

Cinema Distribution as Cultural Governance: Towards a Theory of Distribution Power in the Digital Media Ecosystem

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Abstract

Film distribution has been traditionally conceptualised as a value-neutral logistical intermediary between production and exhibition. This conception remains unchanged even now despite the fundamental changes brought about by platformisation, algorithmic curation, and transnational streaming platforms in the film distribution industry. This conceptual paper contends that distribution is neither a value-neutral function in the supply chain nor an innocent intermediary but a form of cultural governance that defines the knowledge horizon of the publics, thus exerting ideational and epistemic influence on cultural identity construction. In this study adopting a qualitative and interpretivist research approach, a systematic narrative review of the relevant literature (2015-2026) in media industries studies, political economy of communications, platform studies, and media policies in India has been conducted.

The synthesis leads to the construction of an innovative integrative framework, known as Distribution Power Theory (DPT). It theorises distribution of cultural governance as consisting of four dimensions: infrastructure, algorithmic curation, regulatory-geopolitical governance and framing. The theoretical framework is exemplified by the distribution system in the Indian streamings and theatrical exhibition space, drawing on the regulatory distinction between the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023-CBFC certification system regulating theatrical exhibition and the co-regulatory Information Technology Rules, 2021 regulating OTT services as an example of regulatory-geopolitical governance. This paper contributes to gatekeeping and platformisation literature by taking them outside of journalism and social media and into film and culture studies, thus providing policymakers and industry practitioners with a way to analyse distribution power through an analytical language. DPT framework is one of the first theories to combine media capital and governmentality literature with platform studies specifically in the context of cinema distribution...

Keywords film distribution; cultural governance; distribution power; platformisation; gatekeeping theory; streaming platforms; Indian cinema; media policy..

Introduction**1.1 Global and Indian Context**

Film studies have for many years theorized cinema as representing issues of representations, ideology, and identity formation, but there has always been more interest in studying the text and the process of production, rather than the processes through which films are distributed to audiences or not (Wasko, 2003). The last ten years have seen a dramatic shift in the organisation of the global film industry around distribution infrastructures, rather than production studios. Digital distributors like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ are no longer merely distributors but are also exhibition companies, financial backers, and data-led curators, what Lobato (2019) calls the reterritorialization of television and films through digital distribution geographies. Nieborg and Poell (2018) speak of an overall platformization of cultural production, where platform corporations increasingly determine the economic and infrastructural conditions of cultural production. This transformation, particularly within an Indian setting, has had great importance. The distribution system that has traditionally involved single screens and multiplexes in India has undergone change as a result of the swift spread of over-the-top (OTT) systems, language-specific streaming platforms, and state-sponsored digital infrastructures like the India Stack (Athique, 2016; Athique et al., 2018). Decisions on what films in regional languages to promote, which ones to geo-block, delay, or deprioritize, have become gatekeepers of cultural representation in the diverse linguistic and religious public sphere of India.

1.2 Significance of the Problem

Why is distribution power important? Because distribution power sets the parameters of cultural audibility: the narratives that are going to be narrated, their audience, the order and importance with which this happens. The distribution power does not act like censorship in that its mechanisms are not directly ideological; they are commercial (and therefore economic) and technical, but nevertheless ideological (Havens & Lotz, 2016). Such invisibility takes on heightened importance in India because of an underlying regulatory structural asymmetry, wherein theatrical exhibition operates through statutory pre-censorship in accordance with Section 6 and the Schedule of the Cinematograph Act, 1952, as amended by the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023, and as operationalized through the Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 2024, while streamers operate only within the co-regulatory self-classification regime of the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, and exclude OTT content from CBFC's jurisdiction (Government of India, 2023; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2024; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021). Thus, there exist two distinctly structured exhibition modes for the same cultural form, governed by two distinctly categorized regulatory regimes, and with concrete implications for the exercise and contestation of distribution power.

1.3 Current Challenges

Conflation of distribution and logistics in mainstream discussions within the film industry obfuscates the role of distribution in governance.

Algorithmic recommendations employed by platforms constitute opaque and proprietary forms of curation not subject to public cultural policy (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Because Indian regulation divides based on exhibition pathway, the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023 and Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 2024 require statutory pre-certification before theatre exhibition via the CBFC, but the OTT platform sector operates on an independent self-classification system per the IT Rules, 2021, neither addressing distributional visibility or algorithmic curation specifically (Government of India, 2023; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2024; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021).

Additionally, foreign direct investment policy exacerbates this divide: 100 percent FDI is allowed automatically for film production, distribution, and exhibition, but broadcasting carriage services (such as cable, DTH, and HITS infrastructure through which much of the distribution capacity is provided) are limited to 49-74 percent foreign ownership (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, 2024).

Current theoretical approaches, mostly stemming from gatekeeping theory and political economy, were developed pre-platform and require conceptual extension.

1.4 Research Gap

Scholarship has pursued discrete threads of this problem without putting them together in a cohesive theory. The work by Lobato (2019) gives us the geography of digital distribution but falls short of theorising distribution as governance following Foucault's conception. Nieborg & Poell (2018) give us a theorised political economy of platformisation but fail to take it beyond political economy to analyse its implications for cultural meaning-making or identity formation. Athique et al. (2018) give us an analysis of industrial relations in the media industries of India but fail to develop a more generalisable theoretical framework applicable beyond India. Research on the adoption of OTT in India (Patnaik et al., 2024; Sharma & Lulandala, 2023) has remained empirical and limited to user behavior, ignoring ideological or governance aspects of distribution. This research seeks to fill this lacuna by

developing a coherent theoretical framework combining political economy, governmentality, and platform studies: Distribution Power Theory.

1.5 Purpose, Objectives, and Research Questions

The study aims to theorize film distribution as a system of cultural governance and to develop an integrative model that can inform empirical work. Following are the objectives of the Study:

To critically review interdisciplinary scholarly work on media distribution, platformization, and cultural governance during the period of 2015-2026.

To determine the theoretical constructs that are critical for the development of a theory of film distribution as a governance mechanism.

To develop an integrative theoretical framework, namely Distribution Power Theory (DPT), that would articulate the dimensions through which distribution exercises control over cultural knowledge and identity.

To demonstrate the utility of DPT by employing the case of the bifurcated regulation and capital investments associated with theatrical exhibition and OTT platforms in the context of India's film certification and foreign investment policy environment.

Therefore, the research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the theoretical basis on which film distribution could be considered as cultural governance rather than a neutral logistical activity?

RQ2: What are the structural dimensions of distribution power in the digital media environment?

RQ3: How is distribution power manifested in the Indian cinema and OTT ecosystem?

1.6 Contribution

This paper provides theoretical contribution through an extension of gatekeeping theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009) and platformisation theory (Nieborg & Poell, 2018) into film studies via an innovative four-dimensional framework. The paper makes practical contributions through providing an audit tool for evaluating the distributional influence through a new vocabulary for industry players, film makers, and platform developers. It provides policy contribution through the conceptual framework that allows for expanding media regulation from content to distribution.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Distribution as Political Economy

Political Economy approach to media studies has for many years claimed that media ownership and control of distribution infrastructure influence the production of symbols (Curtin, 2003). The theory of "Media Capital" by Curtin defines global media flows as emerging from specific cities and institutions such as Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Mumbai that possess industrial assets, creative workforce, and infrastructural access. While distribution infrastructure is conceptualized as an institution of power accumulation, it was mainly developed in broadcast and theatrical paradigms.

2.2 Platformisation and Algorithmic Curation

The more recent scholarship conceptualizes the process of the platformization of cultural production as the one wherein platform corporations rearrange markets, labor relations and forms of governance around proprietary infrastructures (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The concept of the "platform society" and the idea of increasing negotiation of public values via privately owned technical infrastructure have been developed by van Dijck et al. (2018) as an extension of the previous theoretical approach. When applied to the cinema, the works of Lobato (2019), who explores the case of Netflix, shows that variation in catalogue, geoblocking and licensing window create an uneven geographical experience of global film culture which is inconsistent with the rhetoric of platform of universal accessibility.

2.3 Gatekeeping and Media Industry Studies

Gatekeeping theory, which was formulated in the field of journalism studies, conceives of media organisations as gatekeepers that choose, arrange, and frame information for audiences (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). By applying gatekeeping theories to media industry studies, Havens and Lotz (2016) formulate the "industrialisation of culture" concept by viewing distribution and aggregation as a distinct industrial process that influences visibility irrespective of production qualities. Although such theory is useful from the theoretical point of view, it has not been applied uniformly in relation to film industries.

2.4 Cultural Governance, Governmentality, and Field Theory

The Foucauldian notion of "governmentality," which refers to the set of tactics of governing without coercive force, provides a useful framework within which to consider the ideological role of distribution (Foucault, 1991, as cited in Burchell et al., 1991). The field theory of Bourdieu (1993), which characterizes cultural production as a space where circulation, rather than creativity alone, determines symbolic capital, also provides a relevant conceptual tool. Miller and Yúdice (2002) develop this kind of logic in their discussion of how the governance of populations occurs through the management of cultural resources. Such theories provide us with the language of

governance missing from much of the platform and industry studies literature, but which have not been fully engaged in discussions of film distribution.

2.5 Indian Cinema, OTT Platforms, and Policy Context

In India, the research of Athique (2016) on transnational audiences, and the Indian Media Economy series (Athique et al., 2018) illustrate how the industrial restructuring of Indian media in light of digitalization, satellite consolidation, and regulatory indeterminacies is taking place. The empirical studies of Indian OTT adoption (Patnaik et al., 2024; Sharma & Lulandala, 2023) attest to the swift diffusion of platforms especially post-pandemic, yet are concerned with consumer behavior rather than governance theory. Channel-specific policies still govern exhibition: Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023 modernized statutory certification for theatrical release, introducing age-graded UA labels, indefinite certificate validity and improved anti-piracy mechanisms, all the while explicitly affirming CBFC's pre-exhibition censorship powers over cinema halls (Government of India, 2023; IMPRI, 2026; PRS Legislative Research, 2023). On the other hand, OTT platforms are governed by IT Rules, 2021, co-regulation-based self-classification code, where the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has officially stated that the entire code does not fall within the ambit of CBFC's certification jurisdiction (Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2024). While this channel-specific divide is well recognized in media law literature in India, it has hardly been considered in the light of distribution theory before.

2.6 Synthesis and Identified Gaps

Reading this body of work together results in an implicit yet untheorized assumption that distribution matters when it comes to how cultures understand both themselves and other cultures. Political Economy theory provides the explanation for infrastructure ownership; Platform Studies the explanation for algorithmic curation; Gatekeeping and Industry Studies provide the explanation for organizational filtering; Governmentality and Field Theory provide the explanation for ideological and symbolic consequences; while research in Indian media policy provides the empirical evidence without theory. However, none of the above theories have been able to integrate all five aspects into one model of cinema distribution. This is the theoretical gap Distribution Power Theory attempts to fill.

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

Distribution Power Theory (DPT) is constructed via the abductive synthesis of four theoretical strands found in the literature review: (a) political economy of media capital (Curtin, 2003), which accounts for the structural ownership of distribution infrastructure; (b) platformisation theory (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Van Dijck et al., 2018), which accounts for algorithmic and infrastructural curation; (c) gatekeeping and industrialisation-of-culture theory (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Havens & Lotz, 2016), which accounts for organisational filtering practices; and (d) governmentality and field theory (Bourdieu, 1993; Foucault, 1991, as cited in Burchell et al., 1991; Miller & Yúdice, 2002), which accounts for the ideological and identity-making effects of circulation. Each of the strands individually provides only a partial account of a mechanism; the synthesis is necessary because the act of distribution in today's world simultaneously functions as an economic, technological, organizational, and ideological process, and no single strand accounts for all four at once.

3.2 The Four Dimensions of Distribution Power

DPT proposes that cultural governance through cinema distribution operates across four interlocking dimensions, summarised in Table 1 and elaborated below.

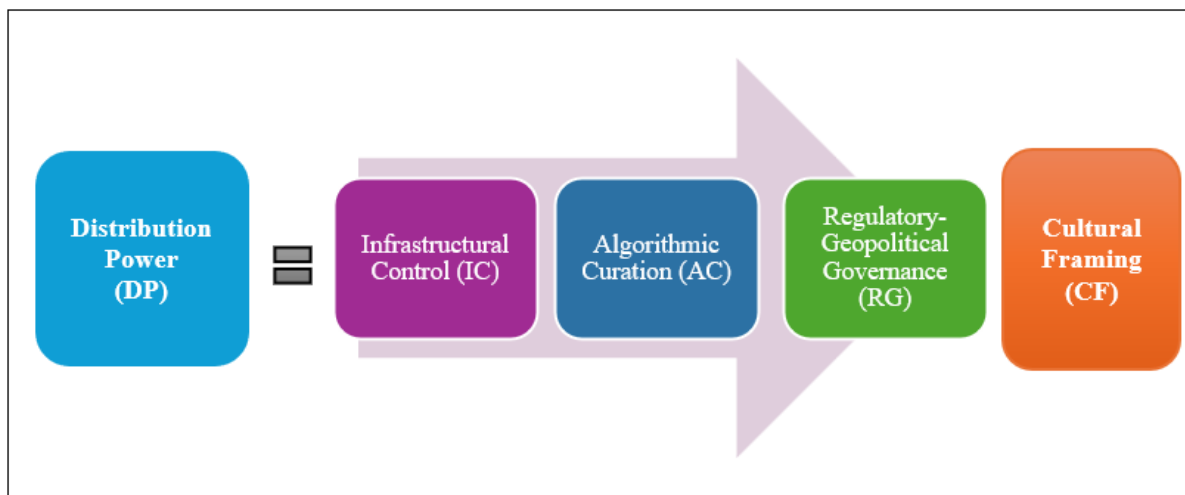
Table 1: The Four Dimensions of Distribution Power

Dimension	Definition	Illustrative Mechanism
Infrastructural Control	Ownership and control of the technical and physical channels through which film content circulates (servers, bandwidth, screens, licensing rights).	Platform ownership of content delivery networks; multiplex chain consolidation; exclusive licensing windows.
Algorithmic Curation	Automated recommendation and ranking systems that determine content visibility and sequencing for individual users.	Home-screen ranking; personalised recommendation; thumbnail and metadata optimisation.
Regulatory-Geopolitical Governance	State and supra-national policy instruments that condition what may be distributed, where, and under what commercial terms.	Geo-blocking; censorship certification; intermediary liability rules; co-production treaties.
Cultural Framing	The symbolic and ideological effects of differential visibility on public knowledge, identity, and cultural memory.	Under-representation of regional-language cinema; diaspora-oriented catalogue

		curation; genre stereotyping through recommendation.
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3.3 Conceptual Model

DPT argues that the four dimensions work in a recursive manner rather than being linearly ordered: first, infrastructural control allows algorithmic curation; second, algorithmic curation takes place within the regulatory-geopolitical parameters; third, as an outcome of the three technical institutions above, we obtain cultural framing as the ideological result of the distribution power, the ideology that defines what publics see as culturally central, marginal, or absent. As for a more formal model, one could say that there exists a directed link where the distribution power (DP) depends on the product of the three technical dimensions (Infrastructural Control [IC], Algorithmic Curation [AC], Regulatory-Geopolitical Governance [RG]) and produces the cultural framing (CF).



3.4 Hypothesis

As a conceptual piece, the DPT does not offer any statistical hypothesis tests; rather, it offers the following theoretical hypotheses that will be empirically tested in future studies:

H1: Infrastructural control that is concentrated within a few distribution entities results in lower cultural diversity of the content.

H2: Algorithmic curation processes without regulatory requirements of transparency reproduce existing tendencies of cultural centrality and marginality.

H3: Content certification policies without consideration of distribution visibility policies are insufficient for ensuring cultural equality.

H4: Cultural influence of distribution is more obvious when it comes to marginalised cinemas than to dominant cinema industries.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Paradigm and Design

In this research, the qualitative paradigm of interpretation is chosen as it is suitable for concept and theory development in media studies and cultural studies. In this research, the research design chosen is a conceptual-theoretical synthesis, which is a well-recognized method in media studies to construct new theories through synthesizing the existing theoretical and empirical literature on a particular topic (Havens & Lotz, 2016).

4.2 Literature Sourcing and Inclusion Criteria

Articles were selected from Scopus- and Web of Science-indexed journals, university press books, and policy documents from 2015 to June 2026, along with theoretical pre-2015 articles that form the foundation of the field (Bourdieu, 1993; Curtin, 2003). The search terms included the following keywords: “film distribution”, “cultural governance”, “platformisation”, “gatekeeping theory”, “OTT India”, and “media capital”. Texts were included if they helped in developing theories on film distribution, platform governance, and cultural policies. Market analysis literature without theories was excluded from the review.

4.3 Analytical Procedure

Included sources were analysed through iterative thematic coding, identifying recurring theoretical constructs (infrastructure, algorithm, regulation, ideology) across the political economy, platform studies, gatekeeping, and

governmentality literatures. Constructs were then synthesised abductively, a method of theory-building that moves between existing theoretical premises and emergent patterns in the literature, to generate the four-dimensional DPT model presented in Section 3. This procedure follows established conventions for theory-building conceptual papers in media and organisational research.

4.4 Rigor and Trustworthiness

The selected sources have been subjected to analysis using iterative thematic coding to determine recurrent theoretical constructs (infrastructure, algorithm, regulation, ideology) from the various literatures on political economy, platform studies, gatekeeping, and governmentality. These constructs were then synthesized using an abductive approach, which is a theory-building technique where one oscillates between theoretical assumptions and emerging patterns in the literature to produce the DPT framework.

5. Conceptual Findings

The application of DPT framework to the Indian cinema and streaming industries demonstrates how each dimension functions. Infrastructural control can be observed in the concentration of rights to exhibition and distribution in the hands of few multiplexes and OTT platforms, many of which have become vertically integrated with telecommunications infrastructures, thus weakening the bargaining capacity of regional language producers (Athique et al., 2018). Algorithmic curation is seen in the home screen architecture of large Indian and global OTT platforms that use recommendation logics favouring the high budget, Hindi, and diasporic films against regional language and independent cinema, as per the explanation provided by platformisation theory (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). Finally, the regulatory-geopolitical governance can be directly traced in the dual certification system employed in India: theatrical release entails statutory CBFC pre-certification as per the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023 and Cinematograph (Certification) Rules, 2024, while OTT platforms self-classify based on the IT Rules, 2021 co-regulatory code, the jurisdictional separation of which the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has acknowledged, leaving streaming content outside CBFC's purview (Government of India, 2023; Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2024; Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology, 2021). Such a dichotomy implies that the same film is subject to two totally distinct regulatory frameworks depending upon its mode of distribution, and that algorithmic curations within the realm of OTT platforms remain untouched by the framework of both of these measures. The situation gets exacerbated when we look into the realms of the infrastructure; the presence of differential ceilings of FDI as well as automatic routing of 100% in the cases of film production, distribution, and exhibition while in the case of broadcasting carriage services, there is only 49 to 74 percent, reveals that the former kind of distribution enjoys more foreign ownership than the latter (Department for Promotion of Industry and Internal Trade, 2024). The cumulative cultural framing effect represents a streaming and exhibition ecosystem wherein linguistic and regional cinematic diversity, regardless of the fact that India produces multilingual films in more than 40 languages, is structurally under-visible compared to its actual production volume, a trend corroborating the theoretical hypothesis regarding disproportionate framing effects for marginalised language cinemas. The results of this research directly answer Research Questions 1 through 3: distribution as a form of governance (RQ1) through the four structural dimensions revealed (RQ2), which in turn manifest themselves in media policies (RQ3) in the Indian case.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interpretation and Comparison with Prior Studies

The core assertion in DPT that distribution is governance and not logistics builds on previous research instead of contradicting it. Lobato (2019) presents empirical evidence about distributional inequality without using the idea of distribution as a form of governance. Nieborg & Poell (2018) theorize the political economy of platformization but fall short of establishing the connection between algorithmic curation and cultural outcomes. The aspect of culture in DPT fills this void. In contrast to Havens & Lotz (2016), who consider distribution just one of many industrial processes, DPT advances distribution as a key form of governance, as posited by Bourdieu (1993).

6.2 Points of Departure and Contradiction

DPT differs from economic approaches to political economy by arguing that mere ownership of the infrastructure is analytically inadequate, and that the algorithmic and regulative aspects have to be theorised as semi-autonomous mechanisms with their own culture-specific effects. DPT partially contradicts media capital theory's spatiality of the city because the distribution powers of the platform era become less territorialised, operating via cloud-based infrastructure and recommendation algorithms rather than only geographical production sites (Lobato, 2019).

6.3 Theoretical Implications

The incorporation of governmentality into the framework of platform and industry studies enables DPT to shift the scholarly focus of film and cultural studies to viewing distribution as an equally important object of ideological critique alongside traditional textual and production analysis.

6.4 Practical and Policy Implications

From the point of view of industry actors, DPT provides a language for diagnosing situations where, in their own organizations, infrastructural, algorithmic, or regulatory decisions may lead to unintentional cultural framing. From the perspective of Indian policymakers, DPT highlights how the current regulatory infrastructure, which is statutory certification for theatrical screening based on the Cinematograph (Amendment) Act, 2023 and co-regulation through self-classification of OTT platforms through the IT Rules, 2021, is concerned with content but not with distributional and algorithmic systems that decide on catalogue exposure and regional-language inclusion; plugging this loophole would require extending regulation beyond what can be shown to how visibility is achieved.

6.5 Novel Contribution

In terms of contributions to the existing literature, the main novel one is the framework of distribution power (DP). As far as the authors can judge from their reading of the existing literature, this is the first attempt at modeling cultural framing as a multiplicative product of certain distribution practices.

7. Conclusion

The current paper has made the case for theory development of film distribution in terms of cultural governance rather than logistics. Drawing on the systematic synthesis of literature on political economy, platformisation, gatekeeping, and governmentality, a new integrative framework of four-dimensional Distribution Power Theory (DPT) was developed. Applying the DPT to the Indian context of streaming and exhibition in an illustrative manner, it is evident how distribution decisions, which are usually perceived neutrally, generate cultural inequality by having a linguistic and regional impact. The importance of the theoretical contribution presented in this paper is in rethinking distribution as the main, and not marginal, object of study in the field of media and cultural studies. It is suggested to empirically test the four hypotheses formulated in Section 3.4 of this paper in future research.

8. Practical, Policy, and Social Implications

8.1 Relevance to Stakeholders

Streaming service providers and distributors: The DPT framework is an instrument to audit the potential presence of inadvertent bias algorithms against regional, independent, and minority-language films.

Policymakers and regulators (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting): This framework is applicable for extending existing content certification regulations into distribution and algorithmic transparency regulations.

Filmmakers and producers, especially regional language and independent filmmakers: DPT explains to them that visibility problems can stem from infrastructure and algorithmic reasons, which are separate from the quality of their content.

Educators and cultural organizations: The DPT framework can be used as a heuristic teaching device in the context of film/media studies curriculums, where students need to understand the reason why visibility, rather than just content, needs to be scrutinized.

General audience/civil society: This improved awareness can translate into platform demands for transparency and catalogue diversification.

8.2 Applications and Benefits

Other than India, DPT can also be adapted in other multilingual, multi-platform media systems, such as the audiovisual media services regulation in the European Union and streaming systems in Southeast Asia, where there is a comparative foundation for research on cultural governance via distribution. The primary strength of DPT is that it takes the discussion away from just being about content management and towards accountability in the entire distribution chain.

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