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MEDIA ETHICS AND POWER IN MULTICULTURAL NIGERIA

Mainasara Yakubu KURFI
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Introduction

In Africa, the evolution of the media is marked by developments and contradictions. At stake often are rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. The 1999 constitution has provided a prism for interrogating the mix of these elements, in a way that provides perspective on the media as moderators and transmitters, and as the Fourth Estate of the Realm. How well the media are functioning, is a subject of contestation, with variable assessments, ranging from acknowledgements of the media's centrality to development processes right from the colony, to questions about what may be the progressive erosion of the capacities and relevance of the media, due to debilitating dysfunctionalities (Owens-Ibie in Aondover *et al.*, 2021).

At the heart of the debate is ethics, which is as universal as it is local in the application, with Codes at the core of the professionalism undergirding journalism practice. Ethical problems are peculiar to the practice of journalism in Nigeria as well as the enforcement of sanctions against journalists who have breached the Code. A symbiosis is implicit or

assumed in the relationship between law and ethics. Law, therefore, is supposed to strengthen the frames for the ethical anchor of media operations and practice, and Nigeria in particular has laws specifically targeted at the media and its practitioners.

From the colonial to postcolonial administrations, the law has provided a credible platform for a justice system from which the media have benefited, either through express provisions in specific Acts or through rulings by courts of law that have aligned with expectations. Section 2 of the 1999 Constitution - on Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy, assigns to the media the responsibility of holding the government accountable to its primary mandate of good governance. The flip side has been suggestions of the subversion of the same legal space for questionable and duplicitous interpretations or implied manipulation (Owens-Ibie in Aondover *et al.*, 2021).

When this is juxtaposed with ethical space, the prospects are dampened. This is why this paper is interrogating ethics and power in multicultural Nigeria. At the level of the media as an institution, issues of the future remain critical. The potency of media influence on the masses when effectively managed is fundamental for the collective coexistence of people in the society. This belief was further reinforced by what happened in Europe before and during the 2nd World War. Thus, the paper argued that the media and the journalistic practice do not exist in isolation or a social vacuum but their existence and operations are informed by certain values or normative assumptions, which need to be taken into cognizance.

As noted by Pate and Oso (2017) Nigeria is a multicultural nation of diverse people, multiple identities, and colourful outlooks. It has a population of 200+ Million people, 400+ ethnic groups, two major religions, dozens of political parties, 36 federating states, and additional complex platforms of diversities. The Nigerian multicultural setting is characterised by diversity, heterogeneity, and pluralism in the cultures, orientations, and attitudes of the people. In other words, it connotes diversity as a fact of life on the grounds of sex, cultural practice, ethnic origin, religious affiliation, ideological stance, political leaning, level of social development, place of habitation, and so on (Pate & Oso, 2017). Nigeria's diversity has both its strength and weakness. Of recent, the negative side of its diversity and pluralism seems to have outweighed the positive side. However, the mass media actively reflect both the strength and the weaknesses.

In this digital era, new media sometimes undermine the hierarchical control of social knowledge by bypassing established mediating agencies and distributing prohibited or restricted information. At other times, new media were incorporated within the system of power, and their potential for disturbing established flows of influence was contained. Within this context, the paper examined the media in a heterogeneous Nigerian society. Based on the lacuna in the literature, this paper discusses some of the conceptual and theoretical issues, which have underpinned the concerned objectives of media and power in multicultural Nigeria, the dangers and consequences of unethical behaviour in multicultural Nigeria, and ethical issues in Nigerian media and how it affects national development.

Ethics and Media Influence in Context

Ethics is a frame for moral conduct and socially approved behaviour as well as conduct that is socially correct based on the core values that are often cherished and upheld by society.

Communication scholars Like Mojaye and Aondover (2022) are of the view that ethics is central to academic and journalistic practice or engagements. Ethics are deeply rooted in the Constitutional and the various regulatory codes in Nigeria. The national ethic is derived from our religions, individual cultures, and social etiquette (Veronese, *et al.*, 2022). Similarly, our cultures and traditions have prescriptive codes on personal and social values as well as standard rules of engagement in relationships. Thus, issues around the unethical conduct of some journalists may not be due to the absence of background or foundational training in standard ethical practices. Rather it may represent deviance from the norm.

Media ethics offers a most interesting, and comprehensive account of a strong correlation between positive values and correct attitudinal disposition in journalistic practice in Nigeria. This paper focuses on the contemporary role of the media in gathering, processing, and the delivery of information. Ethics in the media generally mediates the space between maintaining the status quo and the struggle for freedom of speech and expression. While the power elites would always want to maintain the status quo, there is also a conflict of interest between proprietors or investors and media professionals. The former tend to support government officials for pecuniary issues and professional journalists are usually swayed by the need to protect public interest. Media ethics in journalism is therefore fundamental to both individuals and society. Journalists must report accurately to serve as the conscience of the nation.

This assertion forms the basis for the call to the practice of ethical journalism. Unfortunately, some media houses could engage in the distortion or omission of the truth (Deuze, 2005). For this reason, journalism hardly enjoys public confidence in what journalists do or fail to do. Thus, journalism ethics is developed with a focus on professional ethics and the values, guiding principles, and codes of the journalism profession. The advent of larger mass media organizations and news cycles that have shrunk from days to hours or minutes have fueled interest in the reexamination of the ethical standards of journalism practice. This is evident in many countries in the world including Nigeria. Communication scholars like Wyatt (2014) and Takwa (2017) have lamented about the practice of journalism in Nigeria, especially the application of journalists' code of ethics in news gathering and presentation.

Pate (2018) remarks that efforts have been made to reduce negative values and institutionalize ethics in our individual and national lives. Above all, the 1999 Nigerian Constitution has recognised the place and role of ethics in our national life. However, Takwa (2017) maintained that there is a lack of proper application of such ethics in the process of gathering, processing, and disseminating news. This is dangerous to the profession as such contradictions end up fueling many crises, which posed a great danger to the security of a nation.

Arguably, the power of the media is to hold the government accountable to the people leading to the powerful effect theory of the media (paradigm), which arose after the First World War. Combatants during the war mobilised the mass media in prosecuting the war. The results, according to McQuail (2010), seemed to leave little doubt about the potency of media influence on the masses: when effectively managed and directed. The belief was further reinforced by what happened in Europe before and during the 2nd World War. By the middle of the 20th century, the potency of the mass media as instruments of

propaganda and mass persuasion and for shaping opinions and influencing behaviour, both at the national and international levels, was already well established (Oso, 2018) From this period, the idea that the media, public relations, and propaganda, can be used to 'manufacture consent' was born and has been growing. Towards this effort, many techniques and strategies have been devised to influence perception, popular thinking, and behaviour. Lasswell (1948) who was a prominent figure in communication studies produced his work detailing techniques of propaganda based on his experience during the war. Many news and information management techniques have been deployed, all in an attempt to influence and manipulate news coverage. Film and entertainment have been produced as tools of advocacy, opinion, attitude, and behaviour change. It is not in doubt that the mass media can influence their audiences. These assumptions started with the powerful effect paradigm which extends from the turn of the century, until the 1930s (McQuail, 2010).

The conception of the media audience before 1930 was based on fear of the deleterious effect of the mass media on a weak, rootless, isolated, atomistic, and passive mass of people. The mass media were assumed to be very powerful in influencing the behaviour of such vulnerable individuals. This image of the audience is of course based on the mass society theory, which argues that with industrialization and subsequent social changes, people have become isolated and alienated. The media were regarded to influence individuals who come in contact with media messages. The minds of such individuals are so open and empty that they were ready to accept any message that hit them. The media message is like a bullet (Oso, 2018).

Despite the tendency to appreciate the power of the media to influence public opinion and behaviour, scholars like McQuail, (2010) and Otegunrin (2022) have revised their position. McQuail dates this revision to the 1960s when social science scholarship began to focus on Mass Communication, particularly in the United States. Klapper's in Otegunrin (2022) influential statement to the effect that "mass communication does not ordinarily serve as a necessary and sufficient cause of audience effect, but rather functions through nexus of mediating factors. Klapper in Otegunrin (2022) set the stage for the reformulation of the paradigm. The point is that it was not that the media were impotent or had no effect, but that the media operate within the pre-existing structure of social relationships and in a given social and cultural context (Oso, 2018). It was argued that these factors took primacy in shaping media choice, attention, and response on the part of the audience. Latter revision has also moved from looking for immediate and direct effects towards long-term cognitive change towards what people learn from the media, effects on climate of opinion, definitions of social reality, and ideology (Aondover *et al.*, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

Within the conceptual context, Deontological and Teleological theories of ethics serve the goal of the paper. The theories provide an explanatory model to explain the issues of power and cultural heterogeneity and how the power and cultural heterogeneity affect ethics in journalistic practice. Deontological ethics is non-consequential, which considered what is wrong as wrong and what is right as right while Teleological ethics is concerned with the outcome of an action than the action itself. As observed by Littlejohn and Foss (2009) the tenets of Deontological and Teleological ethics are fundamental to journalism practice.

As such, *deontological ethics* is a branch of ethics that is absolutist. The theory is derived from the works of the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant based on the assumption of ethical judges of actions devoid of what their consequences are (McNaughton & Rawling n.d.). Deontological ethics is not on virtues, outcomes, or emotions but on duties and obligations. Here, what is right is right and what is wrong is wrong. Hence, adherents have it as a moral duty to stand by the truth.

Therefore, journalists who are inclined to this ethical school of thought have no reason whatsoever to “play soft”. Coinages like public interest, national interest, national security, etc., have no space in deontological ethics, thereby rendering them to serious criticism. Opponents are of the view that journalism exists to make and not to mar society. Hence, any journalistic practice that is capable of tearing society apart is not worth the salt of good journalism. No wonder, their maxims: “*Let justice be done though the heavens fall!*” This is how far a deontologist can go in sticking to the truth. As such, a deontological journalist is ever prepared to call a spade by its name. Therefore, the theory is relevant to this paper as journalists like Rufai Oseni and Reuben Abati of *Arise TV* subscribe to the postulations of this theory based on their journalistic engagement.

On the other hand, *teleological ethics* also referred to as consequential ethics accords about the outcome of action than the action itself. This school of thought believes action is based on the likely consequence. The tenet of this ethical perspective is that people are ethically bound to do what is best for most people. Hence, actions are good when they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In this context, no moral act or rule is intrinsically right or wrong. Rather, the rightness or wrongness of an act or rule is a matter of the overall non-moral good produced in the consequences of doing that act (Moreland, 2009). For example, actions such as murder, enslaving others, punishing innocent persons, etc. can be justified if, at all, their consequences are perceived to be good (Otekunrin, 2022). This earned the doctrine criticism, as it allows individuals to hide and perpetrate evils in society because of the consequences.

A journalist operating within the realm of this ethical perspective has the latitude of freedom to make moral decisions. At this level, several stories can be “killed” or reported, depending on their perceived consequences on the masses. Peace journalism for example can be situated within this framework of journalistic practices, such as advocacy journalism, development journalism, etc. to foster development even if it means tampering with the core values of journalism, such as objectivity and accuracy. More so, most repressive press laws can be justified in this context as far as national interest, state security and public good are concerned.

A journalist who subscribed to this ethical position, therefore, can determine his action in any given situation based on how he feels. Generally, such an action will benefit humanity. It is on this premise that Nigerians can truly appreciate the role of Ahmed Salkida and Barrister Aisha Wakili in mediating between the dreaded *Boko Haram* insurgency and the rest of the society, a role that earned them the wrath of security agencies in the country.

Methodology

This paper is exploratory and relied on relevant literature such as journals, historical documents, official publications and records on media ethics and power in multicultural Nigeria for its analysis. The selected documents were content analysed and data gathered

were categorized into thematic areas for analysis and interpretation.

Findings and Discussion

The findings are discussed under the thematic areas that were collated from the materials researched to reflect the ethical and power relations issues.

Media and Power in Multicultural Nigeria

Mass communications are generally discussed as if they were exclusively modern phenomena. Indeed, this assumption is embodied in most social scientific definitions of the mass media. According to McQuail (2010), mass communications comprise the institutions and techniques by which specialized groups employ technological devices (press, radio, films, etc.) to disseminate symbolic content to large, heterogeneous, and widely dispersed audiences. Only modern technology, it is widely assumed, has made possible the transmission of communications to mass audiences. Curran (2000) would have us believe that in the pre-industrial period, the communication system was restricted to direct face-to-face communication between individuals. A variety of signifying forms apart from face-to-face interaction buildings, pictures, statues, coins, banners, stained glass, songs, medallions, and rituals of all kinds was deployed in pre-industrial societies to express sometimes highly complex ideas. At times, these signifying forms reached vast audiences. For instance, the proportion of the adult population in Europe regularly attending mass during the central Middle Ages was almost certainly higher than the proportion of adults in Europe now regularly reading a newspaper (McQuail, 2010).

Since the rituals of religious worship were laid down in set liturgies, the papal curia exercised much more centralized control over the symbolic content mediated through public worship. In the central Middle Ages, the controllers are the highly concentrated and monopolistic press of contemporary Europe. Centralized control over mass communications is thus scarcely new. A historical comparison with older communication forms including communications reaching small elites as well as mass audiences is thrown into sharp relief of the impact of communication. The paper argues that new media gave rise to new centres of power, which increased tensions within the prevailing structure of authority.

Within this context, diversity connotes multiculturalism, plurality, and variety. Naturally, these complex diversities would have positive as well as negative consequences on the social milieu of the people. Positively, these diversities form the basis of unity in the nation. Negatively, competitive tendencies and poor management of diversity issues have resulted in explosions that had violently rocked the basis of the country. But these should not be unexpected in a complex Nigeria where the points of shocks are manifold and widespread. In the mix, there are flashpoints of shocks produced by differentiation in the expectations and behaviours of individuals and groups. In all these, the media and other means of information dissemination and exchange occupy a central position in the process of decision-making, opinion formation, and behaviour manifestation (Pate, 2018).

Multiculturalism as understood in this paper is the co-existence of diverse cultures, where culture includes ethnic, religious, or cultural groups and is manifested in customary behaviours, cultural assumptions and values, patterns of thinking, and communicative styles. However, almost every society is dynamic and ever-evolving, and therefore, is faced with the challenge of appreciating the diverse components of the various cultural

entities that exist in a single entity or country. One of the legacies of colonialism in Africa is that many countries emerged, with Africa currently lodging 54 independent countries (Takwa, 2017). This instantly created a challenge of how to manage the different diverse cultures that were bundled into countries.

In these countries, there are hundreds of ethnic nationalities and a mosaic of cultures that coexist, albeit with long-standing differences, some as old as the history of the various ethnic nationalities deep into the pre-colonial and colonial periods, and some that emerged during the post-independent era. In fact, in most cases, the post-dependence governance in Africa has been so enmeshed in crises that Zartman in Takwa (2017) believes that effective governance lies in how best leaders are capable of managing the competing interest of various groups.

The issues at stake, therefore, revolve around these critical dilemmas: how multiculturalism can be managed to constitute an asset, rather than a burden to national integration and development; and what would be the role of media and reporters in this onerous task of nation-building. What lessons from around the world can a multicultural and diverse country such as Nigeria imbibe to promote a spirit of cohesion and unity, even in the face of a fast-transforming multicultural landscape, and what could be the role of the media?

Interrogating the Dangers and Consequences of Unethical Behaviour

Unethical conduct, immorality, or negative values are devoid of ethical benchmarks. They are dangerous social evils that bridge unethical practices. They can be damaging to society, to the extent of leading to a failed state. The inappropriate behaviour has serious economic implications. In Nigeria today, the cost of corruption is incalculable. Huge sums are stolen, diverted, or wasted based on not being conscientious. Each day, billions of Naira are lost through time wastage, squabbles, naked stealing, and many other acts of indiscipline. Good governance is undermined and democracy is weakened when a system is robbed of trust. The perception and reputation of the country get spoiled as people can see in several international reports like the ones from Transparency International and others (Pate, 2018).

Apart from direct wastage of money, there is wastage in the form of opportunity cost to the nation and society. Indiscipline is recognized as one of the main causes of poverty and underdevelopment in a community (Pate, 2018). Governments of developing nations embark on reform measures to attack poverty. In this direction, the war against poverty cannot be won with endemic corruption and indiscipline. An evil like the disregard for correctness hinders the efficient use of economic resources for national development. Equally, unethical behaviours result in societal intolerance, disdain for alternative opinions, and hatred for individuals and cultures. For instance, ethnoreligious killings and the intolerance exhibited by different groups are an indication of failure to abide by correct religious teachings, deficient sense of social justice, and partisan journalistic engagement.

Unethical conduct among journalists could be for good governance, public trust and social cohesion among the nationalities. Elsewhere, an ethically indicated person is very unlikely to rise to a position of trust and leadership. However, in Nigeria, the story is not similar. This is not good for the collective reputation as members of the global community. When a country becomes notorious for indiscipline, corruption, and crookedness, nothing will ever

be believed from that country. Such a country loses international credibility. Its documents, including certificates, receipts, and news reports, will not be believed. Similarly, unethical behaviour in Nigeria today is backed by corruption and corrupt people in every sector. Nearly 98 million Nigerians live in extreme poverty making the country the world's capital of poverty, and this often reinforces anger in the minds of people with crime impendent (Aondover *et al.*, 2021).

Pate (2018) remarks that media professionals wherever they may be in Nigeria need to have a clearly defined framework that can guide them in approaching and handling issues of national ethics and development. Ethics must be fully understood, starting from individual organisations through the local government up to the federal stage. This means that media professionals must be well educated about their organisations, communities, and challenges in the country for them to be able to advocate and discuss convincingly ethics at the various levels. In other words, apart from knowing their professional responsibilities and organizational commitments, they need to have a sufficient understanding of the Nigeria nation, the attitudes of its citizens, its geography, history, sociological and anthropological setups, and other basic information that can foster the spirit of empathy and inclusion in the process of national development.

The deficiency of such knowledge explains why even arguments on general issues of governance are easily and arrogantly localized into ethnic or religious dimensions with the attendant consequence of dividing the people and causing confusion. Therefore, it is important for individuals, and media professionals to have the direction to support the process of national development in the way they handle situations. Based on correct knowledge and conviction, the journalism profession can easily provide a strong sense of direction and real determination to facilitate the development of their communities and country to greatness based on ethical reasoning and behaviour.

In addition, each journalist should be able to encourage his/her organization to operate on strict ethical standards and focus on programmes and policies that advance cohesion and development. The media should promote ethically oriented interactions among the diverse people of the country to help reduce the level of misconceptions about people's identity and existence in a country. The more people interact with one another, the more educated they become about others and other cultures and the better for national cohesion and integration.

Media Ethics and National Development: Issues and Perspectives

Since ethical issues are supposed to be enforced personally by the individual or media practitioners, it becomes a bit easy for personnel to go against professional ethics in one way or the other. More so, the fact that ethical issues are not necessarily liable under the law like legal issues, journalists tend to violate the ethics of the profession either for individual interest, religious or ethnic interest. Adherence to professional media ethics started becoming a problem right from the inception of the profession itself. According to Agbaje (1992, p. 42), "practitioners included the commercially frustrated local elites driven out of business by unfair competition from European monopolists, the unemployed, those sacked from jobs in ailing European firms, dropouts from other professions" constituted the staff of Nigerian journalism during the colonial and shortly after the colonial period. Therefore, the forerunners of the journalism profession, apart from the fact that they lacked the basic educational prerequisites, did not know or even see the job as a profession. Early

practitioners went into the profession either to make ends meet or to obtain a meal ticket. According to Burra and Ibrahim (2016), this perception continued even after independence in 1960.

Despite the inchoate challenges that confronted journalism during and immediately after colonialism, modern-day media practitioners are to follow or adhere to the ethical standards of objectivity, neutrality, impartiality, and most importantly non-acceptance of gratification. Journalists are to balance stories and report them objectively without any form of ethnic, religious, or personal sentiments no matter who is involved in the event. The importance of objective media reportage is underscored by the fact that policymakers often lean toward making sound decisions on public policy. Objective reportage also helps the security echelon to frame security policies that help in containing developments that pose a threat to national security. Therefore, media practitioners are to remain highly professional and reject any form of gratification because this may affect the objectivity of their reportage. The media are not to give a favourable report to certain stories because it affects a certain group of people nor are they supposed to be culpable in killing important stories because it does not affect a certain area.

According to Oyeyinka (2013), media ownership in the African context especially in Nigeria is a mixture of both private and government ownership. Their influences on the activities of the media are unarguably profound because he who pays the piper dictates the tune. Ownership and control influence could disallow media practitioners to be objective and fearless in their reporting. Dan-Agbese (1995) contends that no publication, no matter how independent it may claim to be, can escape servicing certain stakes either knowingly or unknowingly. This interest may be commercial, political, communal, tribal, or even religious. The consequence is that the dissemination of news could evoke witting and unwitting interest articulation.

While appreciating the impact of the Nigerian media on the emancipation of the people from the iron grip of the colonialists, the media is portrayed as societal agents of dissemination of information by which people shape their opinions and ideals, and are expected to operate within the purview of its ethical code; have been criticized for falling below societal expectations which Adeyemi (2013) termed the seven deadly sins of the media.

Corruption in the media circle in Nigeria is manifest in the “brown envelope” syndrome among media practitioners. Generally, the brown envelope is a monetary bribe handed out to a person to put pressure to do what the bribe giver wants. It is any form of gratification a journalist receives to cover an event, which may influence the judgment of a journalist. The event may be a press conference, an interview of any sort, a workshop, or an impromptu or organized briefing. The coinage “brown envelope” evokes the idea of criminality in the mind of right-thinking persons (Adeyemi, 2013). This nomenclature is regarded because it is derived from the underworld business of wrapping wares in business envelopes (Oyeyinka, 2013). According to Obianigwe (2009), the term “brown envelope” is also used in some African and Asian countries. The broad term that perfectly covers the practice is “envelope journalism” which referred to red envelope journalism, white envelope journalism, etcetera (Obianigwe, 2009). More recently, however, the term “ATM journalism” is becoming popular in society and the term indicates the change to electronic transfer of bribes into journalists' bank accounts.

A study conducted by Adeyemi (2013), shows that media organizations in Nigeria cannot be absolved from blame regarding corruption in the media because some of them do not treat staff welfare with the seriousness it deserves. In a situation where staff is paid miserable salaries that do not come regularly, this sort of situation keeps journalists under constant financial pressure. Thus, media organizations do not frown at various forms of corrupt practices in the media, which contributes to underdevelopment in Nigeria.

The Nigerian press according to Chikaire (2016) is polarized along regional, sectarian or ethnic lines with every side protecting and supporting their kith and kin. He goes on to say that in the coverage of conflict, there is recklessness and partisanship on the part of the press instead of restraint and responsible reporting of events. Ganiyu (2009) also noted that the Nigerian press has not played any vital role in resolving politically-motivated conflicts because journalists are either on one side of the conflict or the other. According to Sobowale (1995), the audience of the media also influences what the media covers. The state of literature discovered that there is no difference in the number of news carried out by both government and private newspapers, but the former hardly publish news that will tarnish the image of the government. This can also be applied to conflict situations like Niger Delta and Boko Haram. Ugbojah (1980) also buttressed the fact that geographical location is the most paramount factor in moulding a newspaper's opinion and reportage, especially in Nigeria. The media only focused on casualties. Miwa (1999) also argues that if geographical expression and speculations affect a newspaper's position even on volatile national issues such as ethnic and religious strife, then their roles become suspicious.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper discussed some of the conceptual and theoretical issues which have underpinned the concerns and the discussion of media ethics and power in multicultural Nigeria. The general assumption is that the media and journalistic practices do not exist in isolation or a social vacuum but in the context of the limitations of the social structure. These values and assumptions in one way or the other form the basis of society's expectations of the media. The media permeate everyday experiences hence their power to structure a sense of social reality. There is a consensus in the existing literature on the power of the media to influence the perception, public opinion, and actions of government, groups, and individuals (Oso, 2018). The controversy is how to understand and explain the effect of this power on people. Therefore, when journalists and media organisations consider journalism ethics in their reportage, the result is ethical journalism. Ethical journalism is thinking journalism. It provides fair, accurate, informed, and reflective coverage of events and issues that are important to people and society. Within this context, the following recommendations are made:

1. There should be prompt payment of salaries and good working conditions for journalists, retraining and capacity building and strengthening of ethical rules.
2. Enforcement of punitive actions against erring journalists for deterrent purposes, qualification of journalists, and government resolve to allow the media to function without being encumbered.

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