

Free Documentaries & Learning TV

THE QUICK VERSION

- 1 Install the free PBS app for NOVA, Nature, American Experience, and Ken Burns films.
- 2 Use your library card with Kanopy and Hoopla for a deep, ad-free documentary catalog.
- 3 Add the free ad-supported apps — Tubi, Pluto TV, The Roku Channel — for more, with a few ads.
- 4 On a smart TV or streaming stick, install the apps from the device's own app store.
- 5 Search more than one app — titles are spread across them and change over time.
- 6 Only install the real apps from the official app store; the free ones never ask for a credit card.

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Free Documentaries & Learning TV: PBS, Smithsonian Channel & More

PBS, Smithsonian, your library and more -- the best nonfiction television, free, on your own set

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WELCOME

1. Read this first — the best learning TV is free

You do not need a pricey subscription for wonderful documentaries — most of the best are free, with no catch.

Here is the one idea this whole guide rests on: some of the finest documentaries and learning programs ever made are available to watch for free, tonight, on apps you can put on your television. You do not need an expensive subscription, and you do not need to hunt through shady corners of the internet. The good stuff is free and aboveboard.

Between public television, your library card, and a few free, advertising-supported channels, you can fill many happy evenings with history, nature, science, and the arts — the kind of television that leaves you knowing something you did not before. This guide shows you exactly where to find it and how to get it onto the big screen.

I am Bill, from Bill's Home Tech here in Portage County, Ohio. When folks tell me their TV bill keeps climbing but there is 'nothing good on,' this is one of my favorite things to show them — a deep well of genuinely good viewing that costs nothing at all.

WATCH OUT

If you love a good nature or history program, you almost certainly do not need to pay a documentary streaming service. Start with the free sources here first; most people never run out.

THE SHORT VERSION

2. The short version

A handful of free apps and a library card cover most of it.

- 1 Install the free PBS app on your phone, tablet, or TV for NOVA, Nature, American Experience, and Ken Burns films.
- 2 Use your library card with Kanopy and Hoopla for a deep catalog of documentaries, free and ad-free.
- 3 Look for Smithsonian programming and other learning content within those same apps.
- 4 Try the free, ad-supported channels — Tubi, Pluto TV, and The Roku Channel — which carry documentary sections.
- 5 On a smart TV or streaming box, install these apps from the device's own app store.
- 6 It is all free; the ad-supported ones simply show a few commercials, and the library ones show none.

GOOD TO KNOW

Exact titles come and go from every one of these services, so treat the catalogs as deep but ever-changing. If a particular film is not on one, it is often on another.

WHY FREE IS ENOUGH

3. Why free really is enough here

Documentaries are one corner where you need not pay.

For many kinds of television you may still want a paid service, but documentaries are a happy exception. Public television has been making superb nonfiction for decades, libraries invest in rich documentary collections, and the free ad-supported services have whole channels of the stuff. Put together, that is more good viewing than anyone could finish.

So before you sign up for a paid documentary app, it is well worth exhausting the free sources first. Most people find they simply do not need the paid option once they see how much is waiting for free. And unlike the questionable 'free movie' sites, every source in this guide is completely legitimate.

WATCH OUT

If a website or app you have never heard of promises 'free documentaries' but wants a credit card or a download from outside your device's app store, steer clear. The genuine free sources are the named apps in this guide, from your official app store.

PBS

4. Public television: the PBS app

The heart of free learning TV.

The single best starting point is the free PBS app. Public television is behind many of the finest documentaries made — the science series NOVA, the wildlife of Nature, the history of American Experience, and the sweeping films of Ken Burns, among a great deal else. A good portion of it is free to stream in the PBS app, with your local station included.

You install the PBS app on your phone, tablet, or smart TV, and a wide selection is available to watch at no cost. Some of the newest or complete back catalogs are reserved for 'PBS Passport,' a benefit for people who donate to their local station — but you do not need that to enjoy a great deal of free viewing right away.

GOOD TO KNOW

Even without donating, the free side of the PBS app is generous. Start there, and only consider Passport if you find yourself wanting a specific older series it unlocks.

PBS PASSPORT

5. PBS Passport, if you support your station

A thank-you benefit, not a requirement.

If you choose to support your local PBS station with a donation, you typically receive PBS Passport, which unlocks a much larger on-demand library — including many complete series and older documentaries that are not in the free tier. It is a lovely way to get more viewing while supporting public television in your community.

Think of Passport as an optional thank-you, not a subscription you must have. The free side of the PBS app already offers plenty, so treat Passport as a bonus you might add if you both value the extra catalog and want to support the station that makes this programming possible.

LIBRARY DOCUMENTARIES

6. Documentaries free with your library card

Kanopy and Hoopla are a documentary treasure chest.

Your library card is a documentary goldmine. Through the free apps Kanopy and Hoopla — both offered by Portage County District Library — you can stream a deep collection of documentaries with no ads at all. Kanopy in particular is known for thoughtful, acclaimed nonfiction, from history and science to art and social issues.

As with other library streaming, there is a monthly limit on how many titles you can start, set by your library, and no credit card is ever involved. We have separate, detailed guides on Kanopy and Hoopla if you want the step-by-step; for documentaries, they are among the very best free sources going.

GOOD TO KNOW

For serious, acclaimed documentaries with no advertisements, the library's Kanopy is hard to beat — and it is completely free with your card.

SMITHSONIAN & MORE

7. Smithsonian and other learning programming

History and science from a trusted name.

The Smithsonian name carries a wealth of history, science, and nature programming, and Smithsonian documentaries turn up in several of the services in this guide — within library apps and on some free ad-supported channels. Alongside it you will find other learning programming: engineering and nature series, biographies, and more.

Rather than chasing one particular channel, it is easiest to search the apps you already have — the PBS app, Kanopy, Hoopla, and the free ad-supported services — for the subject or title you want. The same kind of quality learning TV is spread across all of them, so a quick search usually turns up something good.

FREE AD-SUPPORTED

8. Free ad-supported channels: Tubi, Pluto, Roku

Completely free, in exchange for a few commercials.

A newer kind of free service has arrived: apps like Tubi, Pluto TV, and The Roku Channel that cost nothing and are paid for by showing occasional commercials, the way broadcast television always has. Each carries documentaries — often whole documentary channels or categories — alongside movies and shows.

The trade is simple and honest: you watch a few ad breaks, and in return the whole thing is free, with no card and nothing to cancel. The documentary selection varies and changes, but there is always something worth watching. These are legitimate, widely used services — quite different from the sketchy 'free movie' sites to avoid.

TIP

On Pluto TV and The Roku Channel, look for the live 'channels' laid out like a TV guide — several are devoted to documentaries, nature, or history, so you can simply tune in and watch without choosing a title.

YOUTUBE DOCUMENTARIES

9. Documentaries on YouTube

A mixed bag — wonderful if you know where to look.

Free YouTube carries a great many documentaries too, including official channels from museums, universities, broadcasters, and the makers themselves. There is genuinely excellent material there at no cost. The catch is that YouTube also brims with low-quality and misleading content, so a little care pays off.

Favor official channels — a broadcaster, a museum, a known production company — over anonymous uploads, both for quality and to be sure you are watching the real thing rather than a pirated or doctored copy. We have a separate guide on using YouTube to learn while avoiding the junk, if you would like the fuller picture.

WATCH OUT

On YouTube, stick to official channels for documentaries. Anonymous re-uploads may be poor copies, pirated, or edited to mislead — the real thing is usually posted by the broadcaster or filmmaker.

ONTO THE BIG TV

10. Getting it onto the living-room television

These are best enjoyed on the big screen.

Documentaries shine on a big screen, and happily, every service here can get there. If you have a smart TV or a streaming player — a Roku, Fire TV, Apple TV, or Google TV — you simply open that device's app store, search for the app you want (PBS, Kanopy, Hoopla, Tubi, Pluto, The Roku Channel), and install it, just as you installed apps on your phone.

Signing in on a TV is often easiest with a 'link code': the TV shows a short code, and you type it on a web page on your phone to connect the two — no slow pecking at the remote. Once set up, these apps sit on your TV like any other channel, ready whenever you want a good documentary evening.

TIP

When a TV app shows a code and a web address to sign in, type the code on your phone rather than hunting for letters with the remote. It is far quicker and less frustrating.

WHAT YOU NEED

11. What you will need

A device you likely already own, and an internet connection.

To watch any of this you need an internet connection at home and a device to watch on: a smart TV, a streaming box or stick, a tablet, or even a phone. For the library apps you also need your library card and PIN. That is the whole list — no special equipment and nothing to buy.

If your television is not a 'smart' TV, an inexpensive streaming stick plugged into it adds all of these apps, and we have guides on choosing and setting one up. If you are unsure what you have or what you need, that is exactly the sort of thing I can sort out on a visit.

TWO WAYS IN

12. Two ways people come to this — and both are fine

Trimming the TV bill, or just feeding a curious mind.

Some folks come to free documentaries to cut a climbing television bill; others simply love learning and want more good nonfiction to watch. Either way you come out ahead, so it helps to know which you are.

If you are trimming the TV bill

You want to lean on free viewing and perhaps drop a paid service you barely use.

- Start with the free PBS app and your library's Kanopy and Hoopla — between them, a vast free catalog.
- Add Tubi, Pluto, and The Roku Channel for more, in exchange for a few ads.
- See whether these cover what you actually watch before renewing any paid documentary service.

If you just love to learn

Your budget is fine; you would simply like a deeper, richer supply of good documentaries.

- Lean on Kanopy for acclaimed, ad-free documentaries, and PBS for science, nature, and history.
- Browse the documentary channels on the free ad-supported apps for something to stumble upon.
- Set the apps up on the big TV so a good documentary is always a click away.

GOOD TO KNOW

However you got here, the move is the same: exhaust the free sources first. Most people find they never need to pay for documentaries at all.

HELPING A RELATIVE

13. Setting it up for a parent

A gift of good company for quiet evenings.

For an older parent, a television full of good documentaries is wonderful company — engaging, calming, and endlessly renewing. Set the free apps up on their TV, sign in to the library ones with their card, and arrange the apps they will use on the home screen so it is simple. Show them how to open one and browse; keep it to just two or three apps to start.

A parent who rediscovers Ken Burns, or finds a nightly nature program they look forward to, tends to be delighted — and it costs nothing. Write down which apps you set up and how to open them, and point them first at the one or two they will enjoy most, leaving the rest for later.

GOOD TO KNOW

Start a parent with just the PBS app and one library app. A tidy TV home screen with a couple of good documentary sources beats a cluttered one they are afraid to touch.

STAYING LEGITIMATE

14. Keeping it safe and legitimate

Only the real apps, only from the real app store.

Because this is all advertised as 'free,' a word on safety is worth it. Every source here — the PBS app, Kanopy, Hoopla, Tubi, Pluto, The Roku Channel — is installed only from your device's official app store, and the library apps are signed into with your real library card. That is the safe path, and the only one you need.

If a website promises 'free documentaries' but asks for a credit card, or wants you to install something from outside the app store, it is not one of these — close it. The genuine free sources never ask for payment; the ad-supported ones are paid for by their commercials, not by you.

FOR HISTORY LOVERS

15. If you love history

The free sources are especially rich in history.

If history is your love, you are spoiled for choice. Public television's American Experience and the sweeping films of Ken Burns — on the Civil War, the national parks, jazz, baseball, and much more — are among the finest history documentaries ever made, and a great deal is free in the PBS app. Your library's Kanopy adds acclaimed historical films on top.

Search any of your apps for a period or subject that interests you — a war, an era, a figure from the past — and you will usually find several good programs waiting. History told well on film has a way of bringing a subject alive that a book sometimes cannot, and here it costs you nothing.

GOOD TO KNOW

Ken Burns' long documentary series are perfect for watching an episode an evening. Look for them in the free PBS app, or borrow them through the library.

FOR NATURE LOVERS

16. If you love nature and wildlife

Breathtaking wildlife films, free to watch.

Nature programming is a particular strength of the free sources. Public television's Nature series offers gorgeous wildlife films, and both the library apps and the free ad-supported channels carry plenty of nature and wildlife documentaries besides. On a big screen, these are a genuine pleasure — calming, beautiful, and quietly educational.

Nature films are also wonderful to share with grandchildren, who are often mesmerized by animals, and there is nothing in them to worry about. Search your apps for 'nature,' 'wildlife,' or a favorite animal, and settle in.

GOOD TO KNOW

Nature documentaries make lovely, calming viewing for a quiet evening — and they are a safe, delightful thing to watch with the grandchildren.

FOR CURIOUS MINDS

17. If you love science and space

Big questions, explained for everyone.

For the scientifically curious, public television's long-running NOVA explores everything from space and physics to medicine and engineering, in plain language anyone can follow, and much of it is free in the PBS app. Space fans in particular will find a wealth of material, and the library apps add documentaries on nearly every scientific subject.

You do not need any background to enjoy these — that is the whole art of a good science documentary. They take a big, hard idea and make it clear and wondrous. Search for 'NOVA,' 'space,' or any subject that has ever made you wonder, and you will find a program that explains it.

BIOGRAPHY & THE ARTS

18. Biographies, music and the arts

The lives and the arts, on film.

Beyond history, nature, and science, the free sources carry rich biography and arts programming: portraits of great figures, documentaries on musicians and painters, films about theater and dance, and profiles of places and cultures. Public television and the library's Kanopy are especially strong here.

If you have a favorite composer, artist, author, or performer, search for them by name across your apps — there is very often a documentary about their life and work. It is a lovely way to deepen an interest you already hold, free of charge.

FINDING THE GOOD ONES

19. Finding the good ones without wasting an evening

A little browsing skill goes a long way.

With so much available, the trick is finding the good ones rather than scrolling endlessly. Each app lets you search by subject and browse by category — history, nature, science — so start there rather than at the firehose of 'everything.' Many apps also keep curated lists and 'staff picks' that are a reliable shortcut to quality.

When you find a documentary you love, note the people who made it; filmmakers and series tend to be consistently good, so following a name is a fine way to find your next watch. And do not be afraid to stop one that is not holding you — there is always another, and it costs nothing to move on.

GOOD TO KNOW

Keep a small list of documentaries you mean to watch as you come across them, so that on a free evening you are not stuck scrolling — you simply pick the next one off your own list.

WATCHING OFFLINE

20. Downloading to watch offline

Take a documentary with you, no internet needed.

Several of these apps let you download a program to a phone or tablet while you are on home wifi, then watch it later without using any internet — handy for a car trip, a waiting room, or a spot in the house where the signal is weak. Look for a small download arrow on the title in apps like the PBS app, Kanopy, or Hoopla.

Downloaded titles usually stay available for a set period or until their loan ends, then tidy themselves away, so there is nothing to delete. It is a quiet convenience that turns dead time into a chance to watch something worthwhile.

CAPTIONS & COMFORT

21. Captions, sound and easy viewing

Small settings make a big difference.

If a documentary's narration is ever hard to catch — a soft-spoken narrator, a thick accent, or simply tired ears — turn on captions, the words along the bottom of the screen. Nearly every app offers them with a tap, and many let you make the text larger. It is a small change that makes an enormous difference to comfort and understanding.

Likewise, if the sound from the television itself is hard to follow, a simple soundbar or a pair of wireless headphones can help a great deal; we have separate guides on both. The goal is to make a documentary evening effortless to enjoy, however your eyes and ears are doing.

A WEEKLY RITUAL

22. Making it a happy weekly ritual

A standing documentary night is a small joy.

One of the nicest things you can do with all this free viewing is to make it a gentle ritual — a documentary night, say, once a week, with a cup of something and the lights low. Having a standing date with a good program gives the week a small, pleasant anchor and ensures the free riches you have set up actually get enjoyed.

You might theme it — history one week, nature the next — or simply watch whatever has caught your eye. Shared with a spouse, a friend, or over the phone with a faraway relative watching the same film, it becomes a lovely bit of connection as well as learning.

GOOD TO KNOW

A standing weekly documentary night turns 'I should watch more of that' into something you actually look forward to — and it is a warm thing to share with someone.

COMMON MISTAKES

23. Common mistakes

Avoid these and your documentary evenings go smoothly.

The handful of things that trip people up here are all simple to avoid.

- Paying for a documentary streaming service before trying the free PBS app and the library's Kanopy and Hoopla.
- Expecting one app to have everything — titles are spread across several, so search more than one.
- Confusing the legitimate free apps with sketchy 'free movie' websites that ask for a card.
- Forgetting the library's monthly limit applies to documentaries too, on Kanopy and Hoopla.
- Trusting anonymous YouTube re-uploads instead of a broadcaster's or filmmaker's official channel.

GOOD TO KNOW

When you cannot find a documentary on one app, search another before giving up. The same film often lives on a different free service.

COMMON QUESTIONS

24. Common questions

The questions I hear most about free documentaries.

Here are the ones that come up most at the kitchen table.

If yours is not here, it is very likely a quick answer — and you are welcome to call and ask me.

QUESTIONS

25. Is the PBS app really free?

A great deal of it, yes.

Yes — a wide selection in the free PBS app streams at no cost, including many episodes of its famous series. The larger on-demand library, called PBS Passport, is a benefit for people who donate to their local station, but you do not need it to enjoy a generous amount of free public-television programming.

QUESTIONS

26. What is the difference between the free apps and the ad-supported ones?

Ads, and who pays.

The library apps, Kanopy and Hoopla, show no advertisements — the library pays, so you watch clean, with only a monthly limit on titles. The free ad-supported apps, Tubi, Pluto, and The Roku Channel, have no limit but show occasional commercials, the way broadcast TV does. Both are free to you and completely legitimate.

QUESTIONS

27. Can I watch these on my regular TV?

Yes, with a smart TV or an inexpensive streaming stick.

If your television is a smart TV, you install these apps right on it. If it is not, a low-cost streaming stick or box plugged into an HDMI port adds them all. Either way you sign in — often with an easy on-screen link code — and the apps work like any other channel on the set.

QUESTIONS

28. Do I need a library card for all of them?

Only for Kanopy and Hoopla.

You need a library card and PIN only for the library apps, Kanopy and Hoopla. The PBS app and the free ad-supported services — Tubi, Pluto, The Roku Channel — do not require a library card; you simply install them and watch, sometimes making a free account so they remember you.

QUESTIONS

29. Why can't I find a particular documentary?

Catalogs change — try another free app.

The titles on every one of these services come and go over time as licensing changes, so a specific film may be on one app one season and another the next. If you cannot find it on, say, Kanopy, check the PBS app, Hoopla, or the free ad-supported channels. It very often turns up somewhere else, free.

QUESTIONS

30. Which app should I start with?

The free PBS app, then your library.

If you want one place to begin, start with the free PBS app — it is reputable, easy, and full of superb documentaries at no cost. Once that feels comfortable, add your library's Kanopy and Hoopla for an even deeper, ad-free catalog. Between those three you have more wonderful viewing than you could finish, before you ever look at the ad-supported channels.

QUESTIONS

31. Do these use up my internet?

They use data, so watch on wifi if your plan is limited.

Streaming video does use internet data. If you watch on home wifi with an ordinary home internet plan, this is rarely a concern. If you were to watch on a phone using its cellular data, or you have an internet plan with a strict monthly cap, it could add up — so on a limited plan, stick to wifi and consider downloading on wifi to watch later. We have guides on both if you are unsure what you have.

FOR THE GRANDCHILDREN

32. Watching with the grandchildren

Free, wholesome, and genuinely educational.

Documentaries are a lovely thing to share with visiting grandchildren — nature films especially, which tend to mesmerize children of all ages, and gentle science and history programs that spark questions. Public television has a strong, trustworthy reputation for children's and family programming, and the library apps include curated, ad-free material.

Because these sources are legitimate and, in the library's case, ad-free, you need not worry about what might pop up next, as you might on some free video sites. A nature documentary on the big screen is a calm, screen-time choice the parents will happily approve of.

WHEN IT IS SLOW

33. If the picture stutters or buffers

Usually a simple internet hiccup — and fixable.

If a documentary keeps pausing to 'buffer,' or the picture looks blocky, it is almost always your internet connection rather than the app or the TV. The common fixes are simple: move the streaming device closer to your wifi router, or restart the router by unplugging it for a minute. Closing other devices that are using the internet heavily can help too.

If buffering is a constant problem, it may be that your internet speed is not quite up to smooth video, which is worth looking into. We have a separate guide on slow wifi and buffering, and sorting out a stuttering stream is exactly the kind of thing I can diagnose on a

visit.

QUESTIONS

34. Are the free ad-supported channels safe and legitimate?

Yes — Tubi, Pluto, and The Roku Channel are legitimate.

Tubi, Pluto TV, and The Roku Channel are well-known, legitimate services backed by major companies, and they are used by millions. They are free because they show occasional commercials, exactly as broadcast television always has. They are quite different from the shady 'free movie' websites to avoid — you install them from your device's official app store, and they never ask you for a credit card.

QUESTIONS

35. Can I watch without a smart TV?

Yes — on a tablet, a phone, or with a cheap streaming stick.

You do not need a smart television. You can watch any of these on a tablet, a phone, or a computer. And if you would like them on your older TV, an inexpensive streaming stick or box plugged into an HDMI port adds all of these apps to any set with that connection. We have guides on choosing and setting one up, and it is an easy, low-cost upgrade.

QUICK RECAP

36. The quick recap

The whole guide in one glance.

- The free PBS app is the heart of free learning TV — NOVA, Nature, American Experience, Ken Burns, and more.
- Your library card streams a deep, ad-free documentary catalog through Kanopy and Hoopla.
- Smithsonian and other learning programming turn up across these same apps — search by topic.
- Free ad-supported apps — Tubi, Pluto, The Roku Channel — add documentary channels in exchange for a few ads.
- On a smart TV or streaming stick, install the apps from the device's own app store.
- It is all legitimate and free; only install the real apps, which never ask for a credit card.

GOOD TO KNOW

Exhaust these free sources before you ever pay for documentaries. Between public TV, your library, and the free channels, most people never run out of wonderful things to watch.

BILL'S HERE TO HELP

37. You do not have to do this alone

You just have to remember that a friendly, patient person is one call away.

I hope this guide made finding free documentaries feel a little less daunting and a lot more doable. Keep it in a drawer with your other home papers, come back to a page whenever you need it, and do not worry for a moment about memorizing anything.

When you would rather have a hand, that is exactly what I do. I come to your home, work at your pace, and never make you feel rushed or silly for asking. A first visit is a flat \$99, and for the parts that do not need me on-site I can often help right on your screen for \$49. Every visit comes with a 30-day, come-back-free guarantee. I am a patient tech helper, so for getting these apps onto your television and signed in I will happily sit with you until it all just works.

GOOD TO KNOW

Call or text me at (330) 200-8042, or visit BillsHomeTech.com. Serving Atwater and all of Portage County. 30+ years of patient, plain-English tech help — and if you are ever not 100% happy with a visit, I will make it right or refund it. That is a promise. — Bill

AT A GLANCE

A Picture to Follow Along

Four Free Homes for Documentaries

Where the good nonfiction lives



All free and legitimate -- most people never need a paid service.

AT A GLANCE

A Second Look

Library Apps vs. Free Channels

Two kinds of free, side by side

	Kanopy / Hoopla	Tubi / Pluto / Roku
Ads	None	A few commercials
Need	A library card	No card needed
Limit	Monthly credits	Watch all you like
Best for	Acclaimed docs	Browsing channels

Both are free and legitimate -- use whichever fits the evening.

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.



HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

In-home visit — \$99 flat for your first visit. No contracts and no surprise charges, and a 30-day follow-up is included.

Remote Support — \$49 for a screen-share session. I only connect with your permission, you watch the whole time, and you can end anytime. If I can't fix it over the screen-share, I refund the \$49 — and if it turns out you need me in person, that \$49 goes toward your visit. It's included free for Support Plan members (\$39/mo).

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full \$99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

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