

Research on sociodigital futures: claims and affordances in evidence

Pesquisa em futuros sociodigitais: reivindicações e *affordances* em evidência

Investigación en futuros sociodigitales: demandas y *affordances* en evidência

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Susan Halford¹ and Dale Southerton², researchers and professors at the University of Bristol, share the coordination of the Centre for Research on Sociodigital Futures (CenSoF), created in 2022 with funding of £10 million from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)³. This is an initiative that brings together researchers from different areas of knowledge from twelve UK universities, five other international universities (in Italy, Norway, Australia, the United States and South Africa), as well as non-academic organisational partners such as the UK Department for Food and Rural Affairs (Defra), UNESCO, British Telecom, The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), among others.

This interview was conducted during the period as an international visiting researcher in 2023-2024 (with a CAPES-PRINT scholarship)⁴. Halford, from the field of Sociology, and Southerton, from the field of Business, discuss the challenge of co-leading an interdisciplinary research centre focused on investigating how (and by whom) sociodigital futures are claimed, performed in the present, and what capabilities and capacities are needed to address sociodigital futures in the making.

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Priscila Gonsales (P.G.): Is it possible to say that "sociodigital futures" represent a new area of knowledge in contemporary times or are they more related to a specific focus in humanities and social sciences research?

Susan Halford and Dale Southerton (S.H. & D.S.) Research into sociodigital futures are related to the world we live in and differ completely from the idea of predicting futures or deterministic visions of what the future will be. It is worth remembering that questions about the future are not unprecedented⁵, but the contemporary context demands that we consider how futures are acted on in the present and what possible futures are in the making. In this sense, our investigations into sociodigital futures seeks to examine the materialities and affordances⁶ of both the digital and social worlds, and the intra-actions (Barad, 2007) between them⁷. The term 'sociodigital' is a relatively new term, but, of course, is a derivative of sociotechnical, which has been around for a long time. We want to emphasize that the social and the digital are inextricably linked to each other, you cannot separate them because they shape each other. Thus, technologies are shaped by power relations in the social world, and the social world is shaped by technologies. It is a fundamentally iterative relationship.

As we argued in a recent article (Halford & Southerton, 2023) in a special issue of the journal *Sociology*, we believe that Sociology can and should engage more directly with diverse claims about futures and the materialisation of these claims. This means going beyond sociology – as a distinct set of resources – and aiming for expansive engagement with other actors who think about the future. We have tried to highlight how the constant advance of digital technologies, especially artificial intelligence (AI), creates a sense of accelerated change, almost always vaunted by the technical elites (Noble et al., 2019) who produce these technologies. However, when we look deeper, we notice that these perspectives are disconnected from the everyday lives of people, communities, governments and organisations that have their own claims, and this is what we want to investigate.

P.G.: How is CenSoF organised around research into sociodigital futures? What are the guiding questions behind the research?

S.H. & D.S.: Our analysis encompasses understanding who and what is driving future claims and what this means for the key challenges of our time, including rising inequalities and the climate crisis. We bring together collaborating researchers and also external institutions to the University as partners, so that we can make the idea of sociodigital futures more publicized and thus generate a direct impact on policy development, organizational practice, community participation and

5 The first volume of the scientific journal *Journal of Futures Studies* dates back to 1996: <https://jfsdigital.org/articles-and-essays/1996-2/vol-1-no-1-november-1996/>

6 According to the Theory of Affordances (Gibson, 1977), the noun "affordance" refers to the possibilities that an environment or object offers to a specific agent; the agent perceives value in these possibilities.

7 Barad (2007) formulated the proposal of intra-actions as opposed to "inter-action"; the central idea is to indicate the inseparability between subject and object, or between observed and observer, i.e. phenomena that make up the world need to be considered in their relational dynamics.

technological innovation. Our three research questions are as follows: a) What kinds of sociodigital futures are being claimed and built, and how, and by which actors, and through which key domains of social life? b) How are sociodigital futures acted on in the present and made through the intractions between digital technologies and everyday practices? c) What capabilities and capacities are needed for research and intervention on sociodigital futures?

Core societal issues concerning environmental sustainability, social inequality, social justice, must be integrated into the claims about the future and the types of future claims that are created. So having the ability to make claims for the future and to get people to listen to and act on it, to direct resources, to control policies, these are acts of power and they are not acts that are available to everyone. If you think, for example, about who makes the biggest statements about the sociodigital future, you are looking at governments, international organisations and, above all, technical elites like Mark Zuckerberg or Elon Musk. These are very particular ideas about the future and who the future is for. This creates a very important set of challenges. Almost all corporations and every government will refer to inclusion and the environment in their futures claims, simply because they are the two biggest challenges of our time. But the ways in which inequality, social justice and sustainability are incorporated into these claims are generally very poor, weakly defined, and addressed as a subsidiary of the core claims, which tend to principally focus on specific forms of economic or technological 'progress'.

P.G.: The CenSoF is structured around five integrated domains of sociodigital practice – learning, caring, organising, moving and consuming – which prioritise the action involved rather than the respective sector as is commonly expected. How was this option devised?

S.H. & D.S.: The five domains of sociodigital practice highlight everyday doings and sayings⁸ with respect to practices of caring, consuming, moving, learning and organising. Let's take caring practices as an example, whether in hospitals, in the health sector or in schools and families, there are many different places in which caring is performed, and digital technologies are increasingly intertwined in these everyday practices. Whether it is in the way we communicate with our children, for example, or how we educate or look after our own health. When we talk about the domain of moving, we emphasize how the mobility of people and goods is deeply related to issues of inequality and sustainability. It is a field where global logistics meets justice. Our research analyses how digital technologies shape the movement of people and things, and considers the different futures that become possible or close as a result of sociodigital changes. When we talk about the domain of caring, we explore whether and how our experiences of care across society are affected by sociodigital arrangements, and what opportunities this might create for the way care is done and can be re-imagined for multiple futures.

⁸ Schatzki (1996: 89) defines social practice as a 'temporally and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings'.

Debates about the place of digital technologies in the future of care are often characterised by contrasting visions – promises of cheaper ways to deliver better care are pitted against the dystopian fear of being monitored, quantified and individualised. This approach is unhelpful and often focuses on the possible harms or benefits of emerging technologies, without paying sufficient attention to the meaning, organisation and practices of care in everyday life. On the other hand, we want to think about: who/what is providing care, how, in what environment and using what technologies? In this way, we aim to understand the integrated challenges and opportunities of the sociodigital future of care, especially for children, young people and their families.

The domain of consuming emphasizes how sociodigital entertainment and communication practices have undergone significant changes in recent years and have been the subject of intense speculation about their future. At the same time, the relationship between digitalisation and everyday life is deeply implicated in broader discussions about environmental sustainability, as well as in fundamental processes of social and economic change. Taking the home as an important site of consumption, we are interested in how everyday practices shape and are shaped by sociotechnical systems, as well as the environmental impacts of these systems.

In the realm of learning, we are seeing emerging technologies all over the world driving speculative investments in educational platforms and learning approaches. AI, robotics and virtual reality, as well as immersive technologies and high-performance networks, are changing the way we learn and creating new possible sociodigital futures. From immersive environments in museums and public art environments to the use of AI and big data analytics, we are exploring the sociodigital futures of learning and education. Through this work, we aim to create alliances with educators, activists and others who develop the agency of marginalised communities to shape the direction of sociodigital futures in education.

And finally, we know that the field of organising has always been shaped by technology. Whether we consider pottery or weapons, medicines or transport, or new products and services, the way human beings organise themselves is always a story of the interweaving of human bodies and non-human materials/resources/artefacts. In a digital age, organisation can now be effectively distributed in time and space, enabling action at a distance and temporal coordination. These forms of collection and dispersal can be used by powerful agents such as states and corporations, as well as by grassroots organisations such as communities and activists. We are exploring the ways in which sociodigital arrangements are shaping the future of organisations. We do not assume that the "effects" of technology at work are inevitable, but rather that we need to better understand what kinds of futures are emerging or becoming likely from new relationships that are established (Latour, 2005)⁹.

⁹ Under the perspective of Bruno Latour (2005), cause and effect are no longer understood as a simple dichotomy between active subject and passive object, giving way to a relational conception, that is, it is the relationships that determine subjects and objects.

We chose these five domains because they are major areas of everyday life, where digital technologies and social practice are intertwined in the things people do and say. We even considered a sixth, which would be work, but in fact, work permeates all of this. There is work in care, in consumption, in mobility, in learning and so on. And the reason the domains are arranged as verbs/actions rather than sectors is because of our theoretical approach, which aims to pay attention to practice, to how things are done. These are not static sectors that simply exist, they are practices that are endlessly produced and reproduced in action.

P.G.: How are digital technologies such as AI, virtual reality, high performance internet and robotics considered at CenSoF as "technical possibilities projects" (TAPs) in their materialities and affordances for sociodigital futures "in the making"?

S.H. & D.S.: We chose these four areas of digital technology for the TAPs (technical affordances projects) because they are the dominant areas at the moment. They may not always be. There may be some new ones that emerge in the next few years. That is good. We have scope to include emergent technologies within our research programme. The four areas are also not mutually exclusive, they are increasingly integrated with each other. It is really hard to talk about robotics without talking about AI or immersive technology and without talking about robotics. And we start by asking the same sociodigital questions of these technologies.

We know that technology is not a separate sphere from social life, but is absolutely embedded in social life. Not just now, not just because of digital technologies, but throughout history. And that our experiences and how we live our lives are always produced at the intersection between humans and what some academics would call non-humans. In these mixtures of people and things we have created the world we live in, a premise that has been true for millennia. It could not be any different now with the emergence of contemporary digital technologies, such as data-based artificial intelligence and others. Some say that the current context is more innovative and profound, in the sense that there is a kind of epochal change in the world. We find it very difficult to think like that. And we think this kind of argument is probably put forward by those who want to drive the developments of these technologies, in other words, who want to make big claims for their own technologies.

From CenSoF's perspective, we are interested in the future. We are interested in sociodigital, which we have just been talking about, which is the intertwining of social and technical digital life. We know that this intertwining exists. We know that the social and the digital mutually shape each other because we have studied this in the past and the present. When we say "we", it means that social scientists have studied it and others have studied it in the past and present. For example, we can point to how the invention of the printing press changed lives. We could point out how the internet and the web have changed lives. In other words, we are good at

knowing this from the past and the present. CenSoF is concerned about the kinds of sociodigital futures that may be in the making and that are much harder for social scientists to think about for all kinds of reasons, but mainly because we know that this very complex interaction (or rather we would say intra-action following Barad (2007)) and not amenable to predictive methodologies.

So what do we do? Do we say, well, let's not think about the future? Let's just wait and see what happens? Or do we fall into the trap of predicting futures that we know we cannot really predict because the future is not linear. The future does not depend on the past and the present. It is more complex than that. The central point is that while we cannot predict the future, we find out how futures are thought about, claimed and acted upon in the present. And that matters a lot. When we think about the future demands that will be made, this will mobilise resources, it will make people spend money, invest money. It mobilises governmental policies and all kinds of corporate policies and everything else. But futures also mobilise choices that are made. The future is a really active presence in all our lives, in defining the decisions that are made and the way lives are lived. We need to think about what kinds of futures are being claimed by whom and how those futures are being influenced. That does not determine the future because the future is not determined by anything on that level. Or anyone in particular. But it opens up some futures and makes them more likely and closes down other futures and makes them less likely.

If we think, for example, about the metaverse... when two, three years ago there was a certain buzz saying that in 2030 all these things would happen in the metaverse. But the metaverse does not exist – only the technical capabilities potentially exist. And yet, governments all over the world, companies all over the world, all the universities have started to behave as if the metaverse is just waiting for us in 2030, and our task now is to invest in the right way, create the right degree courses and establish the right policies, and then we will be ready for the metaverse. All these actions are performative; they make the metaverse more likely rather than less. They are not predicting it, they are doing it, and that is why we talk about futures in the making, and not about the future as something that is finished, fixed and awaiting us.

P.G.: How does CenSoF structure itself to promote interdisciplinary integrations in a collaborative way, contemplating theoretical and methodological contributions between researchers?

S.H. & D.S.: We have created an integrative area that we call Threads, which is really about developing capacities and capabilities for doing research on sociodigital futures. Through Threads we are looking at theory, methods, collaboration and design as four aspects of continuous activity in which we have research projects. It is important to note that researchers who are located in one of the five research domains can also be involved in Threads as well as TAPs, which facilitates interdisciplinarity. When we talk about "collaboration", we are encouraging the co-production of research, collaborative methods, critical analysis of issues of

power and value, and research expertise. In addition, key activities include building a culture of collaboration to create plural, sustainable and democratic sociodigital futures? with partners and beyond, and implementing plans for long-term sustainable collaboration.

When we talk about "design" we emphasize elements such as innovation, experimentation and intervention, as well as co-design and future design, which represent creative spaces for capacity building in the arts, social sciences and engineering. Innovation in this context is understood as an opening up of socio-material relations to ask questions about existing practices in order to explore and design new ones. By integrating the material and the immaterial, design thinking provokes interpretive dialogue between the past, the present and the construction of future realities. Key activities include mapping the design field for research into sociodigital futures, inventive "co-design" experimentation, using physical-digital tools/applications to imagine, materialise and convene sustainable and inclusive sociodigital futures.

When we talk about "methods", we analyse the "future" capacity of conventional social science methods as well as new and emerging multimedia computational data (known by the acronym NEFD – new and emerging forms of data) and computational methods (e.g. Large Language Models). Ideally, what we are aiming for most is to have one of the technology areas working with one of the research domains and also one of the Threads (or two or three), so that they really come together to answer substantive questions. For example, investigating sociodigital home care practices through high-performance networks and immersive technologies, where we can really bring all this knowledge together in a single joint project.

And finally, when we emphasize "theories", we provoke researchers to examine the deep ontological and epistemological questions raised by sociodigital futures research. This is an opportunity to examine diverse intellectual perspectives that explicitly and implicitly address future-orientated research, particularly with regard to its dependence on Anglo-European epistemological foundations, and to explore the gaps, absences, tensions and synergies that emerge. The main areas of dialogue include underlying conceptions of temporality, power, ethics, culture, responsibility and inequalities.

P.G.: How do you assess the first year of activities completed in 2023 considering the structuring around the three entries (domains, TAPs and Threads)?

S.H. & D.S.: We can say that we had a first phase in which we worked from questioning what futures are claimed by whom and how. And, derived from that, we have broken it down into sub-questions such as "what are the futures of care?", "what is the future of AI?", and "what methods are used to claim the future of AI and care?". We are continuing to work on this but, now in our second phase, we are

analysing how these futures work and how they work in different places and across various scales. We could ask whether we really want to use the word “scale” and what kinds of infrastructures support or drive some of these changes.

We also want to investigate what capacities and skills we need to drive or guide sociodigital futures towards fairer and more sustainable ways of life. This is not just a question nor a matter of doing research. It is the end of the story, our ultimate goal. We want to empower our researchers and partners to think about sociodigital futures. Because our starting point is that there is a lack of capacity and this is why we are trying to (co)create it. In our view, things are starting to fall into place. In total, we have 48 academic researchers working in the Centre from at least 8 different disciplines, as well as co-researchers from our very diverse group of strategic partners. Our aim is to build on this wonderful mix of expertise to create new ways of investigating, knowing and making sociodigital futures.

Put another way, we are taking digital technologies into critical interdisciplinary research projects, we explore the complexities and contingencies of the human-technology entanglement and aim to rewrite sociodigital configurations through intervention and experimentation. We critically investigate the social construction and technical possibilities of each field, how they are represented, by whom, for what kinds of sociodigital futures, linked to findings related to the five domains of sociodigital practice. We want to respond to recent calls to action in the face of the complexities and contingencies of the human-technology entanglement. Each project conducted at CenSoF will develop a set of sociodigital interventions and experiments (co)created on the basis of the initial findings of the domains, related to the TAPs, and underpinned by insights and experiences from the Threads. Through a focus on “redefining” technical resources and broader sociodigital configurations to enable just and sustainable futures, the projects are working towards demonstration content for dissemination and impact in CenSoF’s fifth year.

P.G.: One of the most interesting aspects of my time at CenSoF as a visiting researcher was the group readings and reflections on temporalities and also on the theories and concepts of the sociodigital approach. Could you talk a little about the importance of this strategy of theoretical and methodological integration?

S.H. & D.S.: Once again citing our article, we refer to a paper by researcher Barbara Adam (2004) in which she emphasizes that futures cannot be reduced to a linear temporal logic in which the past shapes the present and the present, in turn, projects the future. This is still the dominant approach, especially in economics and data science, which projects the future from past acts (and data) to make predictions/anticipations based on what is expected in the present. Let's assume that there is no “future” in the singular for which we would need to be ready, but rather potential futures of multiple natures. There is no way to get involved with research into sociodigital futures without considering temporalities, since we are dealing with temporal processes under construction that do not obey linear logic.

Rather, there is a multiplicity and variety of claims that can change over time, and uncertainty is a crucial element. Of course, some everyday policies and decisions end up making some futures more probable (such as the increase in carbon dioxide emissions since the 18th century and the environmental impacts resulting from this) and others less so.

As Sriprakash et al. (2020) argue, linear narratives of a fixed past that can be worked through in the present towards a planned future will only succeed in incorporating limited perspectives based on historical privilege, and the very "chronopolitics" of this approach disregards marginalised and alternative pasts that could provide the basis for reparative futures. In short, our task at CenSoF is to identify and go beyond these determinisms and explore where sociological analysis can provide constructive challenges to future-making routines, disrupting dominant narratives and collaborating in the (co)creation of new ways of thinking about and making the future. As Haraway (2016, p. 3) argues, with sustainable futures in mind, circumstances invite us to move beyond the "comic faith in technological solutions" and the fatalism of critique, where "it is too late and there is no point in trying to improve anything", to focus on the "more serious and lively task" of creating the future.

Rather than following a theory, which we consider to be limiting our curiosity, we believe that there are cognate theories that speak to each other in very interesting ways, which is why we are bringing them into our reflections with CenSoF researchers. These include actor network theory (ATN), some of the feminist materialist and sociotechnical approaches, such as Karen Barad, Anne-Marie Mol, Donna Haraway, as well as a broader set of social practice theories that consider how everyday lives are organized, experienced and performed across diverse social groups. As Joseph Rouse (2007) notes, these theories are not usually known for being together in the same space, but rather for emphasizing a performative perspective on how things are done in one way or another, with attention to the kind of ongoing process of practice and change through which the world is made and remade. We find it very productive to bring these theories together and see what they do and do not do for each other. They all take an ontological position that denies a separate agency for humans and non-humans or humans and machines or data or infrastructures. Instead, they insist on recursivity, i.e. they are made through each other.

P.G.: How does CenSoF work with the various partnerships it has established, both in the academic sphere with universities, but also with non-academic institutions, considering the autonomies, hierarchies and power relations involved?

(S.H; D.S): Yes, we are committed to impact and engagement with our six strategic partners. From the very beginning, when we started designing CenSoF, we had strategic partners made up of large companies, government and community organisations, in other words, different types of organisations that are dealing with exactly the same issues that we are researching: How do you develop knowledge by understanding the possibilities of sociodigital futures? For example, in business,

we are working with a very large network company, which will say: we understand technology, we make technology, that is our business, but we do not know how to think about social processes, social practices, social relations, changes that shape and are shaped by these technologies.

The same goes for government departments. There is a real demand from different types of organisations, each in their own way, to improve the way they think about sociodigital and, consequently, about the future. Two themes are central and permeate everything we do: social inequalities and climate change or environmental sustainability. When we work with our business partners or with the government or with community organisations, with all of them, we are asking questions about who is included, who is excluded, on what terms are people included? What does this mean for the processes of social inequality? What can this mean for social justice? And they all act in different ways, but they are all committed and interested in the central themes that permeate CenSoF. These external partnerships are important because they broaden the scope of academia, bringing diverse actors into dialogue who are also involved in future creating practices that could have consequences for society as a whole. The partnerships also include community organisations, which are often marginalised or absent from debates, but which must be included if we are to have any hope of challenging the current power relations and inequalities in futures-making practices.

One important thing to say is that we do not offer our services as consultants. We are not saying: what would you like to know? That is not how it works. We are not responding to a demand in that sense. Rather, we identify organisations that share our concerns and interests, and together we co-develop research into a particular panorama. These partners have been with us since the funding proposal was drafted. They contributed to the funding proposal. Their concerns and interests are incorporated into the structure of the Centre. And then, when we are developing specific projects, we know which different partners are interested and we continue those dialogues to identify shared and emergent concerns across our network of partners. Sometimes they come to us and say: oh, we need to develop something. Would you be interested? Do you have the capacity? And if we think it is close to the core of the Centre, if we have people who really want to take it on, then we will accept. In other words, our research collaborations are not predefined. It is quite iterative and evolves over time. But it is not about simple supply or demand and we do not (and probably never will) have a finished product to take to them. And they do not have a finalized question that they bring to us. We work together to define what we can do together that is mutually beneficial for both sides.

We are seeing a big shift in the recognition that the difficult issues about what people might often say about digital futures are actually sociodigital questions, and all the organisations in our network, despite their very different characteristics, are recognising this. For example, the gap in sociodigital capacity as opposed to digital capacity. The different organisations have different knowledge that they bring to questions of sociodigital futures, just as we have different knowledge across the social sciences, engineering and arts and humanities disciplines. CenSoF wants to bring these forms of knowledge together to see how we can learn from each other

and build collaborative projects that harness different types of knowledge so that we are more than just the sum of our parts. This is our favourite way of thinking, but we know it gets us into all kinds of trouble. We are trying to transcend the traditional boundaries of knowledge production and academic expertise, trying to bring them together in a way that suits the questions we are asking, because the questions about sociodigital futures are certainly not answerable by sociologists alone. In the same way, these questions cannot be answered by engineers alone, or by big companies, or by the government, or by community organisations. In fact, you need to bring together all these different forms of knowledge. We are not naive about this, we are aware that there are power relations involved. There are differences involved. There are structures and hierarchies. This is not a naive endeavour, but it is a conscious endeavour that we have to try to do this and see if we can make it work.

P.G.: Organising a new interdisciplinary research centre involves fostering a network of researchers and professionals from different areas of knowledge and backgrounds. How has CenSoF dealt with the issue of regional diversity, given the persistent European and North American centralism in academic research?

S.H. & D.S.: This is indeed a challenge. From a theoretical perspective and from a perspective of commitment, political and theoretical, we consider this a global challenge that needs to be understood from different entry points and through different voices, experiences and histories. This means going beyond Europe and North America. And at the same time, there are real limits in terms of funding and integration. The way we tackle this, and we hope it will improve over time, is by welcoming visiting researchers, encouraging visitors from across the world to spend some time with us. We have a visiting fellowship programme that is open to researchers from anywhere in the world who wish to apply. Our hope is that these visitors will return some of the work we have done and allow us, through this work, to reach wider audiences. We would really like to think about joint research initiatives, joint publishing initiatives. Honestly, we are aware of CenSoF's weaknesses in this respect, but at the same time, we know that it was inevitable, given the funding scheme we have obtained. However, we are always looking for ways to develop what we can do and to expand on what we are doing. Working with UNESCO, as one of our strategic partners, in some way represents all UN member states, which is a start. And that partnership is extremely well connected through its work on education futures in other parts of the world with which we are not well connected.

P.G.: What will be the main challenges for CenSoF in the coming years?

S.H. & D.S.: The biggest challenge, now that we are up and running, is to realize the interdisciplinarity we are aiming for and to work with partners. It is very easy to

talk about interdisciplinarity, and it can be very difficult to implement interdisciplinarity. Observing the people at CenSoF in this first year of existence, we find it extraordinary to see their collective commitment. A commitment to leave their comfort zone and make themselves vulnerable to enter discussions and events where they do not know much about what is being said. Several people have said to us at some point: "this centre is really scary because I really feel out of my comfort zone". And we reply that we all feel that way and that this is what we 'want to feel', because research requires stepping outside of our comfort zones. Engineers feel it when we talk about feminist materialism, and sociologists feel it when we talk about network slicing or whatever. But we believe that if we do not develop this capacity across disciplines we will have no hope of addressing questions about sociodigital futures, or, more importantly, of having any chance of intervening in future-making processes. This is why interdisciplinarity is the most difficult challenge. Keeping all the partner organisations with us is a big challenge too. We do not really have much to say about that, because we consider that they are already with us, but we know that there are competing demands and that staying with us is a matter of continuous constructive research collaborations. The second most difficult part is when the funding runs out in 2027 and we will need funding for at least another five years if our ambitious research agenda is to realise its potential.


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