



Black Propaganda or Solution-Oriented Journalism? Online News Portals Frame Construction of the Post-COVID-19 Depreciation of the Cedi

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ABSTRACT

Through quantitative content analysis, the researchers deductively coded four negative and four constructive frames to examine critically how *graphic.com*; *myjoyonline.com*; *3news.com*, and *Ghanaweb.com* have constructed their frames on the depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi using web scraping with Python the news articles retrieve articles. The study also analyzed the extent of occurrence of the phenomenon, as well as the tones and angle of reportage during the peak of the depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi (August, September, and October 2022) using Tone Analyzer by IBM. The findings show that *graphic.com* predominantly adopted constructive variables like “concern”, “solution-oriented”, “solidarity”, and “inclusiveness”, while *myjoyonline.com*, *GhanaWeb.com*, and *3news.com* which have wide global access, and audiences reported negative frames such as “conflict”, “blame”, “denial”, and “sensationalism”. The analysis also showed that *myjoyonline.com*, *GhanaWeb.com*, and *3news.com* adopted more blame attribution, and sensationalism frames, instead of concern, solution-oriented, and solidarity frames. The findings further suggest that there were changes in frame appearance such as concern, blame, and inclusiveness at different months of the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the cedi. This study again finds that inadequate robust online media regulatory frameworks in Ghana have led to ineffective and negative web portal reportage of issues related to the economy, especially post-COVID-19 era. In conclusion, the study recommends that the National Media Commission (NMC) and other regulatory institutions put in place strict online media regulatory frameworks to guide the operations of online media, especially web portals.

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1. Introduction

The traditional media have always played a critical role in disseminating information on the state of the economy, whether in normal or crisis times (Tsfati et al., 2020). Since the beginning of the 20th century, the media have reported and framed the major economic and financial meltdowns of the 1930s and 2008, and their impacts on countries globally, especially those within the developing world with weak economic fundamentals (Mullen, 2021). The first three years of the second decade of the 21st century (2020-2023) have also seen the global economy go through some massive structural changes, mainly due to the twin global tragic events, of COVID-19 and the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Caldara et al., 2022). This time, the change in “media DNA” globally, thus from traditional media platforms to internet-oriented or alternative media platforms like web portals and social media has resulted in massive consumption of high volumes of mis /disinformation on high inflation and depreciation of the national currencies as a result of the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine on developing and import-dependent countries in Africa and Latin America (Allam et al., 2022; Parrott, 2022; Tsfati et al., 2020).

The Russian-Ukraine war and COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns have caused a lot of increase in government budget overruns and subsequent microeconomic instability mainly due to panic among the business community, especially in less and middle-income countries (Caldara et al., 2022). As industrial production, import and export restrictions were introduced by major producing countries in Europe, America, and China leading to supply shortfalls in goods and services resulting in high food inflation and depreciation of national currencies, including the Ghanaian cedi (Caldara et al., 2022; Allam et al., 2022). For up-to-date and speedy dissemination of information on the state of the economy to larger global audiences, online media platforms such as web portals were mostly preferred by news readers (Kudchadkar & Carroll, 2020; Li, 2022). Li (2022) for instance has posited that global, online readership had increased ten folds due to the Russian-Ukraine war and the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences on the international and local economies.

The perception of the audience on the effects of web portals and the adoption of news frames have very great impacts on the cognitive levels of news consumers (Mason, 2019). Scholars such as

Gravino et al.(2022); and Schulzke (2018), have also recognized that during a crisis the media is prone to adopting frames like denial, concern, solidarity, and blame attribution. For effective communication and responsible reporting of news in times of crisis, Chibuwe et al. (2022); Kotišová (2019), have suggested the inclusion of such frames in news reportage as an important journalistic tool for accessing the issues constructively and getting the anticipated impacts of government policy decisions on the general civilian population. A critical review of previous related literature on this subject has revealed that much of the themes of the related studies focused on traditional media framing and were on public health crises and the frames used were centered on “conflict” framing and neglected constructive framing which is considered important media strategy for news reports during a crisis communication like the post-COVID-19 global economic crisis as cited by Demuyakor et al. (2024), and other variables such as the depreciation of national currencies and hikes in inflations. With framing theory as the main theoretical framework, this study will focus on crisis communication and the incorporation of constructive journalism practice in the construction of frames during the crisis such as the depreciation of the cedi in Ghana. While some media and communication scholars believe the online media, the ecosystem has drastically changed how frames are constructed in crisis times, others hold a contrary view and see web portals as a foe. This study, therefore, seeks to examine critically the construction of news frames by web portals on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Ghanaian Cedi from August, September, and October 2022.

2.Review of Related Literature

2.2.Framing Theory

According to Scheufele (1999), framing refers to the process that entails coming up with aspects that are known for making them more noticeable during the communication process. The agenda-setting framing is also another stage of news, and this entails handling issues for public discourse including critical issues confronting children (Oyero, & Salawu, 2018). On issues of crisis communication, and management, different media outlets come up with different interpretations of the same event. This, in essence, directly or indirectly affected the attitude of the viewers toward Ghanaian and other African media outlets (Oyero, & Salawu, 2018). When carrying out an analysis of the various media content, an evaluation of framing is done to comprehend how media content can affect the attitude and behavior of the audience (Scheufele, & Krause, 2019).

Brüggemann (2014); Demuyakor et al. (2024) points out four major functions of framing. Framing is used to define problems, diagnose the causes of the problem, find a moral judgment, and recommend remedies to the problems (Brüggemann, 2014; Demuyakor et al., 2024). Chong and Druckman (2007) also define framing as a process that involves stressing the significance of various topics. On their part, Wanta, and Hu, (1993) came up with two phases of framing. They include frame-setting and frame-building. As far as the media is concerned, several researchers have pointed out that the stage of frame-building entails coming together from different teams like journalists, editors, audiences, and politicians (Demuyakor et al., 2024; Scheufele, 1999). It is during these joint efforts that different players influence selects and produce a given frame (Hamborg, et al., 2019). For example, journalists are compelled to write texts based on personal preferences and how they interpret them. Editors on the other hand delete and modify the contents according to their understanding and preferences (Bunce, 2016, p. 28).

2.3. Constructive Journalism and Crisis Communication

According to Constructive Institute's, 2022 report, "solution-oriented", "action-oriented", "role-oriented" or constructive journalism is anchored on giving all-round, and objective positions on prevailing issues up for discussion in both traditional and electronic media platforms. Media reportage should inspire solutions and an assessment of the impact of the crisis, rather than instead of focusing on reporting the problems only. Citizens approach and actions are transformed positively when the news stories are constructed well. With media framing of the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Ghanaian Cedi, crisis communication, and Constructive Journalism are adopted to analyze how the sampled news portals provided in-depth and comprehensive coverage of the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Cedi. During a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic, constructive journalism should be an avenue for the media to make duty-bearers, and political office-holders accountable (Herfroy-Mischler, & Friedman, 2020). This approach to journalism provides the media and journalist the opportunity to play their traditional watchdog roles well. Crisis communication and objectivity of the media ecosystem are based on "concern", "solution-oriented", "solidarity", and "inclusiveness", and help reduce, fear and panic, anxiety, and depression. Hence, constructive journalism is the preferred way of crisis communication to lower anxiety, and depression of the public (Scheufele, 1999). Furthermore, during crisis times, constrictive

journalism has a very positive impact on perceptions and the general well-being of the civilian population.

This study aims to examine the specific frame construction employed by four web portals at different times in reporting the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi. The operationalization of the frames for this study was coded based on how various sub-groups and descriptions (concern, solution-oriented, solidarity, inclusiveness, blame, conflict, denial, and sensationalism) in media studies literature. The data collected was analyzed through quantitative content analysis. Based on the gaps from the theoretical foundation and reviewed literature, the following research questions (RQs) guide this study;

2.4. Research Questions

RQ 1: What specific news frames were constructed on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the cedi by the articles on the news portals?

RQ 2: What is the dominant monthly frequency of web portal frame construction on the Cedi Depreciation?

RQ 3: Which website dominated the use of negative and constructive frame variables in reporting news on post-COVID-19 depreciation of the cedi?

3. Materials and Methods

3.2. Sampling

To find the desired answers to the research questions, the researchers adopted a quantitative content analysis was used for the data analysis. Site scraping with *Python* data mining was used to retrieve news on the depreciation of the cedi from the four web portals (graphic.com, myjoyonline.com, GhanaWeb.com, and 3news.com) reportage of the depreciation of the cedi. The selection of these web portals was a result of their large audience as well as the national and global coverage enjoyed by these media outlets. Furthermore, Asante (2023), conducted a study sponsored by the Media Foundation for West Africa and reported that the Multimedia Group, Media General, The Graphic Communication Group, Despite Media, Angel Broadcasting Network, and GhanaWeb B.V., command about 85% of both electronic and traditional media audiences in Ghana. Also, this research adapted web portals due to the ease in access and availability of mobile applications to

access news with ease regardless of time and place. Furthermore, August, September, and October 2022 were the peak of the post-COVID-19-cedi depreciation, the total number of online news items searched on the challenges of the economy (cedi depreciation) was ($N=90$). The periods for the data depict the pre-COVID-19 news on the economy and the news during the peak or post-COVID-19. Further data curing resulted in the removal of 30 news items, which were not related to the subject under consideration and the final news sample for the study was ($n=60$) articles.

3.3.Coding Procedure

Based on the reviewed literature, and the research questions the researchers designed the coding on online news media construction of frames of the depreciation of the cedi. To avoid interpreting the text of the news stories differently and to ensure the reliability of the study, the coding and recording of the text of the news stories were done by the researchers. The coding was done in two ways, the first coding contains data on headlines, publication date, name of the web portals, and the reporter or editor. The second coding was on the categorization and identifications of news frames (negative and constructive frames). Hermans and Gyldensted's (2019) classification and definition of constructive frames guided the authors to identify the main themes and keywords of constructive frames (concern, solution-oriented, solidarity, and inclusiveness). The following characteristics of the negative frames such as conflict, blame, denial, and sensationalism as prescribed by Baden et al. (2019); Bolsen et al. (2022); Hamborg et al. (2019); van der Meer and Hameleers (2022) were used. Every paragraph of the text of the news story was assigned one frame and counted only once. For instance, where a paragraph contains both "conflict" and blame frames, the researchers coded it distinctively.

As proposed by O'Connor & Joffe (2020), the coder's sample (60 news items) for the double rate was 10.5%. The reliability of the intercoder was arrived at by adopting Krippendorff's Alpha and the agreed percentage as a guide (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020; Weyant, 2022). Through the use of *Python*, the content posted and the keywords or variables on the various websites were automatically inputted into the dataset. The variables included captions of the news items published, the information on the content of the news item, likes on pin social media handles, and sharing of the news items with other consumers. Negative frames agreement is ($\alpha=.94$, 96%). For news items reported on the websites, the coders explained if negative content reported was related depreciation of the Ghana Cedi with

inclusions and exclusions coded (1 and 0) respectively. This article also adopted data processing tools like Tone Analyzer by IBM and NRCLEX which is a word-based approach to analyzing the emotions in the frames. The reliability of the intercoder was arrived at by adopting Krippendorff's Alpha and the agreed percentage (Weyant, 2022). Finally, the keywords or variables retrieved from the news portals were automatically inputted into the dataset by *Tone Analyzer by IBM* for analysis. The coders explained negative news reported as content that was related to the depreciation of the Ghana cedi with inclusions and exclusions coded (1 and 0) respectively.

4. Findings and Analysis

The analysis of the results was done based on the various themes in the research questions. The specific frame construction of the web portals was analyzed based on the patterns of the samples identified in the published news stories on the depreciation of the cedi in the sampled websites. The analysis also compared the timing for was also analyzed. This enabled the researchers to have much insight into how negative and constructive frames were constructed at the peak of the depreciation of the Cedi.

4.2.RQ 1: The specific news frames were constructed on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the cedi by the articles on the news portals

The analysis of the individual news articles showed that negative reportage on critical issues like the depreciation of the cedi sends panic to audiences. **Figure 1** depicts the findings of the coding done on all (n=60) on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the cedi on the sampled web portals (graphic.com, myjoyonline.com, GhanaWeb.com, and 3news.com). The percentages of analysis on the specific frame constructions showed clearly that the sampled web portals reported stories on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of cedi generally in the negative frame (62 %). Headlines frames like "conflict", "sensationalism", "blames", and "denial", dominated the reportage, while, constructive frames with attributes like "future-oriented", and "solution-centered" frames were just (38%). The findings from this study are in line with previous studies by AlAshry. (2021) on news media reportage on COVID-19 and conclude that in times of crisis, turns out to be the first source of news which results in negative reports.

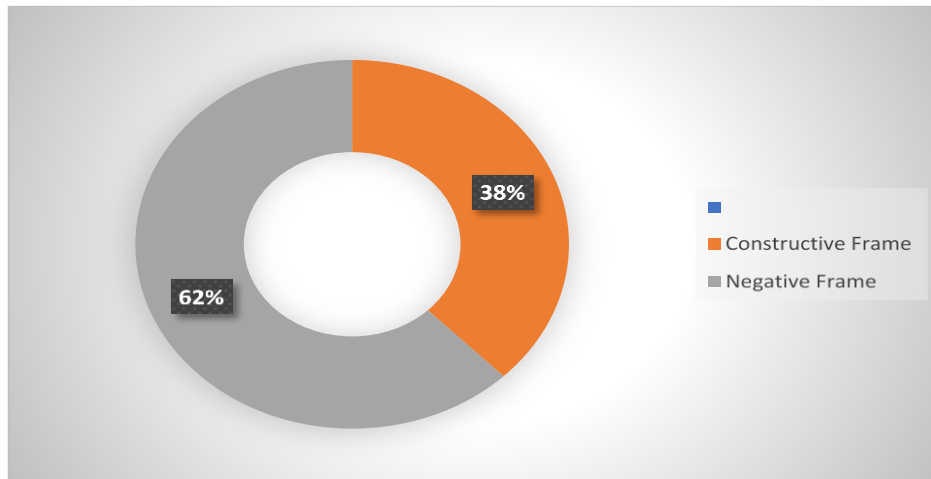


Figure 1: Specific frame construction on the text of news articles (Coding frames, n=60).

Note: Articles on the depreciation of the cedi are the unit of analysis. The appearance and percentage of occurrence in each news articles were analyzed based on the frame types, variables of frames, and the total number of news articles.

4.3. RQ 2: Monthly frequency of web portal frame construction on the Cedi Depreciation

The analysis of the web portal articles on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi showed an interesting trajectory for the three months sampled for this study. The news articles for August for Instanced centered mainly on the consequences of pre-COVID-19 government policies of excessive spending on the 2020 general elections, the impacts of credit agencies downgrading Ghana's economic outlook, and the lack of foreign investor confidence in doing business in Ghana. The uncertainties of both COVID-19 and the Russian-Ukraine war on the domestic currency led to gross panic among the business community and the civilian general population. Though the news articles blame internal and external forces for the depreciation of the cedi, the language and tone were too sensational and full of blame attribution, denial, and reported in negative frames. In times of crisis, it is expected that such news articles on the sampled web portals resort to solidarity, concern, and solution-oriented frames that could give hope to the general public on the pragmatic steps adopted by the government to stabilize the local currency. These findings are in line with previous studies by Demuyakor et al. (2024), and Hermans & Gyldensted (2019), who conclude that the kind of frame characteristics adopted for news reportage helps in evaluating audience levels of depression, and anxiety, as well as fear and panic during crisis times. An analysis of news articles

for August recorded 61.1% negative frames and 38.9% constructive frames. For September, and October 2022 the appearance and sensationalism in the news reported in terms of the construction of frames had similar characteristics as those in August 2022, except that the issues focused more on the extravagant lifestyles of government officials. The over-dependent on exported commodities and excessive teste of foreign goods and services also featured in those articles for September and October 2022 for the depreciation of the cedi. The weak fundamentals of the post-independent economy was also featured in the web portal news stories. October had the highest in terms of construction

of frames on the depreciation of the cedi, thus 70.0% negative frames and 30.0% constructive frames. The frame construction for September 2022 was 57.6% negative frames and 43.4% constructive frames. See **Figure 2** for a detailed analysis;

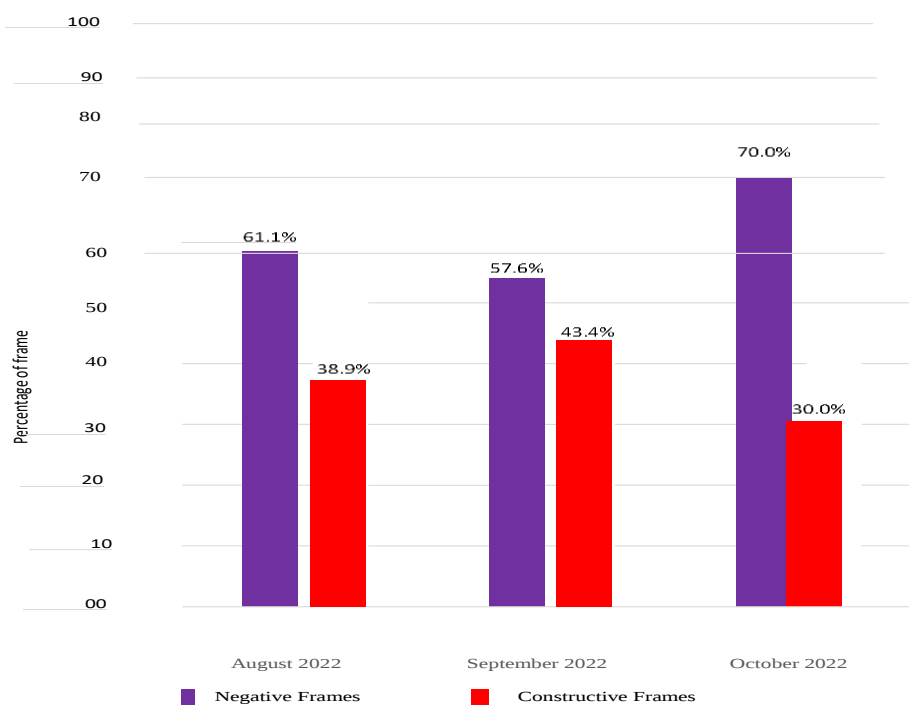


Figure 2: Monthly Frames Construction news Portals (Coding frames, n=60)

4.4.RQ 3: The Dominant news portals and Constructive/Negative frame variables.

The research also wanted to understand which web portal dominated in the use of constructive and negative frames, based on its appearance in the text of the article on the depreciation of the cedi. The objective of this analysis is to understand the frame construction characteristics and the motivation behind such an approach to journalism practice in times of crisis like the depreciation of

the cedi. To help carry out analysis on both negative and constructive frames, the appearance of the constructs or variables in the text of the articles as proposed by Hermans and Gyldensted (2019), McIntyre (2019), and the definition of both constructive and negative frames were used as the guide. The constructive frames constitute news reporting from such angles as; empowerment, concern, solution-oriented, solidarity, diversity, and inconclusiveness. The variables for negative frames also included; recklessness, sensationalism, attribution of blame, consequence, conflict, denial, and the use of them, instead of us. See **Figure 3** for a detailed analysis.

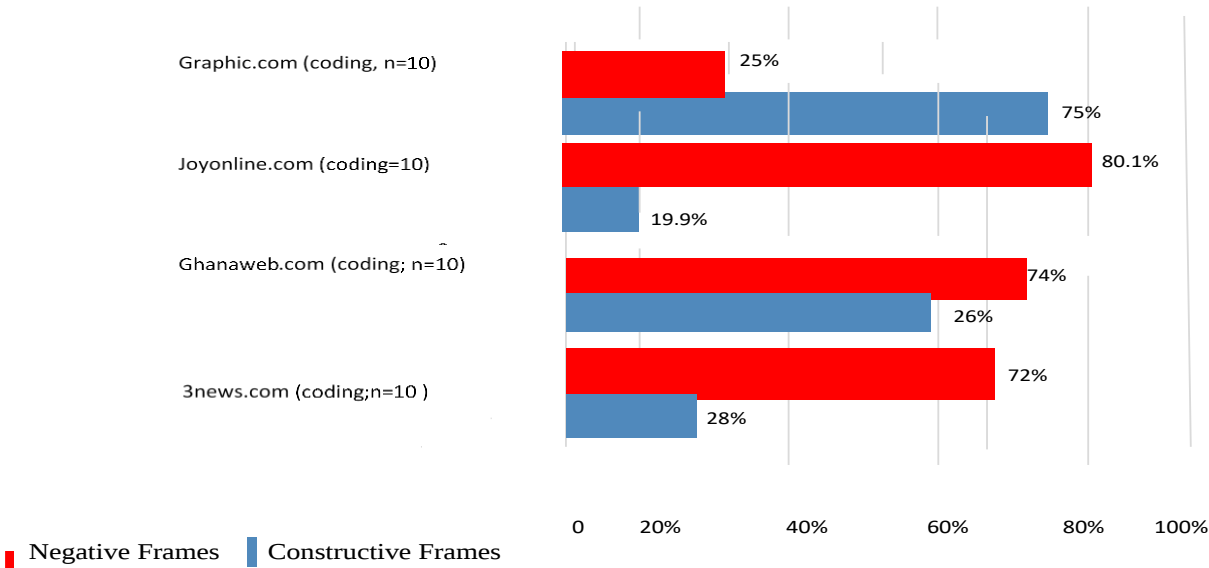


Figure 3: Dominant news portals that used Constructive/Negative frame variables (Coding frames, n=10)

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aims to examine the specific frame construction employed by four web portals at different times in reporting the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Ghanaian cedi. The following is the summary of the findings from the quantitative content analysis of the sampled 60 news articles indicating that three out of four news portals had negative frames construction on the depreciation of the cedi. Generally, the frame construction of the text of the news portals shows that there is no balanced reportage on the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Ghana cedi. The source of information credibility and the tone were not neutral in portraying the reality of the cedi depreciation. For instance, it is expected that accurate data on depreciation, from official sources, could be used in the text of the news articles, as cited by Demuyakor et al. (2024). It is also very clear from the findings

of this study that, myjoyonline.com, GhanaWeb.com, and 3news.com adapted negative frame variables such as blame, conflict, and sensational tones and language in their reportage on the depreciation of the cedi.

In a crisis, it is expected that news reportage in the media relies on the constructive frame which is aimed at showing concern, solidarity, and finding alternative solutions to the crisis at stake (Hermans & Gyldensted (2019). Based on the analysis of how news is reported on our media outlets in Ghana, the rhetorical question is; “are online news portals engaging in persuasion, propaganda, or practicing solution-oriented journalism? The study also concludes that many of the news articles published on the sampled portals did not focus on concern frames. The attention was so much on how the government was solely blamed for the currency depreciation. Though the media is playing a watchdog role in informing the citizens, frames of concern were not so much highlighted in the text of the news articles. The results from this conclude that the news portals' reportage on the depreciation of the cedi was generally framed in the negative, then constructive frames.

The findings further suggest that there were changes in frame appearance and construction at different months of the post-COVID-19 depreciation of the Cedi. With frame theory as the underpinning theoretical basis, the findings from this study make some additions to the frame construction of news stories from emerging countries where literature on framing for journalism practice is still in its fundamental stages.

In a nutshell, the purpose of this research is to critically analyze the frame construction approach of news portals and suggest possible ways to improve fair journalism practice, especially constructive news reportage in Ghana in times of crisis. The findings of the study also point to the fact that digital content regulation is needed in Ghana to guide news portals on the standard procedures for crisis communication. This study, therefore, recommends that the National Media Commission (NMC) implement strict monitoring of news portals to ensure compliance. To reduce fake news, the study further recommends the application of fact-checking before articles are uploaded for public consumption.

Publish Conflict of Interest Disclosure: John Demuyakor and Adwoa Sikayena Amankwah are both editor(s)/editorial board members of Journal of Language, Communication and Media Studies (JLACOMS) and co-authors of this article. They were excluded from editorial decision-making related to the acceptance of

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