# TKAS Model: Citizen Interaction to Resolve Minority Issues in Public Administration

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**Abstract:** The present paper discusses the potential benefits of interaction among citizens on the Internet in the area of public administration. Its arguments are supported by a study previously conducted on a Bulletin Board System (BBS). Special reference is made to two instances where citizen interaction succeeded in prodding public administration into helpful action. Although e-Government policy in Japan has already accomplished information disclosure and digitization of documents, the latter mostly cover common requests and procedures. However, requests that are hard to classify or altogether non-conforming cannot be handled by local governmental websites because of functional disorder stemming from case complexity or lack of human resources. Making a case for resident collaboration and mutual aid, this paper takes its cue from studies of customer interaction in the field of business management. Finally, the paper proposes a specific collaboration and information storage model (TKAS) as a solution for functional disorder in e-Government.

**Keywords:** Citizen interaction, e-Government, mutual aid, non-conforming case, administration

## 1. Introduction

With e-Government projects being under way in many countries, the Internet has come to allow citizens to share information and personal knowledge while participating in the functions of government. Digitization of administrative information as a tool for information disclosure makes governmental work visible to citizens. However, administrative routines, frequently referred to as "red tape," remain unable to handle the sheer diversity of cases.

The rise of e-Democracy, which permits citizens to interact with government via the Internet, has acquired the special purpose of "changing" laws or administrative systems. However, democracy being based on decisions by majorities, the electronic medium makes it difficult to reflect the voice of minorities effectively. This fact contradicts the policy of the public sector at a fundamental level, where governmental works including e-Government must be seen to serve individuals regardless of their personal preferences. The present paper, then, focuses on daily administrative processes closely related to our everyday lives. Although the situations presented in this study do not have the scope of political issues like elections, they reflect troubled cases that often do not receive proper official treatment. Perhaps a lesson can be learned from the treatment of minority opinions in business management, where the behavioral dimensions of customer interaction and reciprocity are being taken into account and studied.

This paper refers to two instances of a case study of civil interaction on a BBS dealing with "*de facto* marriage*,*" a still relatively infrequent occurrence in Japanese society though likely to cause some degree of consternation in civil service offices requested to handle it. This study points to the potential benefits of a knowledge-sharing model among citizens when dealing with public offices. The two examples to be outlined will show that when dealing with issues that do not fit into the common administrative framework, it is important for clients to learn how and where to find legal evidence and precedents. In this sense, the Internet works as a platform for communication and collaboration based both on public and private information disclosure and supporting iterative cycles of autonomous citizen interaction. We will formalize this interaction in terms of the TKAS-model, i.e. a model based on the progression of 'Tell, Know, Act, and Store-up' activities. We will finally conclude that it is necessary for both e-Government and citizens to make practical use of such an interaction model to appropriately deal with functional disorder in the administration of e-Government.

This paper is divided into the following sections. Section 2 will describe the e-Government situation in Japan and outline problems associated with it. Section 3 will discuss current research on e-Democracy and define the scope of the present paper. Section 4 will introduce two instances of citizen interaction on a BBS that may serve to illustrate how citizens can participate in public administrative functions. Section 5 will reconsider the examples discussed to identify the major elements of the citizen interaction cycle and propose the "TKAS-model" based on the Internet.

## 2. Background: e-Government in Japan

In this section, we will try to delineate the areas of e-Government in Japan and isolate two problems

between e-Government and the citizenry: 1) information overflow, and 2) functional disorder in the administrative sector.

## 2.1 IT policy: "e-Japan Strategy "

The Japanese government decided its first IT (Information Technology) strategy in November 2000, followed by the "e-Japan strategy" from January 2001. The government pictured a "knowledge-emergent society," where everyone can actively utilize IT and fully enjoy its benefits. This political strategy originated from IT headquarters that drew on cabinet members, university experts, company executives, and others. Four high priority policy areas were determined to make Japan the world's most advanced IT nation within five years:

1. Establishment of the ultra high-speed network infrastructure and competition policies
2. Facilitation of electronic commerce
3. Realization of electronic government
4. Nurturing of high-quality human resources

(A fifth component was subsequently added to the e-Japan program: Ensuring Security and Reliability over Advanced Information and Telecommunications Networks)

In the e-Japan 2002 program, digitization of public areas was expected to improve convenience in dealing with public services via the Internet, especially so since people's areas of need can be accurately determined from access statistics and consequently used to implement expanded or new public services. In addition, both central and local governments have been requested to publish administrative information via the Internet. Infrastructures of administration such as residents' ID certification have been facilitated as well. While government offices continue to provide more administrative information, the usability of their websites is often debatable. Most websites are infrequently updated and it remains difficult for ordinary residents to navigate toward the required information.

## 2.2 Functions of e-Government

Although e-Government is understood to promote three core functions; 1) service delivery, 2) policy-making, and 3) regulation (Finger et al., 2003), most of what is labelled "e-Government" to date is in fact not much more than the digitization, or mirroring, of existing operational functions without sufficient regard for the electronic medium into which they are placed. The process of putting e-Government into effect is also wanting in terms of four important factors; 1) Efficiency, 2) Information

Disclosure, 3) Convenience, and 4) Digital Democracy (Shirai et al., 2003).

In the light of these factors, e-Government may be considered as little more than one element in the currently ongoing public sector reform. However, as the Internet is becoming the common foundation interfacing government and citizens, the traditionally marked boundary between government and citizenry becomes less clearly defined. That means private communication can more easily interact with the public sector.

Adopting e-Government as the basic system architecture, this paper proposes the hypothesis that interaction among citizens can be postulated as that sub-system of e-Government that encourages collaboration in public affairs, especially in the administrative area.

## 2.3 Information disclosure

As information disclosure by the Japanese government is proceeding under the e-Government strategy, so the volume of official information on the Internet is rapidly increasing. The Japanese government established its portal website (http://www.e-Gov.go.jp/) in 2001, featuring an administrative information directory and a search engine for databases on laws, white papers, reports, applications and proposals at each of the ministries (Suzuki, 2002). Also, local government websites are making progress in providing information on daily procedures. However, there still exists asymmetry of information between organizations (company, government) and individuals (customer, citizen), which puts individuals at a disadvantage. But as information disclosure proceeds beyond current limits and the body of information collected by individuals grows, the problem of asymmetry will gradually be resolved (Kokuryo, 1999).

There exist two problems with information disclosure by e-Government. The first is information overflow. The official database is too large and complicated for ordinary individuals to search effectively for particular information. The information listed by central and local government is mostly readily drawn up and contributes rather more to "major" cases and fails to cover minor, non-conforming ones. For example, we can easily find marriage registration applications on a local government site while it takes considerably longer to find the pertinent legal database and gain access to civil law. For example, if a couple wants to know about the legalities of using particular surnames after marriage, it is hard for them to find out what to do. So, while "e-Gov" is indeed a huge portal, it constitutes a huge labyrinth for ordinary,

local individuals as it is primarily based on major, frequently occurring cases.

## 2.4  Functional disorder

Here we will explain two kinds of functional problems of e-Government in Japan.

The first problem is the treatment of non-conforming cases. One of the reasons why public offices avoid taking care of complicated and uncommon inquiries is lack of human resources. From an interview with an administrator, it was learned that spending a lot of time on a single non-conforming case would be unfair toward other people waiting for clerical attention in more common cases, in the sense that all people are equal in terms of being taxpayers. This may be true, but it should hardly be a reason to deal inadequately with less common issues. Of course, it is nearly impossible for limited counter staff to have the sum total of administrative information and past precedents at their fingertips. But what this inequality does point to is the strong need for better support.

The second problem is the cost for constructing e-Gov. The human resource problem also has a retarding influence on arranging governmental websites, especially locally. In reality, mayors have great influence over resources for e-Gov. Without mayoral support, it is left to staff in public relations sections to try to maintain the web themselves, even to the extent of having to give up private time and incurring great personal cost (Orita, 2004).

## 3.  Past dimensions of e-Democracy and interaction

### 3.1  Two approaches of e-Democracy

This paper defines e-Democracy as a conceptual entity with e-Government as one of its prerequisite components. Citizen action may then be classified in terms of two quite different approaches: 1) the exercise of direct interaction between citizenry and e-Government, trying to effect changes in laws and administrative systems, and 2) the exercise of information exchange and knowledge building mostly among citizens (Figure 1).

As for the former approach, individuals on the Net have been forming communities in various areas such as policymaking, lobbying, election campaigning, and so on. Accordingly, with the emergence of the term "e-Democracy", participation via the Internet has often been treated as an aspect of the political circuit and activities associated with it (Yoshida, 2000). Such

activities directly aim to change laws and administrative systems by putting pressure on the decision-making process, i.e. a kind of direct form of democracy related to specific legislative areas. With a communication tool like the Internet, collaboration and self-organization among citizens may lead to direct political action such as that of Manila residents, using instant messaging while organizing peaceful demonstrations against their president, Mr. Estrada (Rheingold, 2002). However, as democracy is supported by majorities, minorities stay minorities even in the interactive model (Keskinen, 2004).

The latter approach, on the other hand, stressing information exchange and knowledge building, contributes by its very activities to the evaluation of current administrative systems and operations and will lead to demands for proper official handling. This process involves largely personal concerns and the need to gather information comprehensively.

People can change the course of the Diet through elections. However, it is difficult for them to change the course of the administration, especially in its local and daily operations. If Japanese citizens wish to clarify the status of and effect changes in administration, they may rely on processes such as lawsuits and local plebiscites that reflect their needs. Most such cases relate to financial problems, for example, compensation for damages, abuse of public money, and so on. However, the chances of residents to win such cases amount to only 13% of total judgements (Masai, 2002). In a sense, this approach seems similar to the one where all concerned parties seek to determine and widen the current limits of administrative thinking. The methods employed, however, are quite different. A local plebiscite is just one way to forge ahead on the path for direct democracy and self-governance.

How about, then, the handling of personal problems under the current system? If counter clerks come across inquiries that go beyond their customary routines and require fresh approaches, the chances of their applying inflexible or prejudiced procedures are rather high. The problem is that it is almost impossible for ordinary citizens to gather enough supporters and money to force a vote or sue in such a case. These considerations lead to the conclusion that it is necessary for citizens to take the initiative by collecting information covering precedents, experiences and related researches and get them to the office counter to enable proper solutions and effect improved administrative operation.

Thus, this paper defines citizen interaction as an approach that does not always aim to change current conditions, but rather encourages activities such as the sharing of concrete, personal experiences, the acquisition of administrative information, and the monitoring of

the functions of public office. These activities, quite within the existing political, legal and administrative framework, may be carried out both on-line and off-line for mutual support and desirable benefits (Orita, 2004).
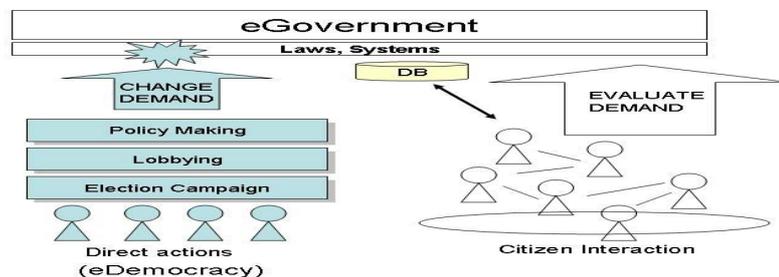


**Figure 1:** The two approaches of e-democracy

## 3.2  Interaction among citizens/ consumers

In the business administration area, current studies show that individual consumers are empowered not only by obtaining already disclosed information but also by sharing knowledge among themselves. Consumers on the Internet share their knowledge and experiences to support each other instead of referring to a customer centre (Levine et. al, 1999). They are exchanging a variety of real and detailed comments to evaluate companies and to support other consumers as well. Not only active members but also silent members of online communities can reflect information in real life (Ogawa et.al, 2003).

Consumer interaction contributes to mutual aid. Those who come forward with similar questions or interests will support each other, i.e. give rise to reciprocal interaction on the Internet (Kokuryo, 2004). Innovation in companies often derives from minority comment and new ideas will emerge in this way (Ogawa, 2002), quite contrary to the general rules of democracy.

As for public administration, the Internet is also providing information of two kinds. One is mandatory public information such as pertaining to laws, departmental operation, procedures, formal requirements, and so on. The other consists of personal experiences that are reported by individuals voluntarily. Interaction among consumers and citizens seems similar from the point of view of individuals sharing information, while the characteristics of communication between companies and government are in fact quite different.

## 4.  Case study: Non-conforming issues and relevance of BBSes

Here we introduce two actual instances of non-conforming requests made by individual citizens, which were met by considerable administrative resistance. Both instances deal with *de facto* marriage (marriage without official registration) and citizen interaction on a BBS. The first instance deals with an application for notation of *de facto* marriage on the resident registry. The second instance deals with a special housing request by a *de facto* married couple. Initially, both applications are seen to fail the existing procedural framework. In that sense then, both applications show up administrative inadequacies generally encountered by non-conforming requests.

Prior to discussing the first case, we will define *de facto* marriage in Japan and then briefly introduce the role of BBSes.

## 4.1  De facto marriage

In Japan, when a couple decides to get married, they must officially register the name that they propose to take as their family name. With an increasing number of women who remain in the work force following marriage, some couples have started to keep their respective surnames after marriage. Though a movement changing civil law to incorporate this approach has made beginnings several times since 1993, the Diet has never seriously taken up the issue because of a variety of objections by the elder generation and conservatives (Orita, 2001; Hisatake, 2002).

As a result, for example, couples trying to keep their respective surnames under the current restrictive legal system retain the woman's maiden name as the name by which she is known at her work place. They may hold a wedding

reception without registering their marriage. Figure 2 classifies types of partnerships vis-à-vis social benefits in Japan (Yoshizumi, 1997). Social services do apply to *de facto* marriages in part but as there is room for interpretation by the clerk, handling of each case may be somewhat different. Most social services, such as pension systems and health-care systems cover not only registered couples but also non-registered couples. Several

laws state that *de facto* marriage is included and should be treated the same as marriages of registered couples. On the other hand, laws related to tax, inheritance, and parental authority do not apply to *de facto* marriage. In general, then, while it is exceptional not to register a marriage, it is not illegal or altogether without benefits.
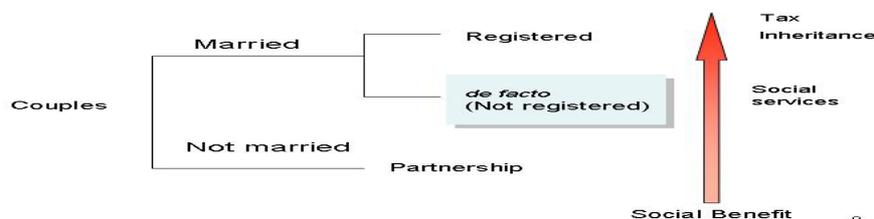


**Figure 2:** Types of marriages in Japan

## 4.2 Background of the "Jijitsu-kon" (*de facto* marriage) BBS

The two cases to be discussed occurred on the BBS of the private web site that the author created in 1999 (Orita, 1999). This BBS was put in place for the purpose of talking about "jijitsu-kon", or *de facto* marriage.

The reason for setting up a "Jijitsu-kon" BBS was that we needed a concise platform to handle the exchange of questions and answers from individuals while assembling a store of information for people to draw on for their "Jijitsu-kon" *de facto* married life. Originally, there were three linked BBSes dealing with similar issues forming a loose network (Orita, 2000). One of them dealt with practical legal information and the others were holding discussions, sometimes resulting in raging controversies. Subsequently, the first BBS was closed as its administrator became tired of arranging information and simply listed its postings on his own website. Another BBS closed because of violent controversies involving gender and family issues with communication becoming limited to wild debates between few participants. Currently only one BBS focusing on marriage and gender issues remains open.
Over 2500 messages were logged on the BBS over four years. The number of threads (i.e.

topical categories) for 2002 and 2003 are shown below in Figure 3. This table also shows the number of posted articles, the number and ratio of extracted threads related to administrative areas, and the number of topics. Let us now introduce two actual occurrences that illustrate exchanges based both on personal experience and on information with public administration officials.

## 4.3 Case 1: Application for public housing by de facto married couple

This case took place in June 2003. It demonstrates how ad-hoc networked corroboration helped a certain individual solve her problem.

A woman (Ms. A) posted a question on the BBS. Her problem was that she and her fiancé were looking for public housing equipped to handle a wheelchair. At the same time, they decided to get married, but without official marriage registration. Since both were children from single child families, they each wanted to keep their own surname after marriage. Ms. A asked on the BBS whether a non-registered couple could apply for a wheelchair-facilitated apartment or not.

| Year | Articles | Threads (All) | Threads (Administrative) | Topics |
|------|----------|---------------|--------------------------|--------|
| 2002 | 574 | 38 | 22(57.8%) | 12 |
| 2003 | 368 | 30 | 18(60%) | 9 |

**Figure 3:** Threads of BBS

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Since both were children from single child families, they each wanted to keep their own surname after marriage. Ms. A asked on the BBS whether a non-registered couple could apply for a wheelchair-facilitated apartment or not.

Two answers came; the first one pointing to identical cases in other prefectures in the past, the second one advising from personal experience that it was better to tell officials that they were "engaged" rather than "married but not registered." In July, Ms. A lodged her housing application but was rejected by the public office. The reason stated was that "there had been no such case before." Moreover, the region of Ms. A's residence has the especially strong custom of the first son being obliged to propagate his family's name. So she was blamed at the office for not willing to change her surname.

Ms. A decided not to resign herself to official pronouncements but to have her say more strongly and to act. She started to collect precedents and past experiences with the help of BBS participants. Finally, one BBS participant managed to access public housing law on the web. It appeared that, according to the law, "*de facto* married" couples with no registration were to be treated the same as registered married couples. Another participant found a short academic paper on a similar issue. Ms. A wrote a letter to her prefecture's office about her and her fiancé's plans and the obstacle of her having to take his surname. She collected other related documentation and sent it along as well, hoping that officials would realize that they were ignorant of the law and that there was in fact no problem with her application. Two weeks later, in August, her application for housing was finally accepted. As the law in fact made clear, the administrative office had no reason to reject her application.

This case highlights a problem at the local public office. The officials in charge made more of prejudice and customary practice than of laws. Evidently, without corroborating her case with other BBS participants, Ms. A could not have found an effective way to act.

### 4.4 Case 2: Application for notation of *de facto* marriage

This case took place in March 2004. This case was quite similar to the previous one but, in addition, it demonstrates the intentionally misleading handling of a non-conforming application.

Ms. B posted a question on the BBS on how to get notation of her *de facto* relationship on her resident card. Although married, Ms. B had never registered her marriage. She found some examples of notations on the web such as "wife (non-registered)," which applies to registered couples in several areas of social services. She

submitted her application with this notation to the local public office, but it was rejected. The office said there was no precedent. The next day, Ms. B brought her case to the attention of the Legal Affairs Bureau, but the answer was again negative. However, Ms. B needed official endorsement of her marriage because her company had asked her to bring the document as evidence of her family status.

Ten hours after she had posted the question, there were two pieces of advice, one based on personal experience and the other based on an administrative document. The latter was difficult to locate, as it was not a legal document but rather just an operational notice. The person who had posted this information was incidentally interested in a related issue and had surveyed this particularly area before. The next day, Ms. B e-mailed precedents from other prefectures together with a reference to the operational notice she had found to the local public office that had previously refused her application. Just three hours later, she got an answer. Her application had been accepted.

The office explained to Ms. B that there were two reasons why it had rejected her case at first. The first one was that there was no precedent so that staff at the window did not know which way to treat her application. The second one was a decision by the chief not to allow such non-conforming cases in order to avoid operational confusion. Based on this policy, the chief had set office terminals to disable irregular notations such as "wife (not-registered)." After Ms. B had brought attention to an in fact valid public notice, the regional office reexamined operational processes and found that there was no legal basis to reject the application. Moreover, the local public office revised its procedures of resident registration.

The first difficulty in cases such as those cited is posed by whether precedents exist or not. If precedents and other corroborative evidence can be retrieved, they are likely to have a positive effect on the outcome of correspondence with public administration. Ms. A's housing application demonstrates this point. Another difficulty appears to derive from local *ad hoc* interpretations of the administrative code as illustrated in Ms. B's attempt to get her *de facto* marriage notation. It is a serious problem when a local office treats uncommon cases on the basis of personal judgment, wishing to contain what it regards as bothersome complications. This problem did not emerge until Ms. B introduced an existing public notice as evidence in her favor. This evidence pointed to an obviously mistaken administrative procedure.

## 5. Citizen interaction: the TKAS model

### 5.1 How to find information

In the case of Ms. A, information on public housing law helped her make a successful claim at a public office. Without this information, the office would have continued to rely on custom and prejudice much more than on rules. As a result, it can be said that information disclosure by the Japanese Government can indeed make a positive contribution to the concerns of its residents.

Special technical literacy is required when looking for exact information on the Internet. For example, it is difficult to find the law database at a brief glance in Japanese e-Gov. Search skills and tips are needed when approaching the Internet. The two cases above show what skilled participants can effect. Especially in Ms. B's case, the person offering information acted on the belief that there had to be some kind of useful official information. That encouraged Ms. B to search not only public databases but also those of Non Profit Organizations (NPOs) to find precise information on apparently non-conforming notations.

The presence of such a skilled people plays an important role in unearthing evidence useful to negotiations with public bodies. Not all people have such skills and literacy. But for the more skilled individuals to speak out and help others along on the e-Participation platform brings greater chances to less skilled participants, as the present examples indicate.

### 5.2 Reliability

Personal experiences open to access on the web could also be referred to as a kind of information disclosure. Ms. A managed to find a personal BBS, because she was searching for personal experiences similar to her own. In addition, Ms. B found out about the non-conforming public notation by reading articles on private websites. Whether the articles were written under real names or anonymously is rather less important in these cases. Importantly, the accumulation of experiences and reports appears to form trust in the information.

During the process of on-line discussion, posted experiences and information tend to get feedback from other participants, which in turn increase the accuracy and reliability of the data collection as a whole. In both cases, some less useful comments were posted at the beginning, with more accurate information accumulating in the course of further interactions.

### 5.3 TKAS-model

Above cases occurred on a private BBS, not on the public sector's BBS, but collaboration between the two of them led to a final solution. The following four elements illustrate the type of interaction that occurred in these cases:
1. *Tell* (Troubled citizens "tell" about their problems.)
2. *Know* (Participants come to their assistance with private and public information thereby adding to what the inquiring citizens "know.")
3. *Act* (The troubled citizens are enabled to "act" in specific ways to solve their problems.)
4. *Store-up* (Information, experience and context is cumulatively stored on the Internet, to be searched in future information gathering cycles.)

Individual cycles of communication and collaboration widen the information store, both in terms of threads and wealth of feedback, so that even silent members can make use of past experiences without the need to speak out.

On the basis of the previous discussion this paper proposes the "TKAS-model" (Figure 4). This cycle is truly driven by citizens, independently of the public sector and forming rather autonomously. If we wish to solve the problems considered above, i.e. inadequate administrative procedures and staff shortages, the citizen cycle must link up with the administrative process as a separate module. External to public administration, yet readily accessible on the Internet, this component imposes no limits on participants.
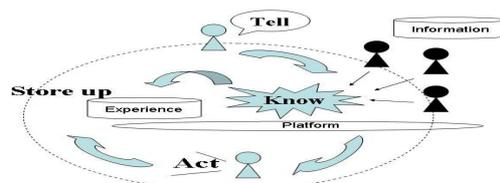


**Figure 4:** The TKAS model

## 6. Conclusion

In this paper, we examined two actual examples of mutual aid aiming to resolve non-conforming

cases. In the process we revealed some of the problems of current administrative operations

while also demonstrating the effectiveness of ad-hoc collaboration on the Internet.

The original role of public administration is to support all residents properly under the law, even if their requirements are "exceptional." Though e-Democracy basically reflects the will of majorities, e-Government must serve everyone, including minorities. Still, troubled citizens often require the handling of uncommon cases, although in reality there are limits to official support. The interaction of citizens in repeated TKAS cycles is seen to encourage both individuals and public administration officials in finding solutions. In conclusion, this paper proposes the e-Government model construct of citizen interaction, data collection, information disclosure and evaluation.

The proper construction of e-Government, including the opportunity for e-Participation, requires a number of problems to be resolved. The first problem relates to citizens' safeguards. Privacy and trust issues will have to be considered. Another problem has to do with the ubiquitous nature of government itself. Where are its proper boundaries of conduct? As this paper is based on particular cases from the viewpoint of individuals, research from another viewpoint, the administrative side, for example, should also be undertaken. We may then be able to extend our hypothesis on the behaviour of citizen interaction as part of e-Government and design a better version thereof.

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