

The Representation of Homelessness in the Nightly News

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Homelessness in the United States is a paradoxical reality. In a nation with the highest Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the largest economy and the highest consumption rate, there are still many who lack basic needs such as shelter, employment and food. Homelessness is not a stagnant crisis: The percentage of homeless in the United States is increasing and every passing year millions of people and families are at risk of becoming homeless.¹ Although the homeless are a difficult population to measure, it is estimated that up to 800,000 people on any given night – and up to three million people per year – are homeless in the United States.² Furthermore, a phone survey conducted by Link in the *American Journal of Public Health* showed that 7.4 percent of all Americans have, at one point in their lives, experienced street homelessness.³ Clearly, homelessness is a serious crisis in the United States. How then, is this crisis communicated to the public?

The ABC, CBS and NBC nightly news broadcasts are among the most watched news programs in the United States. Prior to 2001, at least 20 to 25 million people watched ABC, CBS or NBC News on a regular basis.⁴ The prominence of these networks was further exemplified in 2001, when at least 80 million Americans tuned into one of the three major networks in the wake of 9/11.⁵ In an interview, Tom Brokaw, former anchor for NBC Nightly News, said, “I think our role still is to do as much as possible to give people at the end of their day a snapshot of their world.”⁶ Similarly, a former president of NBC described the ability of television to “transmit experience.”⁷ In light of the self-described role of the nightly news, I pose the following questions: Are the American homeless represented in this “snapshot” of the world? And if so, how well are they represented?

Background

Previous scholarship on issues of homelessness is limited. Ralph Nunez wrote, “Homelessness remains one of the most misunderstood and least documented social policy issues of our time.”⁸ Homelessness commonly is considered an urban problem limited to transient men, but this is simply not the case. Data produced by the U.S. Conference of Mayors demonstrate that the fastest growing population of homeless is not transient men but families with children.⁹ Nunez argued that the absence of information about homelessness, and particularly homeless families, “has led to a crisis of policy in the dark.”¹⁰ In an attempt to improve public policy toward homelessness, Nunez examined the demographics of homeless families by conducting interviews with 777 homeless parents from various shelters in ten different cities across the United States. Some of the common trends he identified in his study were: a dominance of single mothers with two to three children, an over-representation of black families as compared to white families and a high percentage (79 percentage) of unemployment.¹¹ Nunez emphasized that in order for the United States to develop a realistic solution to homelessness, people must first study the problem and attempt to understand it.

Descriptive research is important for developing practical policy, but the media is equally important in defining a public agenda. Bernard Cohen wrote, “The press may not be successful in telling us what to think but is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about.”¹² Wanta, Golan and Lee tested this hypothesis in their empirical study, “Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of

Foreign Nations.” In order to measure the ability of the nightly news to set a public agenda, they juxtaposed data from the Vanderbilt News Archive and a public opinion poll that asked people to rate how they felt about various countries on a scale from 1 to 100. Their data demonstrated that the more media stories there were about a country, the more likely people viewed that country as “vital to U.S. interest.”¹³ Wanta, Golan and Lee’s findings were statistically significant and demonstrated the media’s ability to shape public perception. The agenda-setting capability of the media provides substantial reason to examine who has access to the media, and who does not; which interest groups are represented in the media and which are not; and whether or not there is an identifiable bias in the issues and interest groups represented in the media.

Historically, the media has not represented all issues and viewpoints evenly, as E. E. Schattschneider wrote, “[the media] sings with a strong upper class accent.”¹⁴ Lucig H. Danielian and Benjamin I. Page pursued the concept of class bias in the nightly news in an article titled, “The Heavenly Chorus: Interest Group Voices on the TV News.” Danielian and Page asked, “Do bias of a serious and systemic sort affect which voices are heard in public debate?”¹⁵ In order to test their question, they used data from the Vanderbilt News Archive to measure the probability of representation of different interest groups in the media. The study revealed that certain interest groups were more likely to be used as news sources than others. For example, they found that corporations as well as wealthy interest groups were more likely to be represented by the media than labor unions and resource-poor groups. From their findings, Danielian and Page concluded, “It is obvious that the vast majority of those who speak on TV news – even those who speak for workers, the poor or minorities – do belong to the middle, upper-middle or upper

class.”¹⁶ Thus, empirical evidence suggests that interest groups do not have equal access to representation in the media; rather, the media significantly favors wealthy groups.

This literature is essential to inquiring into the representation of homelessness in the nightly news. Nunez’s research demonstrates that homelessness is a grossly misunderstood phenomenon that affects people all over the United States, while Wanta, Golan and Lee’s work demonstrates the agenda-setting capability of the nightly news. Finally, Danielian and Page document the class bias in the nightly news, providing statistical precedence to my inquiry.

Based on the above literature, I argue that homelessness is underrepresented in the news. Based on the actions of politicians in cities like New York and San Francisco that have implemented laws restricting panhandling and sleeping in public areas as a means to push homelessness out of the cities and out of sight, I suggest that the underrepresentation of homelessness on the nightly news demonstrates that Americans have pushed the homeless to the peripheries of their collective consciousness just as they have pushed them to the peripheries of their cities.

Methodology

In my research on the representation of homelessness in the nightly news, I used the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive.¹⁷ The Vanderbilt database provides detailed abstracts for the network newscasts and is a highly respected and utilized source for scholarly research on the network news. Since my research targets overall coverage and potential differences between networks, I included the nightly newscasts for all three major networks – ABC, NBC and CBS – from 1981 to 2005. I omitted special programs,

as well as all FOX News and CNN reports. There is a general consensus on the word “homelessness” to signify the condition of those who regularly lack shelter as a result of poverty.¹⁸ Thus, I used the search term “homelessness” to identify stories. The term “homeless” also signifies an individual who lacks shelter, but does not necessarily signify the condition of homelessness as a result of poverty. Thus, when the term “homeless” is searched in the Vanderbilt Archive, the news stories generated disproportionately describe individuals left homeless by natural disasters. To focus on the condition of homelessness as a result of poverty, I chose to limit my search to the term “homelessness.” It is important to note that there were a few additional programs found under the search “homeless” that dealt with issues of poverty that are not covered in this report. My keyword selection, however, has the virtue of providing an objective sample of news coverage of homelessness that is not weighted towards those left temporarily homeless by a natural disaster. My search for “homelessness” generated a population of 60 stories.

Once I identified the sample, I engaged in content analysis to determine the nature of the coverage. First, I calculated how many seconds each network devoted to issues of homelessness per year, from 1981 to 2005. Second, I used the abstracts of the news programs to divide the shows into different thematic categories. These categories included natural disaster, families, veterans, youth, health, international and general issues. The final category, “general issues,” included hunger, affordable housing and unemployment. I grouped these issues together because they were commonly grouped together in the news abstracts. In addition to separating the news stories into various categories, I coded both keywords and phrases in the abstracts. The keywords and

phrases included “increase in homelessness,” “benefit/help,” “national problem” and “ban/remove.” These words and phrases provided lucid clues as to how the issue of homelessness is framed and communicated to the public by the different networks. Finally, I coded the participants who spoke during the program. The list of participants included police, politician, advocate, homeless person and oppositional voice. The category of advocates included people who worked directly with issues of homelessness and spoke on behalf of the homeless. The “oppositional voice” category included a wide range of people, from citizens to professionals. The most common sentiments expressed by people in the latter category were that the homeless should not be allowed to sleep in public places or beg for money. Thus, the oppositional voice category was generally opposed to the presence of the homeless in cities or towns.

Results

The CBS, NBC and ABC nightly news programs remained generally consistent in their representation of homelessness. Table 1 shows the number of seconds that individual networks devoted to homelessness per year and suggests that the networks generally devoted an equal amount of time to the crisis. ABC spent 1000 seconds, or 16.6 minutes, less than the other two networks. However, ABC devoted more time to homelessness on the special programs I excluded from this study. Therefore, even though it appears the representation is unequal, it is not significant. What is significant, however, is that between the years 2000 and 2004 there has been virtually no coverage of homelessness. In addition, the main coverage for two of the three networks in 2005 pertained to natural disasters, rather than issues of hunger, unemployment and/or lack of

sufficient housing. These results are striking, especially in juxtaposition to the data from the U.S. Conference of Mayors showing there had been a consistent yearly increase for request of shelter support and emergency food over the same period.¹⁹ Thus, while the crises of homelessness and abject poverty increased, nightly news coverage thereof decreased.

Table 1. Seconds devoted to homelessness per year

| Newscast Year | ABC | NBC | CBS |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| 2005 | 290 | 190 | 700 |
| 2004 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2003 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 2002 | 0 | 150 | 0 |
| 2001 | 160 | 0 | 0 |
| 2000 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1999 | 180 | 350 | 400 |
| 1998 | 0 | 140 | 200 |
| 1997 | 0 | 50 | 0 |
| 1996 | 20 | 260 | 0 |
| 1995 | 0 | 410 | 0 |
| 1994 | 240 | 200 | 140 |
| 1993 | 280 | 520 | 140 |
| 1992 | 280 | 210 | 280 |
| 1991 | 380 | 470 | 0 |
| 1990 | 420 | 440 | 710 |
| 1989 | 0 | 430 | 940 |
| 1988 | 90 | 180 | 490 |
| 1987 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1986 | 0 | 150 | 140 |
| 1985 | 810 | 230 | 0 |
| 1984 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1983 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 1982 | 0 | 140 | 290 |
| 1981 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total Seconds | 3150 | 4520 | 4430 |

Table 1 also shows that the bulk of time devoted to homelessness was between the years 1988 and 1994. During this time, it was common for a network to devote between

200 to 700 seconds, or 3.3 to 11.6 minutes, per year to homelessness. Comparatively, the CBS, NBC and ABC nightly news programs devoted well over 378 minutes, or 6.3 hours to crime in 1988 alone.²⁰ Thus, while the nightly news has devoted a significant amount of time to crime, it has hardly acknowledged the crisis of homelessness. Although the consistent representation of homelessness between 1988 and 1994 could be considered positive, the brevity of coverage suggests the news was leading the public to believe that homelessness was not a serious problem. Overall, in the last 25-year period studied, these networks spent on average 4033.3 seconds or 67.2 minutes on homeless issues. Clearly, the network news channels understated the condition of homelessness in America.

Table 2 presents the distribution of people who were quoted in the newscasts. Data from NBC and CBS present a similar quantity of voices, while ABC lags behind significantly. This lag is most likely attributable to the fact that ABC had more than 1000 fewer seconds devoted to homelessness. The distribution of quotes demonstrates a relatively balanced presentation of homelessness issues: homeless people and advocates were quoted more often than oppositional voices. The greater presence of advocate voices versus homeless voices supports Danielian and Page's findings that wealthy people, even when they speak on behalf of the poor, are more likely to be used as a news source than poor people. The fact that more politicians than police were quoted suggest that homelessness was not framed as a criminal problem, but rather as a political and public crisis.

Table 2. Number of people quoted in the newscasts

| Who Spoke? | ABC | NBC | CBS | Total |
|-------------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
| Police | 0 | 2 | 0 | 2 |
| Politician | 6 | 13 | 12 | 31 |
| Advocate | 17 | 21 | 26 | 64 |

| | | | | |
|---------------------|----|----|----|-----|
| Homeless Person | 12 | 24 | 17 | 53 |
| Oppositional Voices | 19 | 30 | 42 | 91 |
| Total Number | 54 | 90 | 97 | 241 |

Table 3 is a collection of phrases that, in some cases, were repeated through a series of newscasts. This table shows that the most common phrase was “Increase in homelessness.” The common use of this phrase suggests that that the newscasts accurately represent homelessness as a crisis that is increasing. Two other popular phrases on the newscast were “national problem” and “ban/remove.” All three phrases were used at least once on each network. This commonality suggests that there was a level of consistency between different networks in their representation of homelessness. Furthermore, the absence of the word “solution” in newscasts suggests that the nightly news was more in the business of presenting problems as oppose to presenting individuals who are offering solutions.

Statistics on homelessness demonstrate that homelessness is not isolated to any one geographic area; rather, it is a nationwide problem. Even though homelessness is nationwide, Table 3 shows that in the 25-year period studied, homelessness has been cited as a “national problem” only nine times. In many ways, the use of the phrase “national problem” is a contradiction in terms: if the network news stations were to adequately represent homelessness as a national problem rather than just rhetorically labeling it as one, the networks would have framed homelessness as a national problem more than nine times in 25 years.

Table 3. Phrases and key words in newscast

| Mentioned Phrase | ABC | NBC | CBS | Total |
|-------------------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|
|-------------------------|------------|------------|------------|--------------|

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|----|
| Solution to homelessness | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Increase in homelessness | 2 | 7 | 4 | 13 |
| Benefit/help | 0 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| National Problem | 1 | 5 | 3 | 9 |
| Ban/Remove | 2 | 5 | 1 | 8 |

Table 4 highlights the different frames in which homelessness was presented. The most common frame was “general issues.” Again, this included issues such as lack of food, lack of shelter and unemployment. The prominence of this frame, as opposed to the others, suggests the nightly news generally grouped the conditions of homelessness together and presented them as one problem, rather than discussing the different issues separately. This presentation provides a more holistic image of homelessness, but it does not adequately account for the diverse and complex components of the crises.

The networks generally devote more time to segments on natural disasters than segments on homelessness: Even though there were only a few natural disaster stories in this study (less than 5), these stories occupy a considerable amount of broadcast time. The tsunami in Indonesia came at the end of 2004 and then in 2005 the United States experienced Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. These disasters were devastating events that left millions of people homeless. Thus, especially in 2005, natural disasters were a dominant frame in which issues of homelessness were presented.

Table 4. Seconds devoted to various homeless issues

| Themes | ABC | NBC | CBS |
|------------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Natural Disaster | 290 | 140 | 1470 |
| International | 0 | 320 | 150 |
| Ban/Remove | 360 | 1240 | 310 |
| Youth | 180 | 110 | 140 |
| Family | 400 | 270 | 180 |
| Health | 370 | 640 | 0 |

| | | | |
|----------------|------|------|------|
| Veterans | 270 | 190 | 0 |
| General Issues | 1280 | 1610 | 2180 |
| Total Seconds | 3150 | 4520 | 4430 |

Table 4 also demonstrates the limited amount of time devoted to the most rapidly growing homeless population – homeless families. This suggests that the nightly news, via omission, did not accurately report the contemporary face of homelessness. While transient men continue to represent the most common perception of homelessness, the contemporary crisis involves families and children as well as single men.

One of the most popular themes in the newscasts was “ban/remove.” These newscasts included stories about cities attempting to remove homeless people from public spaces by banning panhandling or sleeping on public property. NBC devoted the most amount of time to this problem: 1240 seconds, or 20.6 minutes. This coverage is significant because it showed the willingness of the news to report on the homeless when they are threatened or targeted by new laws. The nightly news claims to be a “watchdog” for citizens. The news coverage of banning panhandling or sleeping in public places suggests that in some cases, the news serves as a watchdog for homeless people just as it does for renters and homeowners.

Discussion

News media has a history of overstating societal ills such as crime.²¹ Hence, it is counterintuitive that they should understate homelessness, another societal ill.

Nonetheless, this study suggests that homelessness has been grossly underrepresented in the network news. The crisis of homelessness in America is, in part, a crisis of misrepresentation and communication. Table 2 demonstrates that in the 25-year period

studied, across three networks, a total of 53 homeless people had been quoted on the nightly news. The absence of homeless voices in the media suggests that the homeless have been excluded from the national discourse. Arguably, the crisis of homelessness continues to deteriorate because the crisis is not adequately communicated.

Why do the media overstate crime and understate homelessness? In his book, “Governing with the News,” Timothy Cook argues that there is a structural bias in the media: The media favors stories that fit a narrative structure and involve officials as sources or subjects. Cook writes, “For any news medium, whatever the source does must be packaged into a narrative. Not only must the story have protagonists and antagonists in conflict, but the sources’ actions must move the story along to a new episode.”²²

Crime fits this narrative structure very well. First is the criminal act, second the apprehension of the suspect, then the trial, the sentencing and finally the release. There is a beginning and an end; there is a climax and a dénouement. The victim is the clear protagonist while the perpetrator is the antagonist. Furthermore, there are a series of officials or “authoritative sources,” that appear throughout the process of a crime. For example, there is the arresting officer, the police chief, the lawyers, the judge, etc. Thus, crime may be overrepresented in the media because it fits the implicit biased structure of the media.

Homelessness, on the other hand, is an amorphous problem – there is no definitive beginning or end to it, nor does it present a clear conflict. It is unlikely that a story on homelessness will, as Cook says, “move the story along to a new episode.” For example, the news can report on the condition of homelessness in urban or rural America, but chances are the condition will continue just the same in the days to follow. Thus, the

story does not have any movement toward a new episode and, for this reason, may not even be considered a story. Moreover, there is no clear opposition to homelessness. Some people are opposed to the presence of homeless people in the streets, but it is hard to imagine that any person believes that a percentage of the population deserves to live in abject poverty without any assistance or support. In the absence of a defined narrative structure, it is possible that homelessness is not considered news.

The structural bias of the media may also explain why the news favors issues like natural disasters. Natural disasters are extraordinarily tragic events that can devastate communities and leave millions homeless. This form of homelessness, however, is an exceptional state: homelessness that is usually ameliorated by private, federal and international aid. In the case of a natural disaster, the story has direction and each news report can move it to a new episode. First reporters cover the disaster, next they report the damage and, finally, they report the clean-up. Thus, the news media consistently covers natural disasters in part because they are extraordinary, but also because they fit a defined narrative structure.

The goal of the nightly news should be to inform people, or as Tom Brokaw described, “to provide a snapshot of their world.”²³ But as this study demonstrates, homelessness has been overwhelmingly left out of this snapshot. Homelessness continues to increasingly affect people and families across America; at the same time, the representation of homelessness on the nightly news has decreased. A solution to homelessness is not feasible until it becomes an acknowledged policy priority across the nation. In an age of technology and television, where the network news assists in setting a public agenda, it is essential that homelessness be recognized and adequately

represented in the nightly news. Homelessness is a national affliction, but until it is prioritized as one, a solution will not be initiated.

Media Strategies

The structure of the news has become increasingly consistent across networks and across time through institutionalization within the industry.²⁴ For this reason, it is unlikely the news will change in order to accommodate the voices of resource-poor interest groups or issues such as homelessness. However, homeless advocates or other groups could adapt specific media strategies in order to increase their access to representation in the media. Advocates should work to reframe issues in order to fit the biased structure of the media in three ways: (1) They should adapt issues and events to a narrative structure; (2) They should try to attract the support of prominent officials such as mayors, governors, state representatives and even senators; and (3) They should seek to naturalize relations with media outlets in order to gain regular access.

Presenting homelessness in narrative. There are multiple strategies for presenting issues and events as narratives. One tactic is to organize events that have an implicit narrative structure such as marches, vigils or protests. There is clear binary opposition in the structure of these events for example, the protestor versus the protested. The media is categorically drawn to conflict, making direct citizen action one of the easiest ways for citizen groups to access representation in the media. However, even though direct citizen action is a good way to attract media attention, there is no guarantee it will attract positive media attention. A protest may help raise awareness of a crisis, like the “Housing Now” march that took place in Washington D.C. in 1989. Or, it may backfire

and ostracize an advocacy group from the public. The other problem with accessing the media through direct action is the amount of energy required in planning an event and recruiting participants. Thus, citizen action may be a good way to occasionally access the media, but it is not optimal as a means to regularly generate news coverage.

Attracting the support of prominent officials. Another way to increase media attention would be to host public forums on homelessness and to invite local and national politicians to attend. For example, Preble Street Resource Center in Portland, Maine hosts candidate forums. Politicians come to these events to speak with the homeless and low-income clients and answer questions. As Cook argues, officials receive more media coverage than citizens or professionals; thus, featuring officials at public forums or events increases the potential of attracting media attention.²⁵

Naturalize relations with media outlets. Finally, it is important that advocates attempt to naturalize relations with local and national media outlets. Traditionally, resource-poor groups have had a difficult time establishing routine access to the media; nevertheless, it is important to try.²⁶ Advocates should actively release stories to the press; they should make themselves available to reporters to comment on issues and concerns; and, finally, advocates should seek out reporters who are sympathetic to their cause and who may be more willing to follow leads.

Wealthy interest groups receive more coverage in the news, in part, because they are readily available to the media. Resource-poor groups may not have the advantage of maintaining an office in Washington or producing a regular publication like some wealthy interest groups.²⁷ Hence, resource-poor groups must actively find ways to make themselves available. Advocates could seek public or private funding for a publication,

publish a blog or write articles for local publications. By firmly announcing their presence as an authority on an issue as well as engaging the public discourse, advocates will improve their chances of attracting and naturalizing a relationship with the media.

Media is an important tool for homeless advocacy. Edie Goldenberg writes, “News coverage is particularly important to resource-poor groups because they lack most of the other political resources that might enable them to be heard and affect policy directly.”²⁸ By adapting media strategies, advocates may be able to increase their access to representation in the media, help define the public agenda, engage in public discourse and, ultimately, work towards an effective solution to homelessness.

End Notes

¹ "Sodexo USA Hunger and Homelessness Survey 2004." Paper presented at the The U.S. Conference of Mayors 2005. Internet address: <http://www.usmayors.org/> (accessed November 6, 2005)

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³ Rosenheck, Robert. "Editorial: Homelessness in America." *American Journal of Public Health* 84, no. 12 (1994): 1885.

⁴ Downie JR, Leonard and Robert G. Kaiser. *The News About the News*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.

⁵ Ibid note 4

⁶ Ibid note 4

⁷ Ibid note 4

⁸ Nunez, Ralph. "A Snapshot of Family Homelessness across America." *Political Science Quarterly* 114, no. 2 (1999): 289.

⁹ Ibid note 1

¹⁰ Ibid note 8

¹¹ Ibid note 8

¹² As quoted in: Wanta, Wayne, Guy Golan, and Cheolhan Lee. "Agenda Setting and International News: Media Influence on Public Perceptions of Foreign Nations." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 81, no. 2 (2004): 364-77.

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¹³ Ibid note 12

¹⁴ Danielian, Lucig H. and Benjamin I. Page. "The Heavenly Chorus: Interest Group Voices on Tv News." *American Journal of Political Science* 38, no. 4 (1994): 1056-78.

¹⁵ Ibid note 14

¹⁶ Ibid note 14

¹⁷ Vanderbilt Television News Archive," Vanderbilt University Collection. Internet address: <http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/> (accessed October 15, 2005)

¹⁸ U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. Internet address: <http://www.hud.gov/> (accessed October 7, 2006) and The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, codified in USCA 42 Section 11302(a) Internet address: <http://www.neisd.net/mckin/define.html> (accessed October 7, 2006)

¹⁹ Ibid note 1

²⁰ Ibid note 17

²¹ Friedland, Lewis, Mira Sotirovic, and Katie Daily. "Public Journalism and Social Capital: The Cases of Maison, Wisconsin." In *Assessing Public Journalism*, edited by Philip E. Meyers Edmund B. Lambeth, and Esther Thorson. Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1998. and McQuail, Denis. "The Influence and Effects of Mass Media." In *Mass Communication and Society*, edited by M. Gurevitch J. Curran, and J. Woolcott. New York: Sage Publications, Inc, 1979.

²² Cook, Timothy E. *Governing with the News*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.

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²³ Ibid note 4

²⁴ Ibid note 22

²⁵ Ibid note 22

²⁶ Goldenberg, Edie N. *Making the Papers*. Lexington: D.C. Heath and Company, 1975.

²⁷ Ibid note 14

²⁸ Ibid note 26

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