

Investigation and Implications of MOOC Copyright Services in Foreign University Libraries: Postprint

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] As the essential characteristics of MOOCs become increasingly prominent, the copyright issues they raise have gradually attracted widespread attention. University libraries, as major institutions in higher education, play an important guiding and supporting role in MOOC education. [Methods/Process] Through web-based research and questionnaire surveys, this study analyzes the MOOC copyright service practices of foreign university libraries, revealing that while the frequency of service provision is relatively low, the quality is high, and their practices in copyright institutions, copyright clearance, copyright cooperation, and copyright literacy training offer valuable insights for reference. Case analysis of nine selected foreign university libraries reveals that service models and emphases vary. [Results/Conclusion] Four recommendations are proposed for improving the current status of domestic MOOC copyright services, with the aim of developing a Chinese-model MOOC copyright service system through continuous exploration and practice.

Full Text

Preamble

Research and Implications of MOOC Copyright Services in Foreign University Libraries

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Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] As the essential characteristics of MOOCs become increasingly prominent, copyright issues have gradually entered public view. University libraries, as key institutions in higher education, play an important guiding and supporting role in MOOC education. **[Method/Process]** This study analyzes the MOOC copyright service practices of foreign university libraries through web-based investigation and questionnaire surveys, finding that while the frequency of MOOC copyright services is not high, the quality is very high, offering valuable references in copyright agency establishment, copyright clearance, copyright cooperation, and copyright literacy training. Through case analysis of nine key foreign university libraries, we find that service models and emphases vary. **[Result/Conclusion]** We propose four improvement suggestions for the current state of domestic MOOC copyright services, hoping that through continuous exploration and practice, a Chinese model of MOOC copyright service system will eventually be formed.

Keywords: university libraries; MOOC; copyright service; online education; massive open online courses

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Introduction

The emergence of Udacity and Coursera, along with the official launch of edX, triggered a “digital tsunami” in the history of education in 2012. Numerous universities worldwide subsequently embarked on their MOOC education journeys. As the influence of MOOCs has expanded, stakeholder groups—including universities, producers, instructors, and learners—have grown substantially. With the increasingly prominent essential characteristics of MOOCs, copyright issues have gradually come into focus, particularly concerning: copyright ownership of MOOC courses; fair use and its limitations; copyright disputes over user-generated content; and copyright clearance for resources used.

University libraries, as mainstays in higher education, play an important guiding and supporting role in MOOC education. While they provide video support, content support, and retrieval skills training, many scholars believe that copyright services represent one of the most effective and important ways for university libraries to engage with MOOCs. Consequently, library copyright services focused on MOOCs have become a mainstream direction in MOOC research.

Our team previously conducted a thematic clustering and content analysis of domestic and international library MOOC copyright service research based on the CNKI and Web of Science databases. After examining over 50 highly relevant papers, we found that while the quantity of domestic literature has far exceeded international levels—with some Chinese scholars publishing quality

papers in foreign academic journals—domestic library practice in MOOC copyright services still lags significantly behind Western developed countries led by the United States. Current practices have yet to demonstrate the unique advantages of libraries and librarians in providing MOOC copyright services.

Given these shortcomings, this study emphasizes empirical cases in its design. The term “foreign university library MOOC copyright services” in our title primarily refers to the exemplary practices and rich experiences of selected university libraries in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, and Singapore regarding MOOC copyright service emphases and innovative models. Under the principle of combining comprehensiveness with representativeness, we systematically examine and deeply discuss their work practices to provide effective references and inspiration for domestic university libraries.

1. Empirical Investigation and Data Analysis

1.1 Research Path

We selected the currently most influential platform, Coursera, as our primary research object, examining its 161 institutional partners from 29 countries and regions. The investigation consisted of three rounds. The first round (January 24–31, 2018) involved platform selection, questionnaire design, consultation on questionnaire design, and simulated testing. The second round (February 1–10, 2018) conducted preliminary screening of the 161 university or institutional partners based on established criteria (see Table 1), ultimately identifying 94 research objects. The third round (February 11–March 2, 2018) obtained actual MOOC copyright service information from these 94 institutions through both web-based investigation and SurveyMonkey questionnaires, receiving responses from 43 universities (see Table 2).

The “information provision level” indicator in Table 2 (interpreted in Table 3) served as the primary criterion for case analysis. We conducted detailed investigations of Category A and B universities, partial investigations of Category C universities, and used web-based research as supplementary reference for Categories D and E.

1.2 Data Analysis

We analyzed ten questions collected through SurveyMonkey. The first six closed-ended questions were analyzed based on data, while the last four open-ended questions were interpreted from a discursive perspective.

1.2.1 Frequency of Copyright Service Provision Two libraries do not provide MOOC copyright services. Another two libraries indicated they either previously provided MOOC copyright services or only offer them during MOOC

launch periods. Four libraries reported service frequencies concentrated at 1–10 times per year, while one library reported 11–30 times annually (see Figure 1 [Figure 1: see original paper]). This suggests that at the individual level, demand for MOOC copyright services is not substantial and is typically most needed during initial design and production phases.

1.2.2 Copyright Agency Configuration Copyright agencies here include copyright offices or copyright librarians. Among eight responding university libraries, six possess such resources—four emphasized they have established copyright librarian positions with titles such as Academic Publishing Liaison Librarian, Education and Copyright Librarian, and Academic Communication Specialist. Two universities provided links to copyright office webpages: one a copyright office subordinate to the library, and another called Copyright Guidance Resource Services as part of the library’s overall services. This indicates that copyright agency establishment lacks formal uniformity and varies in emphasis (see Figure 2 [Figure 2: see original paper]).

1.2.3 Copyright Clearance Services Among eight responding libraries, four provide copyright clearance services. However, three only offer preliminary consulting and suggestions for alternative resources, while only one provides temporary copyright clearance services based on specific circumstances. Although MOOC instructors have such needs, constraints make it difficult for foreign university libraries to provide comprehensive services.

1.2.4 External Cooperative Copyright Agencies External cooperation shows two main trends. The traditional approach involves collaboration with open resource organizations to obtain low-cost copyrighted materials and solutions through cooperation with other libraries or publishers. The alternative response is “no external cooperation,” with four libraries stating in the “other” category that: (1) the library already possesses sufficient resources and resolution capabilities without needing external assistance; or (2) while not engaging in external cooperation, the library references relevant resources from various external copyright agencies during service provision (see Figure 4 [Figure 4: see original paper]).

1.2.5 Copyright Literacy Construction Six libraries have implemented copyright literacy construction, roughly divided into three approaches (see Figure 5 [Figure 5: see original paper] and Table 4). Among these, “copyright guides” require significant initial investment but have low maintenance costs, making them suitable for most domestic university libraries to reference. “Copyright training” and “public presentations” demand high requirements for instructors and speakers, making them appropriate for a small number of qualified domestic university libraries to attempt.

1.2.6 MOOC Copyright Service Content This multiple-choice question reveals that MOOC producers most frequently use copyright consulting and copyright guides. After sufficient communication and understanding, the most popular approach for solving copyright problems is using alternative resources (see Figure 6 [Figure 6: see original paper]).

1.2.7 Other Findings The remaining four open-ended questions yielded the following overall responses: (1) Copyright processing time varies considerably, generally requiring at least one week and up to nine weeks, indicating that work is measured in weeks. (2) Copyright agency responsibilities are largely similar. While MOOC copyright services are not a primary function, most respondents recognize them as part of their job responsibilities. (3) Regarding MOOC course copyright ownership, two universities each indicated that the university owns copyright, the instructor owns copyright, or the situation remains unclear. (4) Copyright guide design references vary, primarily including national copyright law, fair use, academic norms, open educational resources, and licensed acquisition of copyrighted materials, generally noting they are for reference only rather than legal advice.

2. MOOC Copyright Services in Foreign University Libraries

2.1 US University Library Practices

As the birthplace of MOOCs, numerous US universities have made substantial investments in MOOC education. On Coursera, 60 of its 161 partners (approximately 37.3%) are US higher education institutions. Among the 94 universities surveyed via email, 46 were from the US (nearly 50%). Below are case practices from three universities.

2.1.1 University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill UNC joined Coursera in 2013, offering a MOOC titled “Metadata: Organizing and Discovering Information.” The university has three notable practices in MOOC copyright services: (1) **Establishing a copyright agency:** The “Scholarly Communications Office” helps UNC libraries fully utilize excellent practices in academic publishing to serve faculty and students through guidance, policy interpretation, and advocacy. Its website features multiple sections for easy problem orientation, including copyright basics, fair use, open access, licensing, Creative Commons, course reserves, MOOC guidelines, related topics, and academic communication and copyright groups. (2) **Developing MOOC copyright guides:** UNC’s MOOC copyright guide, completed in April 2013 after a 10-month development cycle, has been used continuously through 2019 with minimal updates. The guide follows a “what it is” to “how to do it” structure, providing comprehensive MOOC copyright guidance based on US legal environment and Coursera’s

platform environment. (3) **Providing MOOC-format copyright training:** Beyond internal MOOC copyright literacy training, UNC offers public copyright knowledge training through Coursera, particularly the MOOC “Copyright for Educators and Librarians,” co-developed by Duke University and Emory University and taught by UNC’s Library Copyright Office director.

2.1.2 University of Michigan UMich’s MOOC copyright services are distinctive: (1) **Comprehensive copyright problem resolution mechanism:** The UMich Library established a Copyright Office as a specialized agency with a well-developed MOOC development team (Academic Innovation) handling MOOC production matters, equipped with a copyright officer and a clear problem-resolution process (see Figure 7 [Figure 7: see original paper]). (2) **Regular copyright workshops:** While passively accepting copyright assistance requests, UMich’s Copyright Office actively conducts regular copyright literacy training, essentially guaranteeing 10 workshop courses each quarter. These workshops also support customized copyright training for university groups. All course PPTs and PDFs are freely downloadable on the workshop webpage, strongly promoting copyright awareness and problem-solving capacity within the university.

2.1.3 University of Kentucky UK’s Instructional Technology Services handles MOOC development and production, with the library, distance education team, and legal counsel collaborating to ensure MOOC materials are both copyright-compliant and practically valuable. The copyright agency, called the “UK Copyright Resource Center,” operates as a virtual online copyright center providing various copyright-related information. It has functional specialists for distance education library services, electronic reserves, distance education, legal counsel, academic communication, and media who collaborate with each other. While the library has no dedicated copyright librarian, one librarian handles some copyright issues part-time, submitting complex problems to UK legal counsel. Regarding MOOC copyright ownership, although Coursera and UK signed an early agreement stipulating instructor ownership and Coursera’s right to promote electronic courses, UK traditionally holds that paper materials produced during instruction belong to the university. Thus, MOOC copyright ownership primarily depends on the degree of university resource dependence during development—greater dependence means university ownership.

2.2 European University Library Practices

While Belgium, Russia, and Sweden lag in MOOC development, and Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain offer many MOOCs primarily in their native languages (creating research difficulties), European university library involvement in MOOC copyright practice is generally low, mostly limited to copyright guides and consulting. We present three cases from the UK, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

2.2.1 University of Manchester The university participated in our survey by directly completing the questionnaire. Its MOOC copyright service features include: (1) **Library-produced copyright guides:** Attached to the library's subject guides, these provide copyright basics, teaching-oriented, student-oriented, and researcher-oriented information, and guidance on finding free materials. Based on open educational resources and licensed acquisitions, the guides don't specifically target MOOCs but include MOOC copyright handling methods in teaching-oriented guidance through Q&A and glossary approaches. (2) **Multi-angle copyright cooperation:** The university conducts extensive external cooperation with government departments, open resource organizations, other libraries, publishers, the Copyright Licensing Agency (CLA), and the Educational Recording Agency (ERA). This explains why it only provides copyright guides and consulting—subsequent services like copyright clearance, licensing negotiations, and alternative resource identification can be achieved through external agencies.

2.2.2 École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne (EPFL) EPFL has no specialized copyright agency for MOOC copyright services nor seeks external copyright cooperation because its engineering MOOCs are world-leading, and most materials don't need external acquisition. The practice involves: teaching librarians answering copyright questions with feedback within one week; providing copyright consulting and classic resources; and a copyright office dedicated to helping MOOC teams conduct fair dealing analysis, striving to determine lawful material use. Regarding fair dealing, detailed processes from material judgment to handling methods are posted on the office's dedicated MOOC development page. The copyright office staff of five includes a director, copyright librarian, copyright specialist, copyright permissions assistant, and copyright assistant. The copyright librarian primarily provides copyright education and training for faculty and staff, while the copyright specialist handles copyright literacy training. MOOC course copyrights belong to the university.

2.2.3 Leiden University The university library has a Copyright Information Office and copyright specialists, handling approximately 20 MOOC copyright issues annually. As a support member of the online teaching team, the Copyright Information Office handles copyright clearance and contract signing, with most issues resolved within three days. The copyright specialist manages copyright literacy training, and MOOC course copyrights belong to the university.

2.3 Other Regional University Library Practices

Other regions refer to areas outside Europe and America. According to the 2018 QS World University Rankings, 36 of the top 100 universities are from outside Europe and America. Based on this list, Coursera partners in other regions, and questionnaire and web survey content, we present three university cases.

2.3.1 National University of Singapore (NUS) NUS's Centre for Instructional Technology (CIT) handles MOOCs with a clearly divided 10-person MOOC development support team. Its copyright webpage comprises four major sections listing 11 copyright considerations for MOOC production with practical tips. While the NUS Library doesn't actually participate in MOOC-related affairs, it possesses certain copyright problem-handling capacity with a professional copyright emergency response team. Librarians handle daily consulting on material usage in classrooms and publications but don't provide legal advice.

2.3.2 Macquarie University, Australia The university library has dedicated copyright specialists and information policy management specialists. Its MOOC copyright problem resolution mechanism closely resembles UMich's, with two intermediate stages between instructors and copyright specialists where most issues are resolved before reaching specialists.

2.3.3 University of Alberta, Canada The university library has a Copyright Office and copyright specialists with three distinctive features: (1) **Emphasis on “fair dealing” over “fair use”**: Fair dealing is similar to fair use but allows more flexible utilization of copyrighted materials due to expanded purposes. The Copyright Office helps MOOC teams analyze materials for fair dealing, striving to ensure lawful use. (2) **Clear rights and responsibilities**: The Copyright Office provides education and services to faculty and staff, with five staff members handling different functions. MOOC copyrights belong to the university. (3) **Comprehensive copyright clearance**: Despite averaging fewer than 10 MOOC cases annually, the university requires copyright permission for all MOOC content, maintaining a clearance process where the office helps identify copyright owners, provides measures for “orphan works,” and offers legal assistance for sensitive issues.

3. Summary of Foreign University Library MOOC Copyright Services

The above presents only representative practices identified in our investigation. Table 5 summarizes questionnaire and web survey results. However, we must not blindly assume that all foreign university libraries have achieved high levels of MOOC copyright construction and services. Overall, many surveyed libraries remain at the stage of publishing copyright guidance webpages and providing consulting, with only a few exceptional cases (such as Duke University Library) whose service concepts, experiences, and web documents are widely promoted, referenced, and emulated.

4. Implications for Chinese University Library MOOC Copyright Services

China now ranks first in the world in MOOC course quantity, with over 200 MOOCs on international platforms and 55 million enrollments from university students and social learners. China's MOOC construction has entered the world's top tier, providing Chinese solutions and creating a Chinese model for global MOOC development. This vigorous development presents both opportunities and tremendous challenges for Chinese university libraries and librarians. In terms of teaching support, transforming from traditional passive services to active services—from supplementary end-of-chain services to indispensable front-end services—requires vision, initiative, and bold innovation. We propose the following recommendations regarding copyright services.

4.1 Value the Copyright Service Needs of Domestic MOOC Teams

By the end of 2017, the Ministry of Education's Department of Higher Education announced the recognition results for 2017 National Excellent Online Open Courses, designating 490 courses, all MOOCs. We surveyed 468 undergraduate course instructors from this list between January 24 and February 22, 2018, receiving 41 valid responses. Although the sample size was modest, responses were thoughtful and high-quality.

Over 75% of respondents considered MOOC copyright information services by university libraries important, with 25% rating them “particularly important.” Regarding evaluations of their own university library's copyright services, nearly 40% approved or highly approved, indicating some libraries have achieved certain standards. However, over 60% considered their library's services inadequate.

For “problems encountered in MOOC production and management,” approximately 60% of responses focused on course copyright ownership, 44% on third-party resource authorization, and 30% on conflicts with fair use rules. Copyright ownership is particularly critical—if instructors invest multiples of their usual classroom effort to complete a MOOC without guaranteed economic and intellectual property rights, their motivation will be severely damaged.

Regarding “costs of resolving MOOC copyright problems” (referring to time, energy, and financial costs measured qualitatively based on instructors' personal experience), over 70% of teachers found the costs “moderate,” “relatively high,” or “extremely high.” For “assessment of future MOOC copyright problem trends,” nearly 90% agreed that copyright issues in China will not decrease but will steadily increase. Thus, Chinese university libraries must provide MOOC copyright services.

4.2 Establish Professional Copyright Management Institutions and Personnel

Foreign research reveals four specific models:

4.2.1 Assign Part-Time Subject Librarians: Cultivate or recruit librarians with law (especially intellectual property) and education backgrounds. Their primary function is to serve as subject librarians for the law school while participating in library copyright consulting services and designing online copyright guides and offline guidance programs. The advantage: MOOC course numbers are generally small, and copyright service demand is infrequent, allowing subject librarians to provide temporary counseling without heavy time commitments. The disadvantage: extremely high comprehensive quality requirements for subject librarians.

4.2.2 Establish Virtual Copyright Service Centers: Copyright processing centers can operate without physical presence, providing information and consulting services online. Staff composition comes from various university branches: open resources modules to librarians, distance education modules to education school faculty, legal modules to university legal counsel, and audiovisual services modules to IT departments. Advantages: effective utilization of each department's expertise, concentrating forces for major tasks, and providing optimal services at every MOOC stage. Disadvantage: loose structure requiring strong overall management.

4.2.3 Establish Physical Copyright Offices: Create specialized copyright information processing institutions within the university or library to centrally handle all MOOC copyright matters. Even if not library-affiliated, these offices connect with and expand library services. Offices may have up to five positions (see Section 2.3.3). Advantages: scalable on-campus service benefits and unified external liaison. Disadvantage: high establishment costs requiring professional talent recruitment.

4.2.4 Establish University-Level Teaching Service Centers: These independent university branches often assume all MOOC production and management responsibilities, including copyright services, with libraries barely participating. Such centers have professional MOOC service teams (see Section 2.3.1) comprising education experts, graphic designers, liaison officers, video producers, instructional designers, and web maintainers, with instructional designers primarily handling copyright issues. Advantages: long-term, stable, efficient MOOC development teams. Disadvantage: weakened MOOC copyright service capacity, as copyright issues occur infrequently and team members focus on other areas, using conservative approaches to avoid legal sensitivities.

We believe Models 1 and 3 currently best suit China's national conditions and university libraries' MOOC copyright service development. Some libraries have already established copyright librarians (full-time or part-time) providing services at certain levels, as reflected in our domestic MOOC instructor survey,

but coverage remains far from meeting user needs. Models 2 and 4 move beyond the library, with the university establishing physical or virtual copyright service centers (with MOOCs as one service object), where libraries and librarians still play important roles. If developing toward university-level institutions, we recommend libraries proactively apply and secure advantageous positions to leverage existing resources and greatly enhance influence.

4.3 Provide Standardized, Diverse, and Multi-Level Copyright Services

Foreign university copyright agencies employ various solutions for MOOC copyright problems, generally following this process: copyright literacy training (to enhance awareness and knowledge) → targeted training for MOOC instructors/teams (to identify or prevent issues) → copyright consulting (preliminary understanding) → in-depth problem resolution (three approaches: copyright guides, copyright clearance, and finding alternative resources). Differences lie mainly in process details. Specific practices for domestic reference include:

4.3.1 Conduct Regular Copyright Literacy Education: Regular training courses are highly effective. Organize copyright training courses quarterly or annually, featuring external speakers, internal copyright experts explaining knowledge and techniques, or multi-party discussion forums. Target audiences include MOOC instructors, developers, and learners. Librarians help MOOC teams confirm copyright status to avoid reproduction and information network transmission infringement risks. Instructors learn about school copyright policies and relevant laws to understand the importance of obtaining copyright for MOOC materials and clarify copyright ownership policies. Students learn that user-generated content during MOOC learning also has value and copyright protection needs. Actively survey learner expectations and feedback for summary and course adjustment. Accept training requests from MOOC development teams and other groups through various remote communication methods, offering specialized training courses in MOOC and micro-course formats. Maximize open sharing through online registration to accept external personnel or small groups for learning requests, achieving promotion, education, and dissemination effects.

4.3.2 Design Intensive Copyright Guides: MOOC copyright guides, precisely positioned for MOOCs, are more detailed. Based on detail level, they divide into MOOC guide handbooks and MOOC copyright guide webpages. Handbooks generally include: handbook guidance, course materials introduction, fair use, public domain topics, and resource links. Webpages typically condense MOOC-relevant copyright knowledge and the university's primary problem-resolution methods. Domestic university libraries can develop copyright guide webpages based on current copyright personnel expertise, absorbing other universities' excellent practices and linking to external platform resources to provide MOOC developers and instructors with more assistance channels.

4.3.3 Help Clarify Copyright Ownership and Provide Customized Copyright Clearance:

University libraries should clarify MOOC course copyright ownership and changes when formulating MOOC copyright policies. They must distinguish whether MOOC creation is commissioned, funded, performed under other agreements, performed as employment duties, or utilizes substantial school resources. This determines whether the work is a joint work, independent work, commissioned work, or work for hire—different types leading to different ownership determination criteria.

Copyright clearance's core is confirming copyright status and obtaining permission—tedious, professional work requiring law-background experts. For materials whose owners cannot be located, publish copyright statements with contact information for future negotiation. For works with identifiable authors, negotiate for copyright permission, typically focusing on licensing fees. A key negotiation technique: since MOOC student scale is huge and unpredictable, calculating per-student fees would be prohibitively expensive, so fixed rates are used, and most copyright owners don't set usage fees, enabling negotiation using information asymmetry. If these approaches fail, copyright experts can contact libraries or external open educational resource organizations to provide open resources with minimal copyright risk, transforming MOOC material copyright issues into new material selection problems. Alternative copyright resources currently include Creative Commons, open access, and public domain, with US universities adept at utilizing the public domain concept.

4.4 Explore a Chinese-Model Copyright Service System

The “Chinese model” concept is frequently used in international relations scholarship, characterized by eight features: practical rationality, strong government, stability priority, people's livelihood focus, gradual reform, sequential differences, mixed economy, and opening up. Applied to library MOOC copyright service construction, we should emphasize practical rationality and gradual reform, avoiding blind construction and rushing for quick results. We should develop based on external excellent experience while self-developing.

Currently, we can attempt establishing cross-university and cross-regional MOOC copyright service institution alliances domestically. Our investigation shows most foreign universities handle fewer than 10 MOOC copyright issues annually. Although each problem requires days or weeks to resolve, long service vacuum periods still cause resource idleness and waste. An alliance enables universities to concentrate resources for specialized development, achieving precise services with dedicated personnel. It also allows universities to invest resources in one area to obtain professional services in all areas through alliance membership, forming a highly cost-effective cooperation model. The alliance can also centrally guide external cooperation matters, solving bulk external work copyright issues involving foreign organizations like the UK's CLA and ERA or the US Copyright Clearance Center.

Since 2012, China's Ministry of Education has closely monitored international MOOC development, determining from the outset that China's MOOC construction should reflect Chinese characteristics and world-class standards. After nearly seven years of vigorous support and promotion, China's MOOC construction and application have shown explosive growth, but unclear copyright and high dropout rates have become constraints. As the main body of MOOC construction, universities and their libraries must constantly learn from many excellent and advanced foreign practices while combining their own conditions with China's MOOC development path to gradually explore and improve service content and standards, quickly building a Chinese-model MOOC copyright service system.

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Author Contributions

Hao Qun: Primary author responsible for topic selection and structural design.

Zhang Libin: Partial content writing and final manuscript revision.

Zhou Xiaokang: Responsible for questionnaire surveys and web-based investigation, partial content writing.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

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