or direct and indirect violence bring active fight or flight responses as the body’s biology moves to protect the individual from threat. If the nervous system perceives a threat to life, it will shut down all but essential functions, and the individual appears to freeze. An efficient system to detect threat is now switched on, and it is likely that a state of apparently permanent response to trauma arises, which is problematic on many levels. In this article, the term warrior talk will be used to understand the sources of the communication of collective trauma experienced by families and communities during the conflict in Northern Ireland.

A Definition of Warrior Talk

Language, terms and metaphors associated with war and violence used in political discourses or appropriated into everyday settings to influence people and situations (Watson, p. 2[1]).

This article focuses specifically on Irish republican warrior talk to give the reader a comprehensive understanding of the term. All parties to war and conflict have their own forms of warrior talk, which impact the trajectory of the conflict and attempts at peace-making. The generic definition above was developed during an extensive study of Irish republican discourses from 1969 to 2022. It was discovered that warrior talk was not just an oral language, but also involved rituals, symbols, and stories, all focused on the political justification for a “noble cause” – Irish unity. Acts of remembrance appeared to act as both sacred rituals and political tools. The scale and proliferation of republican warrior talk represents an excellent case study to explore the far-reaching effects of human conflict and also, specifically, the transmission of transgenerational trauma.

A study of the first generation of young people to grow up in Northern Ireland during the peace process illustrates how slow the progress towards reconciliation can be in reality (McLernon et al., 2004). The focus of the research was on attitudes in order to examine whether there was a change in perception of intergroup forgiveness. A sample of 364 participants aged 25 or younger indicated that 340 participants had been affected by both direct and indirect violence. The research indicated a general reluctance to forgive. Six years after the Good Friday Agreement, it was clear that although rival communities in Northern Ireland had entered a period of peace-building, collective trauma wounds were far from healed. These words from a younger generation of radical republicans are a chilling reminder that despite significant political change, a traumatic legacy remains in Northern Ireland: “You think this is madness? There will be madness as long as there is an armed occupation of Ireland. Go back to what the IRA did in the 1970’s” (Mooney, 2019).

War and Conflict

In Northern Ireland, the terms war and conflict have been used interchangeably to account for

both sectarian community violence and direct violence against the British state. For republicans, their struggle for freedom, justice, and democracy has been communicated as a noble war, and their warrior talk reflects a traditional republican principle that sanctions physical force as a strategy to unite Ireland. Unionists and groups wishing to remain part of the United Kingdom are more likely to describe sectarian violence as a conflict. Ironically, the term “Troubles” developed as a euphemism for bloody conflict, and uses political rhetoric that avoids ascribing blame to any of the participants (Phoenix, 2019).

A war is generally defined as a state of armed conflict between groups (Galtung, 1996). The term “war” instantly polarizes opponents into good or evil by labeling one party as the other or enemy. In Northern Ireland, the term “war” was frequently used by republicans to justify their armed struggle with the British government. The term “conflict” does not necessarily imply that the situation is physically violent, but the effects of indirect violence, including oppression, dislocation, and injustice can be devastating, with long-term consequences for individuals and communities. Warrior talk appears to encode and normalize violence, contributing further to the transmission of trauma across generations. Below is a sample of political warrior talk from a speech to an annual republican gathering one year after the Good Friday Agreement:

“Fellow republicans, I call upon you to educate our youth and instill a sense of pride and understanding of the sacrifices of countless generations of men and woman in the pursuit of Irish freedom. Memories will come rushing back to you. Of parents and grandparents, childhood friends, comrades in arms, the memories and camaraderie of the internment camps and prisons” (Price, 1999).

The Origins of Warrior Talk

Two key principles have shaped republican warrior talk: physical force tradition and political abstentionism. The right to use physical force was seen as a legitimate response to injustice. This principle continued to present violence as a moral choice until the 1990s, when the question of decommissioning became a major political issue for all parties engaged in the peace process. The second prin-

ciple of abstentionism was regarded as the “sacred flame” of republicanism, and represented the republican political position that the 1921 partition of Ireland was illegal. Abstentionism positions the British government as the traditional enemy of Irish freedom, and to this day republican elected politicians do not take up their seats in the British parliament in London.

Against a backdrop of core republican principles, several key events have contributed to the development of republican warrior talk and its relationship with collective trauma. In this section, three events will be outlined: the Easter Rising; Bloody Sunday, and hunger strikes.

The Easter Rising – 1916

A strange alchemy of Irish politics that transmuted sixteen executed men into martyrs (Bowyer-Bell, p. 13).

The Easter Rising in Dublin brought physical force republicanism back into Irish politics. The executions resulted in a strong reaction against the British government from nationalist communities who had been working toward a more peaceful constitutional route to Irish freedom. The backlash manifested as a significant rise in political support for an Irish Republic. The chief beneficiary was Sinn Féin, with a decisive general election victory in 1918. In the aftermath of the 1916 Easter Rising, the British government came under international pressure to agree to Home Rule for Ireland, but faced fierce opposition from the Protestant majority in the north of the country. The result was the formal partition of Ireland. The impact of partition was brutal, and ruptured communities as both republicans and unionists found themselves dislocated from their roots and families.

The division of Ireland was deemed to be illegal, and to this day, republicans refer to the south as “the twenty-six counties” and the north as “the six counties.” In 1921, the south gained their independence, and a Republic of Ireland (Éire) was created. Partition resulted in a long history of unionist-led governments in Northern Ireland, but this ended on May 7, 2022, when Sinn Féin became the largest party in the Northern Ireland Assembly. The current Sinn Féin leader, Michelle O’Neill, became the new First Minister of Northern Ireland under the terms of the Good Friday Agreement (1998).

For republicans, the 1916 executions reframed their previous armed insurrection against the British government into a legitimate war for freedom. Over time, the Easter Rising became an important event in the republican calendar, with commemorations across the whole island. The impact of the Easter Rising is reflected in their warrior talk to this day:

“The rebels of 1916 set out to liberate our country from British rule and to shape a nation that would thrive and prosper. Much like the rebels of 1916, our generation too is impatient for change. A new generation is rising up to lay claim to our destiny” (McDonald, pp. 2-3).

Bloody Sunday – 1972

In August 1969, an explosive combination of civil rights activity, sectarian violence, and overzealous policing by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) tipped Northern Ireland into a period of time known as the “Troubles.” That same month, British troops were deployed to restore order in a move that galvanized Northern republicans into civil rebellion. In the words of Seán Mac Stiofáin: “A colonial power does not send in its army to hurry social reforms” (FRFI, 2018).

The armed response from the British government provided further justification for northern republicans to engage in a historic battle for Irish unity. In parallel, sectarian violence escalated in the 1970s, and this provided a remit for the Irish Republican Army (IRA) to assume the role of community protectors. Such was the level of threat; republican communities felt they could not trust the RUC to protect them. On January 30, 1972, a civil rights march was met with an armed response from the British military. The death of 13 unarmed civilians became a turning point for republicans, and the IRA’s military organization expanded rapidly in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday. Warrior talk now communicated the notion of a “just war” with the British government. Behind the scenes, republicans prepared for a lengthy battle with the British army. Young people flocked to sign up to become republican soldiers and activists, and all efforts were focused on deposing a unionist-dominated political system controlled from London. A republican “Long War” (O’Brien, O’Brien Press, 1995) continued into the 1980s: “Never to treat with the

enemy, never to surrender to his mercy but to fight to the finish” (An Phoblacht, April 1971, p. 8).

Hunger Strikes – 1981/82

Another powerful source of republican warrior talk was hunger striking. This was an ancient sacrifice that represented a different form of physical violence, and enshrined an alternative form of martyrdom to dying in battle or being executed by the enemy. The words of Terence MacSwiney, who died during a hunger strike in an English jail in 1920, became another powerful legacy adopted by northern republicans in their warrior talk: “It is not those who inflict the most but those who can suffer the most who will conquer” (MacSwiney, *An Phoblacht*, 1971, p. 1).

The warrior talk from the hunger strikers in the 1980s reveals an alternative war front in the fight against the British government. The election of Bobby Sands as an MP for the Westminster parliament was a major watershed for northern republicans and other nationalist communities in Northern Ireland. The republican principle of abstentionism prevented Sands from taking the seat, but his win galvanized the political development of Sinn Féin, and a realization that Irish unity could be won at the ballot box. Within ten years, Sinn Féin would transform the political agenda for republicans towards electoralism and peace. Warrior talk remained in their political discourses, most noticeably at remembrance events such as Easter Rising and Bloody Sunday commemorations. On these occasions, warrior talk was used to preserve links with the past. From a trauma perspective, the hunger strikers narrative expanded republican warrior talk, and ensured that exposure to republican sacrifice was transmitted to another generation. Loyalty to a noble cause continued to operate as a transgenerational mechanism trapping others in a collective story far removed from the reality of death from starvation.

The death of Bobby Sands and that of nine other young men on hunger strike reinforced the stories of martyrdom already embedded in republican warrior talk. Hunger striking was communicated as an act of dignified rebellion against a persecutor, and another generation of martyrs joined the narrative of a noble cause: “Our comrades have lit with their lives an eternal beacon which will inspire this

nation and people to rise up and crush oppression forces” (An Phoblacht, 10th October 1981, p. 13).

The Good Friday Agreement and Warrior Talk

This treaty represented a major breakthrough in the Northern Ireland peace process because it created the conditions to end violence and build a more equitable and peaceful society in Northern Ireland. The ending of partition, subject to majority consent by the citizens of Northern Ireland, was addressed. The treaty provided for new forms of power sharing and cross border bodies to ensure a more diverse and democratic style of government. The treaty signaled that social and economic priorities in Northern Ireland would be addressed first, and include peace-building across communities. To the dismay of traditional republicans, the precise arrangements for Irish unity were a secondary objective.

The traditional republican principles of physical force and abstention had proved to be a strait jacket for the Sinn Féin leadership, but during the 1990s a majority within the republican movement was persuaded that a more proactive stance towards peace could provide significant political leverage for northern republicans. It was a gamble, because the conditions for peace included military ceasefires and decommissioning of all weapons for both unionists and republicans. This was a deeply disturbing scenario for republican veterans and volunteers serving the IRA. Their identity was transformed as they became redundant as freedom fighters, warriors, and heroes. A collective mythic narrative was at risk. The research findings from both discourses and interviews revealed that this change of identity was brutal for republican prisoners, as their status changed from prisoners of war to that of criminals. For some, the traumatic memories of the 1970s and 1980s are still keenly felt: “As Republicans who refused to wear the badge of criminality we will not forget the crime of forgetting. Always and everywhere, remember the hunger strikers” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 117).

A very interesting evolution of republican warrior talk took place during the 1990s, and reflects the paradox facing Sinn Féin as a growing political force in Northern Ireland. Their traditional use of warrior talk was a potential barrier to their credibility nationally and internationally. Their polit-

ical strategy was to leverage their peace strategy, and show the world the republican commitment to peace in Northern Ireland. However, within the republican movement, it was essential that Sinn Féin continue to use traditional warrior talk at annual conferences and internal events in order to reassure supporters that the main goal of a united Ireland was still a priority: “We will never allow the thirst for freedom to be quenched” (Adams, May 1998, p. 1).

In the years since the Good Friday Agreement, Sinn Féin has continued to use forms of warrior talk to promote a peace agenda. There are many examples of contradictory messages, such as fighting peacefully, securing a bridgehead for peace, or peace under siege. It could be argued that their continued use of warrior talk facilitated change within republicanism, and prevented serious splits internally. From a trauma perspective, warrior talk continued to trap republicans in a narrative about a military past despite the overtures of peace.

In 2002 a *Tírghrá*¹ was held in Dublin bringing together republicans from the north and south to pay tribute to fallen volunteers of the IRA, republican activists, and their families. On the surface, the use of warrior talk in the context of the Good Friday Agreement may appear incongruous to outsiders, but below is a clear example of warrior talk used to sustain the coherence of the republican message:

“Republican and nationalists hold the families of our republican dead in great esteem. It is because we are in your debt, 11 days from now, 86 years ago; The Irish Republic was proclaimed at the Easter Proclamation of 1916 and asserted in arms by republican men and women of that time. The IRA is not merely an army of soldiers; it is an army of political activists. It takes bravery to wage war but it takes special courage to sue for peace. The reality is that there would be no peace if it were not for the IRA” (Adams, *An Phoblacht*, April 11, 2002, p. 1).

Sustainable Peace and Transgenerational Trauma

The Good Friday Agreement did not resolve all the issues, because the reality for communities in Northern Ireland was more complex. Initially, an end to violence was established through ceasefires and decommissioning, with which both republicans and unionists complied. The agreement

created conditions for positive peace, which were witnessed by significant improvements in social, economic, and political equity in Northern Ireland. However, deeply polarized positions remain between republicans and unionists on the continuing partition of Ireland, and this continues to shape attitudes across communities and generations.

The Good Friday Agreement had a number of unintended consequences. As republicans developed into mainstream politicians and won elections, their capability and credibility to participate in the government of Northern Ireland grew. Within the republican movement, several republican groups, both political and military, emerged to take up the traditional call for the re-unification of Ireland (for example, Real IRA (1997); New IRA (2016)). In unionist communities, groups loyal to the British crown have reappeared and become more active in the persecution of nationalist and republican communities. Old enemy lines have since emerged, and can be observed through an increase in direct and indirect violence. To this day, violence continues between unionists and republicans, including a full spectrum of criminal activity, punishment beatings, kneecapping, and intimidation. Young people are frequently caught up in acts of violence or bear witness to the impact of violence on their friends and families: “I am having to answer questions from my children, who came across the image on social media, why their Daddy is on a bonfire to be burnt” (Gary McCleave in Leebody, 2022).

Transgenerational Trauma: A Summary

It is clear that historical conditions for republican collective trauma are many and varied. It is interesting that the heroic narrative from 1916 remains a rallying call for present-day republicans, and a justification for the tradition of citizen warriors. The traumatic consequences of normalizing physical violence are very difficult to escape, and over time create a coercive group culture: “In its more extreme form it was thought not only right to die, but also to kill for that version of Ireland” (Hume, 1983, as cited in Dover, 1995).

With the partition of Ireland, the creation of Northern Ireland, and the subsequent creation of a free Irish republic, the conditions for war and conflict were in place for the next century. Republican warrior talk is a good example of a “living link” back to an ancient political ideology that continues to provide consistency and continuity for republicans both north and south of the border. It also seeks to bind people to a single, polarized narrative and implicit cultural agreement, or “trauma loyalty” (Hübl & Ayritt, 2019, p. 99).

As the scale of violence grew in Northern Ireland in the 1970s, warrior talk provided a clear identity and purpose at a time when republicans came under serious physical attacks. An earlier warrior talk from 1916 provided an initial collective coherence for communities under threat with an increasingly fragile sense of safety. Faced with the presence of British soldiers and sectarian violence, republican communities were effectively under siege. A new generation of republicans took up arms to defend their communities, and the scene was set for further transgenerational trauma. Within a few years, sectarian violence had settled into cycles of planned attacks and retaliation between communities.

By the 1980s, warrior talk contributed to a collective denial about the activities of the IRA, and provided political justification for retaliatory violence, mainland UK bombings, and planned murders. Warrior talk has operated as a “shadow” language (Hübl & Ayritt, 2019, p. 99), and has been instrumental in reinforcing fear, anxiety, and hypervigilance across generations. There is a stark contrast between narrative memories generated by warrior talk and the traumatic memories of republican veterans active in the 1970s and 1980s:

“The IRA was a manifestation of insurrectional energy within the nationalist community at that time, a reaction to how the British behaved there. The difference between what was on offer in 1974 and what was accepted in 1998 did not justify the loss of one single life” (McIntyre, *Belfast Telegraph*, 2019).

Warrior talk is found in the political discourse of both republicans and unionists. Noble causes re-

1. A Tírghrá is a national tribute going back to 1916. 2,000 people attended representing 450 republican families.

main alive, conflict endures, and new generations join established collective trauma systems. Despite the peace process, many families and communities in Northern Ireland have rarely felt safe since 1969, and even to the present day.

Warrior Talk Research Findings

An analysis of the research findings produced three major themes to explain the role of warrior talk: polarization, sacred cause, and identity politics:

- **Warrior talk and polarization.** The language of war instantly polarizes a complex political scenario or social setting into opposing positions, and attracts the labels of “right” and “wrong.” Terms such as “enemy” and “battle” heighten emotional reactions irrespective of the form of the conflict. A competitive game may appear benign, but the polarizing process that encourages participants to take sides can become a tipping point for violence, both direct and indirect. During a competition, both players and spectators display human fight/flight behaviors, and the outcomes can be exhilarating and entertaining. When the term “enemy” is used in a nonviolent context, the language can evoke an image of threat and introduce the possibility of violence.

The threat of violence impacts the ways in which people respond to the situation, and is a factor in whether the situation becomes violent. It is clear that the polarizing effect of warrior talk language masks the complexity of the political issues, as well as the sensory reality of individuals and communities living with threat.

- **Warrior talk and sacred values.** The findings illustrate the power of warrior talk as a transmitter of collective sacred values, and explain how group identity and traditions transcend short-term self-interest. Warrior talk mobilizes people to follow a specific cause and justify their collective rights to protect their values, whether they are orientated toward religion, family, community, or nation. The existence of a noble cause inspires people to act now for the greater good of a distant future, and this is a powerful platform for radical action and political violence.

The combination of warrior talk and a sacred cause is a combustible mixture, and manifests in both peaceful protests and violent demon-

strations. The tipping point into violence during a protest march for human rights or environmental issues can be observed in elements such as the chants, slogans, and combative messages between protesters and their opponents. The image portrayed in the media is one of an army advancing on the enemy’s castle, whereas the experience for the marchers is frequently one of solidarity, comradeship, and identity with a cause.

- **Warrior talk and identity politics.** The rise of identity politics is a modern social phenomenon fueled through new usages of language and the impact of social media. Group identity is used as a primary driver to address inequality and reconfigure the power relations between different identities. Social media enables the rapid transmission of views and information, and this clearly accelerates the creation and maintenance of identities.

Social and political identities separate groups into “us” and “them,” and although this may be a valid political expression of discontent, the warrior language of protest can deteriorate rapidly into the language of threat and violence. It is important to recognize that memories of past grievances, abuses, and atrocities become sacred causes for other generations to follow. This brings a complex dynamic between remembrance as a gesture of respect and as a collection of memories that trap people in destructive cycles.

The Unspeakable Truth

The findings from the case study illustrate a relationship between warrior talk and the transmission of transgenerational trauma. With the benefit of research into neuroscience and the work of trauma therapists and healers, an in-depth and somatic explanation of trauma is now more possible than it might have been during the 1970s and 1980s in Northern Ireland. After the Good Friday Agreement (1998), initiatives in peace-building and community engagement were grounded in the post-apartheid South African model of truth and reconciliation. This model requires interviews and prolonged discussion, which run the risk of further traumatization for the participating individuals and communities.

The knowledge that a traumatic event is experienced through the body means that sensations felt in the present can provide information for healing, which is more effective than individuals repeating stories about their past. Trauma healing and recovery is therefore possible without exposing the individual to a recurring story or flashbacks. The contrast between the narrative story of the traumatic experience and the sensory memories stored in the body is key to a somatic approach to trauma healing (Levine, 2010), which connects the individual to the past from a resourced place, and avoids re-traumatization. Peter Levine's approach puts the trauma story secondary to the work of locating the imprints of past trauma on the individual's nervous system. Full exploration of the original trauma is attempted once the person has built up the internal resources that make them feel safe.

The Northern Ireland case study demonstrates how reliance on language has significant limitations in trauma healing, and may even be a source of further traumatization. The evidence from republican discourses indicates that warrior talk has acted as a replay button continuously stimulating trauma stories. From a trauma healing perspective, a sole focus on talking therapies may further embed a narrative memory, and override the body's visceral responses.

Finally, in terms of polyvagal brain circuitry (Porges, 2017), a traumatized person's secondary defense system will have rapidly responded to preserve life until the threat has passed. This somatic impact will remain in the body unless the defensive activation is completed, and trauma memories and fragments heal. The implications of this are profound for Northern Ireland. It is highly likely that ancestral trauma from 1916 continues to exist for republicans. Its collective impact can be found in the abundance of warrior talk from that era. The prolonged exposure to violence for individuals and communities in Northern Ireland since 1969 is a practical example of transgenerational trauma. It is clear that warrior talk has been instrumental in the transmission of both individual and collective trauma.

In the final section, the learning from the case study will be summarized into two key practical insights for healing transgenerational trauma. This will not be focused on current trauma healing approaches in Northern Ireland, which include a range of talk

therapies plus body/mind approaches, PTSD counseling, EMDR, and emotional tapping. Rather, the following summary will comment from a strategic view on the future priorities for transgenerational trauma healing in general. Each priority is supported by a number of practical suggestions for the future.

Priority One

Understanding the transmission of trauma across generations

- Greater emphasis on bringing a trauma-informed approach to peace-building, and to the political institutions and key stakeholders engaged in conflict resolution.
- Greater understanding that each new generation inherits some collective trauma, which, if left unresolved, continues to re-traumatize people and solidify ancient conflicts.
- Greater awareness of language and its role in the polarization of communities and societies. Closer examination of warrior talk as a curator of rage, and its impact on traumatized communities.
- Greater knowledge of the interrelationship between somatic, emotional, and thinking expressions of trauma, and how this impacts the healing process

Priority Two

Weakening the links in the chain of transgenerational trauma

- Develop systems of remembering that honor ancestors and their sacrifices, but reduce the risk of trauma transmission to younger generations and the re-traumatization of individuals and their communities.
- Take a strategic approach to communicating the impact of collective trauma on health and well-being, and engage with key societal stakeholders including schools, higher education, social services, police, and the custodial system.
- Build confidence in somatic approaches to trauma healing as a form of empowerment for each generation impacted by war, conflict, or a legacy of direct or indirect violence.
- Develop capacity and capability to deliver somatic trauma healing with young people,

groups, and families. This would require a collaborative, partnership approach across dif-

ferent providers, and support through political sponsorship and funding.



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