

January Meeting: Using Flare – Content Reuse in Action

Meeting Date	Meeting Time	Location	Speaker
January 12, 2009	6pm CENTRAL	Online Meeting See instructions below	Sharon Burton MadCap Software

We will have a Drawing at the end of the meeting for a Free Copy of MadCap Flare! Be sure to attend...

In this virtual meeting, Sharon Burton will show what MadCap Flare can do for you. Even if you're using other tools right now, you need to see how the fastest growing tool on the market can help you leverage your content and increase your productivity. Come find out:

- Overview of topic-based content development and how it adds to your workflow
- Introduction to Flare
- Create new content and import existing content
- Define the look of the content using style sheets, create page layouts, and add snippets, variables, conditional text, and more
- Easily reuse and repurpose your content with TOCs and Outlines
- Create the targets to output to PDF, XPS, WebHelp (cross-browser, cross-platform), Microsoft HTML Help, or others

Instructions for Accessing the Meeting

1. Click <https://www2.gotomeeting.com/join/330596064> to access the meeting.
2. Enter your name, email address, and the meeting ID, **330-596-064**, to enter the meeting.
3. Use your speakers and a microphone to access the meeting for free with VOIP.
4. Or, call **646-558-2103** and enter the access code, **330-596-064**, to enter the telephone conference.

About the Speaker

Sharon Burton is product manager/product evangelist with Madcap Software. She oversees Blaze and Analyzer as well as other products yet to arrive. Sharon is a nationally recognized practitioner, business expert, and speaker in the field of technical communication.

With over 16 years of experience in the field, she has consulted with large and small companies to improve their product documentation and/or their documentation processes. Sharon has received many awards from places such as the Society for Technical Communication and Apex.



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Central Texas STC Fall Seminar, Presentations in Review

by Heather Parsons, Alamo Chapter President

Seminar Overview

The Austin and San Antonio STC Chapters hosted the Central Texas STC Fall Seminar on Saturday, November 15, from 10am-3pm in downtown San Antonio at the Riverwalk Valencia Hotel. It was a great opportunity for everyone from the Austin, Houston, and San Antonio chapters to meet, network, and hear presentations on several technical communication topics. We also went to lunch on the Riverwalk, which was an easy and refreshing five-minute walk from the hotel.



The first speaker was Alan Porter from WebWorks.com in Austin on *Why Technical Writers Shouldn't Be Writers*. The second presentation was given by Alyssa Fox and Meredith Kramer from NetIQ in Houston on *Agile Development Processes in an Information Development Team*. The third presentation was given by Paul Mueller from UserAid in Houston on *Using Metrics to Estimate Your Documentation Projects*.

Why Technical Writers Shouldn't Be Writers: Review of Presentation by Alan Porter



Alan Porter from WebWorks.com has been a technical writer for 20 years, has written three books with more on the way, and is a big fan of comic books. These experiences contributed to Alan's mission of educating technical writers on what their role not only is, but could be (i.e., communicating information that is written, verbal, and visual). Using all three communication methods enriches the user experience and ensures that the information being shared is remembered.

Alan's work and research in technical writing and comic book writing and design has helped him learn more about how people learn. Alan said that people remember about ten percent of what they read, twenty percent of what they hear, and forty percent of what they see.

So what does this mean to technical writers? The answer is that "writing is not about what 'you' know; it's about the user," said Alan. Alan gave a funny example to illustrate how important it is to consider the user's point of view in all three areas (i.e., written, verbal, and visual communication). He told us a story where a person calls a help desk and asks for Jack. After some initial questions, the help desk person realizes the caller is not calling about a problem at all, but calling because he thought he was following the instructions (i.e., unplug the Ethernet cable and telephone jack).

Continued: Why Technical Writers Shouldn't Be Writers: Review of Presentation by Alan Porter

Thus, the written message may not always be understood by the reader. Look at the words, "Turn the switch ON" as an example. "Turn" implies turning something left or right. "Switch" implies flipping a lever one way or another. There's no way a switch can be turned. This may seem like a slight discrepancy in words, but, if the reader has no experience with the product or knowledge of the process, this may impede them from fully understanding what you are trying to convey. This is an example where the written word may not be enough to communicate information. That's where verbal and visual communication can help.

Alan discussed several examples of materials created to engage more than one communication method. I was reminded from Alan's presentation of the success the American Indians have had in verbally communicating history and traditions. American Indians and other cultures have passed information from generation to generation by telling stories. Alan said that because people more easily remember stories, verbal communication can be a very effective tool in sharing technical processes and procedures.

One of the most popular and well-known examples of visual communication is the Army's instructions on using the M16A1 Rifle (affectionately known as "Love Your Rifle"). It is a comic book called DA-PAM 750-30 on how to use and maintain the M16 rifle. It was written in the 1960s and presented in comic book layout with bright colors, detailed pictures, and descriptions of characters, which resulted in a story of how to use and maintain the rifle. As a result of its appeal to its readers, it is the most widely read document in the Army.



Speaker, Alan Porter

Alan also noted that people respond to simple visual methods. Do you remember in the movie, Forrest Gump, where a guy on the street gets the idea to create a smiley-face t-shirt when Gump wipes the mud off his face onto a yellow t-shirt? The success of the smiley face was an example of how people positively react to simple, visual messages. I was reminded of this movie scene from Alan's presentation. He said you can express more information in graphics that is appreciated and remembered by the user. One example he gave was the increased positive reaction babies have to pictures of smiley faces than they have to pictures of real people.

So how can technical writers incorporate written, verbal, and visual communication methods into technical documentation?

First, become a user advocate. Learn everything you can about the user. Understand how they most easily learn. Understand what communication methods work best for their experience level, education, and situation. And, look at your distribution methods so that you present the information in a way they can most easily access it.

Continued: Why Technical Writers Shouldn't Be Writers: Review of Presentation by Alan Porter

Second, tell a story. Remember that a story includes the *what*, *who*, and *how*, as well as a *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*. Telling a story makes the information more personal and memorable to the user.

Third, look for ways to incorporate more graphics, video, and/or sound into your documentation (e.g., flow charts for processes, graphs to show overall measurements, pictures for visual background information, movies to show the user what to do, and sound to verbally reinforce the background information).

Alan challenged us to not look at technical writing as just writing, but to look at it as *technical communication* involving written, verbal, and visual communication. Incorporating all three into your documentation will make the user's experience more successful and will make your documentation more valuable.

About the Speaker

President and Founder of 4J's Group, **Alan Porter** has 20 plus years in Corporate Publishing in the UK and USA. He has been involved in the development and adoption of various publishing standards and has been a regular speaker at industry conferences. He has held senior management positions at various publishing software and services companies, allied with extensive consulting experience. His client base has included Boeing, Canadian Government, Forbes, McGraw-Hill, Mercedes, Sun, UK Royal Air Force and many other Fortune 1000 companies. He is a published author of several books and has numerous magazine articles to his name. Alan J. Porter is also a member of the management team of The Quadralay Corporation.

Continued: Central Texas STC Fall Seminar

Agile Development Processes in an Information Development Team: Review of Presentation by Alyssa Fox and Meredith Kramer



Alyssa Fox and Meredith Kramer from NetIQ Corporation in Houston gave an information-packed presentation on how Agile development processes have been incorporated into the development, testing, and documentation areas of their company.

At a high level, Agile development processes chunk features or pieces of usable functionality within the software development life cycle. As a feature is developed, it moves from one area to the next (e.g., from development, to test, and to release). When that feature is completely tested and approved (i.e., called *feature complete* at NetIQ), the feature is ready for release.

Alyssa and Meredith's team took this process one step further by coordinating documentation development of each feature with the feature complete stages in development and test. As a feature is developed, their team is in the process and in discussions of when the feature will go through each stage of testing and when the feature will be categorized as *feature complete*. Once the feature is determined to be complete, their team begins documenting the feature with developer and tester input to verify the information is complete, is tested, and is ready for release to the user along with the feature code.

This has been a very helpful process to their team because it helps them document functionality, which has been completed, tested, and approved (i.e., they do not document code that is incomplete or in development because any changes made to the code will most likely require changes to the documentation). It also helps people in development and test because the feature being released tends to be fresh on their minds allowing them to review smaller chunks of information rather than an entire user guide at the end of the development project.



Continued: Agile Development Processes in an Information Development Team: Review of Presentation by Alyssa Fox and Meredith Kramer

Another benefit Alyssa and Meredith liked about Agile for information development was that it is easier to make changes to schedules and resources. The units of work are based upon each feature being developed rather than upon large sections of code or modules. The smaller chunks of functionality can be finished faster, which helps prevent schedule and resource changes from having a major impact on the project. Agile allows schedules to be rearranged at a more granular level, which allows resources to be reassigned more easily due to shorter development/test time periods. Other methods (e.g., waterfall method) tend to release larger portions of code and functionality, thus requiring longer time periods for information development and testing.



Speakers, Alyssa Fox (left) and Meredith Kramer (right)

Some tips and tricks that Alyssa and Meredith suggested were to define information development tasks within each project iteration. For example, a feature in iteration 1 would go through code development, testing, and documentation development; whereas, in iteration 2, any unfinished tasks from iteration 1 would be completed as well as code development, testing, and information development for any new features. Holding regular scrum meetings is also very important to information development. But, they added that you shouldn't hold so many scrum meetings that prevent you from getting any work done. Scrum meetings should be short (i.e., 15 minutes), should be held on a consistent basis (e.g., daily), and should not take up more than 20 percent of your total weekly hours. One purpose for having scrum meetings is for each project team member to briefly share their tasks in progress and identify areas where others can help.

Another tip Alyssa and Meredith gave was to not document a feature until it has reached *feature complete* (i.e., don't document the feature until it is tested and approved for release). This way, you can ensure the documentation's technical accuracy until the feature is scheduled for planned changes.

They also said to provide time in the schedule for three drafts of each feature (e.g., a first draft, an approved draft of information, and a quality edit draft for final review to tie up loose ends and review formatting).

Lastly, Alyssa and Meredith suggested getting involved as much as possible in learning from the developers and testers to ensure they understand your role on the project and ways that you can help them in a timely manner.

Continued: Agile Development Processes in an Information Development Team: Review of Presentation by Alyssa Fox and Meredith Kramer

About the Speakers

Alyssa Fox is an Information Development Manager at NetIQ Corporation. She works across product teams to coordinate resources, processes, and schedules for agile planning and implementation. She received a B.A. in History from Texas A&M University and has been involved in technical communication for over 10 years. Alyssa enjoys projects that address the entire user experience from beginning to end, and has an avid interest in usability. She is also interested in developing junior team members and building cohesive, cross-functional teams that work together to deliver a product that is relevant to the user. Alyssa is a senior member of STC and has served in the Houston chapter as Treasurer, Executive Vice President, Vice President of Competitions, Vice President of Hospitality, Banquet Manager, Banquet Arrangements Manager, and competition judge. Alyssa has spoken at the STC 55th International Conference and at STC Houston chapter meetings and has won awards in the local STC competition.

Meredith Kramer is a Lead Information Developer at NetIQ Corporation. She started her technical writing career after graduating from Texas A&M University in 1998 with a B.S. in Journalism. Meredith enjoys contributing to projects that provide information to users in a clear and concise way to help make their jobs easier. She has served on teams this year that have moved from the waterfall methodology to agile methodology and spearheaded efforts to promote Information Development in that transition. Meredith is a senior member of STC and has served the Houston chapter as Vice President of Hospitality for two years, Technical Publications competition judging manager for two years, and competition judge. Meredith has spoken at the STC 55th International Conference and has won awards in the local STC competition.

Continued: Central Texas STC Fall Seminar

Using Metrics to Estimate Documentation Projects: Review of Presentation by Paul Mueller



Paul Mueller, who is President of UserAid in Houston, gave the third presentation at the Central Texas STC Fall Seminar on November 15. He spoke on a topic that is key to working on any documentation project as well as key to being a technical communicator, *Using Metrics to Estimate Your Documentation Projects*. Paul shared a number of very helpful tips on planning and estimating the amount of time needed to work on a documentation project for individual projects as well as projects worked by a team of technical communicators.

Paul said that the first step in estimating a project is to define either the topics your document will have or the number of pages it will have. Once you know the number of topics or pages, you can determine the amount of time needed per page or topic. The amount of time can be in whatever unit of work measure you want (e.g., hours, days, weeks, etc.). The important thing to remember is being consistent in how you measure your work.

Estimating time requires a standard amount of time to complete work that is new development, editing, and formatting. For example, a new page may require six hours of development time; whereas, a reworked page requires four hours of work, and a revised or minor edited page requires two hours of work.

Continued: Using Metrics to Estimate Documentation Projects: Review of Presentation by Paul Mueller

Finding the standard amount of time depends upon your skill set, knowledge of the topic, and experience level. If you are a technical writer just out of school with no writing experience, the standard amount of time to create a new page may take eight hours to complete, but may take two hours per page to complete for an experienced writer with advanced knowledge on the topic. Paul said that the more experience you have estimating your projects, the more accurate your estimates will be. That is why it is important to review your estimates throughout the project and record actual time needed to complete different types of work at the end of the project. Reusing your revised estimates on future projects is the key to providing clients with accurate project estimates.



Speaker, Paul Mueller

If you are estimating time for a team of writers, be sure to account for each person's skill set, knowledge of the topic, and experience level when estimating the time needed for that person. Your project estimates will be more accurate if you account for each person's vacation time, holidays, regularly scheduled meetings, and other time committed to non-project activities.

Lastly, Paul showed us examples of spreadsheets he has used to plan project schedules and estimate as well as record actual time needed to complete each topic within the project. Often, the spreadsheet could include a list of each topic or task, the assigned worker, the type of work required for the task (i.e., new development, reworked text, revised text, etc.), and the time period to complete the tasks in hours, days, etc. Paul suggested having a total number of hours for the project as well as subtotals for chapters, sections, and other major divisions within the project.

If you would like to see a template schedule Paul created and has used on past documentation projects, he can be reached at paul@useraid.com.

About the Speaker

Paul Mueller is President of UserAid, which designs and implements innovative communication solutions that deliver information when and where users need it. Paul received a B.S. in Computer Science and a B.S. in Mathematics from Pennsylvania State University and has been involved in technical communication for more than 20 years. Paul has managed information development, usability, and graphic design teams across the United States, Bolivia, and India. Paul often presents conference sessions about embedded help, management topics, and technology-focused implementations.



Volunteers Needed Desperately...

by Heather Parsons, Alamo Chapter President

Volunteering not only helps the technical communication community; it also helps you gain experience working with other communicators and helps you build your leadership skills. We have a very small group of communicators, who are trying to move the Alamo Chapter STC organization into a new direction.

We are holding all meetings online (program meetings and administrative meetings) to make meetings more convenient to everybody. The cost of gas prices and the cost of driving time alone make it difficult for communicators to do what they do best (i.e., communicate). By holding meetings online, we hope to eliminate this problem and attract new members and volunteers. Believe me, my time is very valuable, and I know your time is valuable to you, too. So this is a chance for you to volunteer for a group that provides ways for you to volunteer in the most efficient ways possible.

We are accepting volunteers who can contribute in any capacity and for any time period. Please email Heather Parsons at president@alamostc.org with your volunteering interests.

Positions to be filled include:

1. Secretary

- Record meeting notes for online and in person meetings and post the notes to the Alamo Chapter Administration web site.
- Learn how to use the Alamo Chapter Administration web site in order to keep the information up-to-date.

2. Newsletter Article Writer/Editor

- We have an ongoing need for articles that are posted to both the Alamo STC web site (alamostc.org) and to the PDF newsletter that is emailed to members.
- Article length is open (usually 500-1000) words, but can be less depending upon the topic.
- Article topics are up to you, but they will be reviewed for appropriateness and mechanics prior to being posted. If you are interested in volunteering as an article writer in any capacity or for any time period, please email Heather Parsons at president@alamostc.org.

3. "Idea" Person

We need help in gathering ideas for potential meeting topics and speakers, which can be used for online and in person meetings. If you have any ideas on meeting topics or speakers, please email Heather Parsons at president@alamostc.org with your idea and with any potential speaker contact information.

Thanks for considering us and for being a part of the technical communication community!



Alamo STC Financial Report

by Debbie Wood, Alamo Chapter Treasurer

Every year by September 30, STC chapters have to file a financial report with the STC office. I filed that report this year, and I want to let you know what our report said.

This report covers the period from July 1, 2007, through June 30, 2008. For the report, I had to provide STC with a basic balance sheet for the chapter. A balance sheet shows all income, all expenses, and the net income.

Income	
Interest Income (from our checking account)	25.42
Dues Rebates (from the dues you pay to STC)	921.00
Total Income:	946.42

Expenses	
Chapter Meeting Expenses	331.65
Web Hosting and Domain Name Registration	191.30
Miscellaneous	81.14
Total Expenses:	604.09

Net Income	
Total Income	946.42
Total Expenses	604.09
Net Income:	342.33

STC has changed its fiscal reporting year, so I'll also be filing another report early in 2009 that covers the last six months of 2008.

February 2009 Meeting

Sasha Zucker from the Alamo Chapter will be speaking on *User Stories Versus the Waterfall Method* on **February 10 at 6pm CENTRAL**.

STC Refreshes Logo to Coincide with Strategic Plan

Reprinted with Modifications from an STC.org Announcement Dated 10/15/08



STC President Mark Clifford announced the debut of a 2009 version of the STC logo this week calling it a "positive update combining the traditional elements of the logo with a modernized look." The updated version was developed by the public relations task force, led by Char James-Tanny and Rich Maggiani, with the creative expertise of Patrick Hofmann. Maggiani also revised the logo guidelines to aid in the use of the refreshed logo.

"I think our members will find the new version an attractive symbol of the strategic direction in which STC is heading and the new energy among the leadership," explained Clifford. He noted it has "a cleaner, brighter look, and gives greater definition to STC's branding."

The refreshed logo keeps the basic look of the STC traditional logo and adds graduated blue color plus a hint of curvature and dimension. Remaining inside the "box" are the "STC" letters with the "TC" in yellow to emphasize Technical Communication. The updated version also includes slight changes to the choice of typeface.

The new version will begin appearing on the STC Website tomorrow — and in documents as existing supplies of letterhead and envelopes are exhausted. "With the current economic condition it makes sense that we get the most use of our supplies and signage," explained STC Executive Director Susan Burton, who indicated the logo project was undertaken without the expenditure of any additional Funds. "I am especially thankful to Patrick Hoffman for his work on this project," said Burton.

Senior Member Patrick Hofmann, of Teeswater, Ontario, Canada, created the new design as a contribution to the Society. "Given the time and investment that went into the STC rebranding back in 2001, I wanted to maintain the overall look and feel of the original STC logo, yet give it a good dusting, polishing, and sprucing up," explained Hofmann.

The refreshed logo has been posted on the STC Website in various formats with guidelines for its use. Chapters and SIGs that have independent logos are encouraged to consider updating their logos and may use elements of the STC logo in their design. The refreshed logos, both colored and B&W versions, can be used in a variety of new and innovative ways, such as in conjunction with community logos and specific event logos.

Renewing Your Membership with STC

By Bryce A. Walat, Pittsburgh STC President

Recently, I've heard other STC members talking about the economy, especially the rising cost of fuel, food, health care, and other necessities, and the falling value of their homes and investments. For some STC members, their membership in STC is a prime candidate for an "extra" item to cut from their personal or professional budgets. You may be thinking about not renewing your membership in STC when it expires, or if you aren't a current member, you may be having second thoughts about joining STC. If you still plan to renew or join STC, you may also be thinking about cutting back on meetings or events.

Continued: Renewing Your Membership with STC

By Bryce A. Walat, Pittsburgh STC President

Before you decide not to renew or join STC, or skip a meeting you'd like to attend, I'd like to ask you this question: Over your lifetime, what is your most valuable and biggest asset?

- Your home
- Your education
- Your career
- Your retirement plan

Answer: Your career is your biggest and most important asset. Your career gives you the income to get the necessities of life, such as food, clothing, and shelter, and also to get an education, real estate, a retirement plan, and other investments and assets. When you think about how much of your time every day you spend working and how much of your lifetime is spent working, you can see why your career is so important. That's why it's important to manage your career well.

STC helps you manage your career by helping you to:

- Launch your technical communication career or transition into a technical communication career
- Learn new skills and enhance existing ones
- Find opportunities to network with fellow technical communication professionals
- Find a new job or a better job
- Launch an independent technical communication career
- Find help when you need it
- Improve your "soft" skills, such as public speaking or team-building skills

The cost of STC membership is "chump change" compared to the value it adds to your career. For example, STC's free or low-cost articles, seminars, and conferences give you knowledge and skills to not only keep up with changes in the fast-paced technical communication field, but also get ready for the technical communication jobs of the future.

On a personal note, I've now been through four "career transitions" in my eight years as a technical communicator. In some cases, they occurred because of circumstances beyond my control, such as economic conditions; in others, there were things that I could have done or not done that might have led to a different outcome. In every case, I found STC to be a helpful resource to manage these transitions. STC proved valuable as a go-to for technical communication job leads, ways to improve my technical and interpersonal skills, and just to know that I wasn't alone in my career transition. STC Pittsburgh's WorkQuest was, as the MasterCard slogan goes, priceless. Also, in every case, employers and potential employers noticed my membership in STC on my resume, and some even knew of me from STC.

As President of STC Pittsburgh, part of my job is promoting the chapter and the Society, and I wrote this column as a way to promote STC and to make a case that STC is more important to your career in times like these. But I also wrote it to explain how STC helped me and why I joined STC.

With that in mind, if you join or renew your membership in November, you'll receive two months free, because your membership won't expire until the end of 2009. Visit stc.org to join or renew. Also, ask me about membership, because not only am I STC Pittsburgh's President, I'm also a member!



Meeting in Review: Dr. John Morkes, Expero

by Heather Parsons, Alamo Chapter President

We had our first online meeting on September 9. The speaker was Dr. John Morkes, who is a usability expert and consultant. He spoke on the *Joy of Use: The Next Stage in User Experience*. When I first heard the title, I thought, "Great, this is a presentation on usability and how it can be applied to software development." But, it was much more than that. The description of the meeting was that "joy of use follows usefulness and ease of use as the next stage in user experience." As we learned in the meeting, the "next stage in user experience" is humor and social interaction.

Dr. Morkes reviewed examples of web sites that incorporate humor and/or human social skills in the design and function of the software in order to make the user "feel" more of a connection with the product. For example, Dr. Morkes talked about his work on a usability study in which two user groups were asked to complete an online treasure hunt using test software. One group was given software that responded to user needs with questions, commonly used phrases, jokes, and compliments while they did the treasure hunt. The other group was given software that had no "human-like" response capability, but still allowed the user to do the treasure hunt. Even though the users in the first group were receiving and responding to communication from the software, they were still able to complete the treasure hunt within the same amount of time as the group without the "human-like" software interaction. As a result of the interaction, the users in the first group felt more comfortable in asking questions and receiving answers from the software.

This example was key to the rest of his presentation. Because the users in the first group were able to interact with the software by asking questions, responding to jokes and receiving/giving feedback, the first group enjoyed the experience more than the second group. These interactive social qualities are what Dr. Morkes says will be the next step in software design.

The rest of the meeting was spent reviewing web sites that incorporate and embody (or try to embody) the social qualities of humor (e.g., a feeling of "human" connection between the software and user), likeability, perceived competence (on the part of the software), and cooperation (a feeling that the software is trying to help you). A couple of web sites Dr. Morkes reviewed included weber.com and the Mini Cooper web site.

Dr. John Morkes heads Expero's User Research group and is an expert in content usability and research methods. John is a consultant, published researcher and frequent speaker at user experience conferences and client events around the world. John has a Ph.D. from Stanford University and a Master's in Journalism from Northwestern University. He has worked in the user experience field for 14 years and before that was a high-tech journalist for Wired and Research & Development magazines. In November, he will present tutorials on Content Usability at the Nielsen Norman Group's user experience conferences in Chicago and Amsterdam. For more information, go to http://www.nngroup.com/events/tutorials/writing_for_web.html or http://www.nngroup.com/events/tutorials/content_2.html

Alamo Tech Line: *Alamo Tech Line* is the official newsletter of the Alamo Chapter of the Society for Technical Communication (STC) and is published monthly. It is available to all chapter members as a PDF file on the Alamo Chapter web site and is emailed to the Alamo Chapter email list. To subscribe to the email list, go to http://mailman.stc.org/mailman/listinfo/stc_alamo_info.

Alamo Chapter STC Web Site: www.alamostc.org

Editor: Open position. Email: president@alamostc.org.

Submissions and Deadlines: Please send submissions to the Editor. Submissions in Microsoft Word 2003 or text are appreciated. All submissions may be edited for clarity and length. Deadlines for submission are by the 20th of the previous month for publication in the following month.

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