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**Irish Print Media Portrayals of People with Traumatic Brain Injury**

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# Irish Print Media Portrayals of People with Traumatic Brain Injury.

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MA in Sociology

(Youth, Community & Social Regeneration)

Traumatic Brain Injury is the result of a sudden trauma to the head that leaves the person sustaining it either dead or with a permanent disability and impairment. Where there is relatively little social contact between people with Traumatic Brain Injury and the general public, people construct their meanings regarding them from the media. This article draws on research conducted to investigate how people with Traumatic Brain Injury were portrayed by print media in Ireland? The findings were generated vis-à-vis framing analysis of print media articles dating from the year 2010 and were contextualised using Clogston's (1989) media models of disability. The research investigated whether articles portrayed Clogston's traditional or progressive media models of disability. The paper finds that the vast majority of articles examined used the traditional model to portray people with Traumatic Brain Injury, in that the emphasis was on the impairment of the individual, rather than the civil rights of the person.

## Introduction

The silent epidemic, that is, Traumatic Brain injury (TBI) occurs as a result of a sudden trauma to the head (Headway 2012a; Mazaux and Richer 1998, p.435). I would argue that this is an apt description because firstly, a person that sustains a TBI is either left dead or with a permanent disability / impairment, and secondly, in general the public are unaware of the numbers affected. Therefore, they have little knowledge of how TBI manifests in people. According to the

Philips (2008, p.9) report, this general lack of understanding is due to a dearth of research and paucity of data on people with Traumatic Brain Injury (hereafter PWTBI) in Ireland. Therefore, where there is relatively little social contact between PWTBI and the general public, people may well construct their meanings regarding PWTBI from the media. In that context, this paper argues that people negotiate the meanings they receive from a media text depending on their prior knowledge, and their social experiences (Bullock et al. 2001, pp.229-230).

The paper is based on a textual analysis of print media articles from the year 2010. Drawing on the work of Greg Philo, the research maintains that audiences are active processors of a news text, and can decode these messages based on prior knowledge and social experiences. Furthermore, Clogston's (1990, 1993) media models of disability were used to discuss and contextualise the findings of the framing analysis in order to characterise and allow the researcher to develop a typology related to the nature of the portrayal of PWTBI.

**Traumatic Brain Injury in Ireland**

TBI and Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) are terms used interchangeably to refer to a brain injury which is not congenital and occurs after birth. TBI comes under the broad umbrella term of ABI (Lorenz 2010, p.862). However, TBI can be differentiated from other causes of ABI as it occurs due to an external force or sudden impact that causes trauma to the head, and is defined as "damage to brain tissue following traumatic injuries – resulting from road traffic accidents, falls, assaults and sports injuries" (Headway 2012a). The Philips report (2008, p.9) contends that a true reflection of the numbers affected by TBI in Ireland cannot be accounted for, thus inferences have to be drawn from international studies. For example, Headway is an Irish organisation tasked with bringing positive change to people with ABI, and they estimate that between 9,000 and

11,000 people sustain a TBI annually in Ireland (Headway 2012b). TBI is described by rehabilitative professionals as a "hidden disability" as it manifests itself internally and is not always immediately apparent (Headway 2009, p.7). Therefore, if the public are ignorant of the impairment, there is an ever-present risk that the perception of an individual with the manifestations of TBI may be one of an individual who is intoxicated, or abnormal.

**The Public Perception of People with Brain Injury**

While, there is a dearth of research which investigates public perceptions of brain injury, one such study by Linden and Crothers (2006, p.765) revealed that public perceptions were in strong disagreement with positive statements such as "people with brain injuries can be useful and productive members of society", and further illustrated negative public perceptions with statements such as "they are embarrassing, uncommunicative and less intellectually competent".

**How do these public perceptions affect PWTBI?**

Public perceptions are central to defining the social role or functions of any social group in society; PWTBI are no different. Studies like Gelech and Desjardin (2010) and Linden *et al.* (2005) have illustrated that people's lives post injuries are largely influenced by public perceptions surrounding the injury. The potential of mass media coverage "to influence people's perceptions of public affairs" would appear to be significant (Price 1989, p.198). Equally, it is acknowledged that audiences have the agency to decode media meanings depending on a person's prior knowledge and their social experiences (Bullock et al. 2001, pp.229-230).

In that context, it is important to understand agenda setting, priming and framing. Agenda setting refers to the ability of the mass media to bring issues to the attention of the public. The more salient an issue is in the public mind the

stronger its influence may be on policy. In that sense, if TBI is not part of the media agenda, it is thus not a salient issue in the public mindset. Philo (1993, p.270) states that it is important to note that this biased presentation of considerations and standards on how to judge social or political issues is purposefully constructed. An example of purposive presentation of media can be seen through agenda setting and its extension, priming. Moreover, framing goes beyond just placing things on the agenda, but rather, it encourages people to perceive reality framed within the constraints in which it has been presented. A frame is the method that leads audiences to see something in a certain light. It taps into our pre-existing beliefs and experiences.

**The significance of the media and society's relationship to PWTBI**

Hegemony is defined by Gramsci (Fenton 2007, p.16) as the dominance of society by a particular social group through the power of ideas that appear universal to subordinated social groups. This perceived universality of ideas allows the dominant groups to rule through consent rather than coercion. As the power of ideas is central to society being organized in this manner, the medium for transmission of said ideas becomes of great importance. According to Devereux (2003, pp.157-158), various forms of media, present a discourse that legitimizes the power of the dominant social group within society. Therefore, what has been illustrated by Gamson (1992) is that the lens through which these images are delivered is not neutral. When one social group is presenting ideas which favour their own social group, they must construct something to measure themselves favourably against. This process naturally creates categories of 'other', which label a member of that category as different and inferior to the dominant social group in society (Merskin 2011, pp.80-85). These categories of difference ascribe individuals who comprise these categories with unfavourable characteristics.

Clogston's (1990, 1993) research on representations of disability within the media in order to contextualise the portrayal of PWTBI identified two types of media models of disability; traditional and progressive. The traditional model portrays people with disability (PWD) as malfunctioning in a medical or economic way, thus constructing them as inferior (Burns 2011, p.73). Conversely, the progressive model deals with societal and attitudinal barriers to PWD, placing responsibility on society rather than the individual. Therefore, it aims to create a more equal and inclusive society for PWTBI.

The traditional category is subdivided into three media models; *the medical model*, *the social pathology model and the supercrip model.  The medical model* presents disability as a medical and individual problem that causes a state of dependency and passivity (Barnes 1992). Likewise, *the social pathology* model maintains that PWD "must look to the state or to society to provide them with economic support, which is considered a gift, not a right" (Haller 2000, p. 61). Moreover, Clogston (1990, 1993) developed a media model of disability entitled the *supercrip model.* Ellis (2009, p.32) argues that this model is based on human interest stories of people who have almost superhumanly overcome their disabilities. Consequently, it encourages the denial of the word "disabled" so that it "...perpetuates the cultural tendency to individualise disability and ignores any special provisions or accommodations that individuals with disabilities might need" (Ellis 2009, p.32).

The progressive model stands in opposition to the traditional models, and constructs PWTBI as a social group who are disabled not by their impairment but by society. This category is further subcategorised into *the minority / civil rights model and the cultural pluralism model.* Clogston's (1990 cited in Haller 2000, pp.61-62) *minority / civil rights model* portrays PWTBI as part of a disability community with legitimate rights, and who are members of an

oppressed group that face prejudicial views from the non-disabled. *The cultural pluralism model* sees a person's disability as part of their identity which cannot be ignored (Clogston 1990 cited in Haller 2000, pp.61-62). The presence of this model would provide images to the public which enhance the collective identity and rights of PWTBI and would generally be considered a positive representation by media organisations.

**Methodological Considerations**

In investigating the nature of the portrayal of PWTBI by Irish print media, this research analysed by way of an inductive framing analysis, eighteen newspaper articles from a range of Irish newspapers from 2010. According to Entman (1993, p.52), framing is a paradigm that goes beyond agenda setting, and is frequently used by journalists constrained by time to convey a biased meaning of social phenomena in a simplistic way. The main product of an inductive framing analysis is an overview of interpretative frame packages, which are comprised of framing devices (Van Gorp 2010, p.95). The study rejected solely constructionist explanations of a cultural stock of frames separate from the individual, where news texts are complex systems of meaningful elements received homogenously by the audience (Van Gorp 2010, pp.89-90). Instead, it opted to take into account the constructivist concept that news frames cannot be analysed independently of the interpreting individual, and where the meaning structure only "reveals itself in the interaction between the text and its reader" (Van Gorp 2010 pp.89-90). Essentially, this position took into account both the production and reception of media messages. It also allowed me to draw links between the production/reception of media, public perceptions and media portrayals. Thereafter, the study linked the framing packages to Clogston's media models of disability allowing me to develop a typology concerning the portrayal of PWTBI in Irish print media.

**Findings**

The following section delineates all eight frames identified in Figure 1 below. However, it details and discusses five framing packages that emerged from the research, and were used to portray PWTBI by print media in Ireland.

**Figure 1**
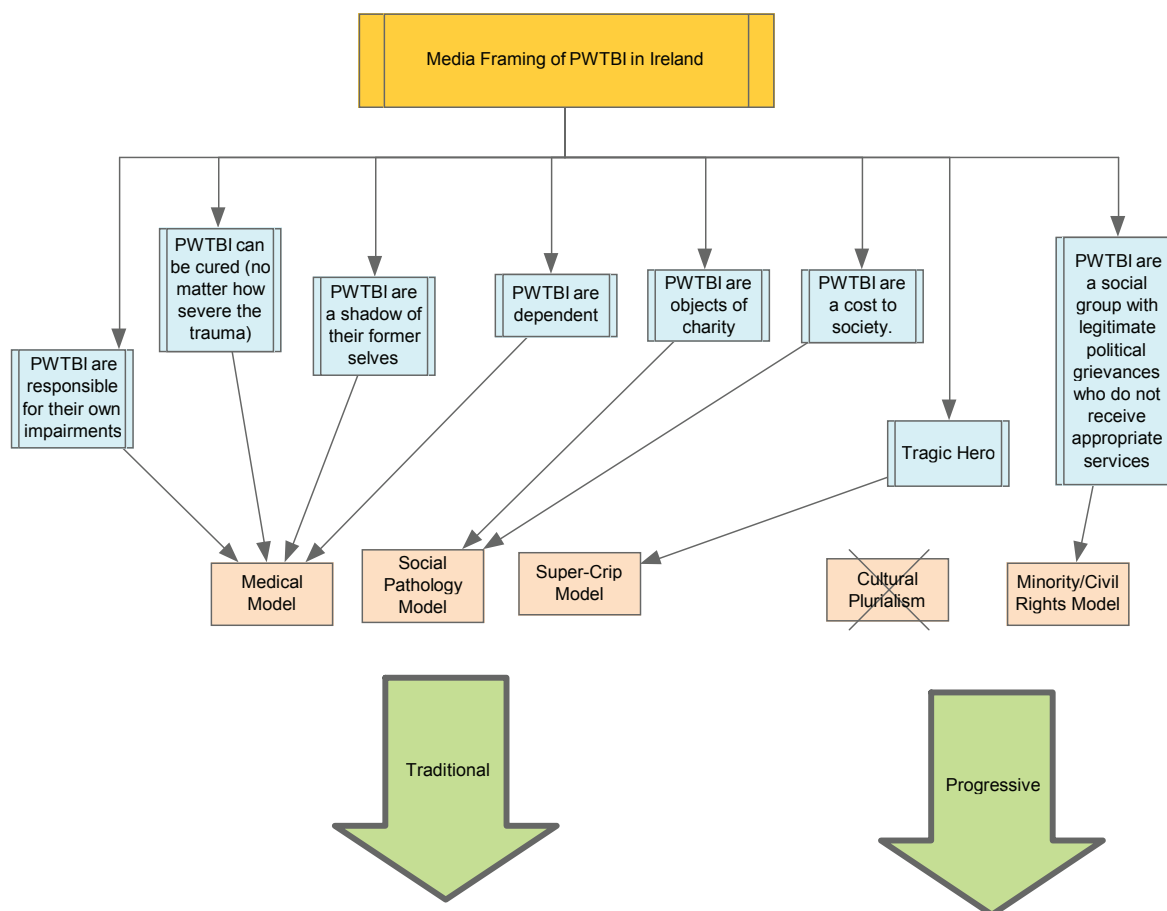


**Frame 1: PWTBI are a shadow of their former selves**

The first framing package emphasises that there is a significant difference between the identity of the individual before and after a TBI, and portrays the individual with TBI, post injury, as inferior. This framing package occurs in five articles in the sample and is noticeably present in newspaper articles portraying sports injuries, assaults and accidents, suggesting that it is commonly used around a sudden unexpected event. Articles associated with this frame

focused on the issues relating to sustaining a TBI and did not explore the lived experience of having a disability. It therefore is a common framing device in the sample. This frame notably occurs in *The Irish Independent* which is Ireland's top seller, *The Irish Times* and a regional newspaper, *The Corkman*.

The package uses many framing devices to construct the frame. The headline *Life can change in the blink of an eye* is a cliché which is associated with a rapidly changed situation which has commonly worsened. It denotes the rapidity and negativity of the change in PWTBI, contrasting a more positive former self with a significantly changed new self. This is further evident in the following example. "*The world was young Louth woman Siobhan O'Brien's oyster...sadly all that changed in an instant...*" (The Corkman 29 April 2010). This sentence is used to contrast the old self, which was full of possibility, with the instant passage to a limited and diminished version of the individual concerned. Throughout the article, phrases are used to further reinforce the concept of a new inferior identity, for example, Siobhan is quoted as saying "*the person she was up until that point in her life did actually die on that day*" (The Corkman 29 April 2010). This is a striking metaphor as her life post injury is described as a transition to death; as if life were not worth living in her current form.

Further use of descriptive and emotive language (Van Gorp 2010, p.95) is evident in the article entitled "*Natasha's parents 'thinking positive' over her recovery*". This article conveys the story of an attack which left Natasha permanently changed. Phrases such as "*It's her body but Natasha is not there*" reinforce the absence of the old Natasha (Belfast Telegraph 4 May 2010). This kind of imagery is often associated with coma patients who are vegetative or unresponsive, and this represents the archetypal 'vegetative' coma patient (The Irish Times 5 February 2010).

It is also evident in *Life can change in the blink of an eye* with the individual being metaphorically "*marked for life*" (The Corkman 29 April 2010). This lexical choice of 'mark' implies an affliction or burden, illustrating how PWTBI's role can be framed as moving from important to redundant. What they once had to contribute is utterly diminished, and this transition is marked as the death of the old self and a transition to a negative condition.

There appears to be a pattern in the articles that are associated with this frame, in that the individual's life changes rapidly or in an instant. It is a frame that marks contrast. The importance of this portrayal of PWTBI is evident from literature surrounding the change of identities and loss of self experienced by PWTBI. Nochi (1998, p.869) states that PWTBI experience a sense of loss, that is synonymous with comparisons made to their identity pre and post injury.

Media depictions of the transition using words like "sadly" or "died" (The Corkman 29 April 2010), may adversely affect the self image of PWTBI who are trying to reconstruct their identity. Barnes (1992) contends that PWD internalize negative media depictions and thus this creates a negative self-image. We can therefore speculate that the situation is similar for PWTBI. Hence, I argue that this frame can adversely affect the rehabilitation process and the sense of value felt by a person with TBI (Nochi 1998, p.873). In addition, this frame uses medical sources and the medical model to emphasise the impairments of PWTBI, and subsequently legitimise their exclusion from social and political arenas.

**Frame 2: PWTBI are a social group with legitimate political grievances who do not receive appropriate services**

This progressive frame is evident in an article where Kieran Loughran (CEO of Headway) notes that "*there is an acute and definite distinction between ABI and psychiatric disorders*" (Irish Examiner 4 October 2010). This sentence uses a stereotypical comparison of ABI and mental illness which highlights the entitlement of PWTBI to be seen as a distinct group separate from psychiatric patients and to receive the appropriate rehabilitative services. The author uses an emotional appeal, from a position of experience, to the reader's intelligence and compassion. This is evident in the article, when he uses the phrase "*to align mental health patients with ABI patients is to misunderstand*" (Irish Examiner 4 October 2010). The article uses emotive and direct language to further articulate the message. Loughran further specifies that there are insufficient services for PWTBI, "*His placement in a psychiatric unit was wholly inappropriate to his organic care needs*" (Irish Examiner 4 October 2010).

The lack of appropriate services is highlighted with the lexical choice of the word "dearth" in a "*dearth of essential rehabilitation units equipped to deal with....the aftermath of brain injury*" (Irish Examiner 4 October 2010). Essentially, the article is depicting PWTBI as a social group who, post-injury, are not given the proper rehabilitative care that they are entitled to. Further use of emotive language to illustrate this point is evident in the description of "*many people with ABI languishing in secure wards and nursing homes*" and by Loughran strongly arguing that "*brain injury patients should no longer be marginalised*" (Irish Examiner 4 October 2010).

As this frame was only evident in one article, it illustrates that such views are not prevalent in media or public perception. Clogston (1989, p.1) stated in regards to media portrayals of PWD, that "small diverse minorities still struggle

for recognition of their problems and acceptance in society". Loughran's framing of PWTBI in this manner is most likely due to his work and experience with Headway Ireland. The exclusion of this story from the news section of the paper is also significant. Loughran's viewpoint is situated in the opinion section, portraying it as less than news or not a true reflection of reality. Clogston (1989, pp.1-2) states that "mass media influence visibility of minorities, and can have an impact on broad social recognition" and reinforces the argument that a greater proliferation of this positive frame would surely be beneficial for greater public awareness and recognition of brain injury.

**Frame 3: PWTBI are a cost to society.**

The frame occurs in three articles in the sample and is relatively prominent as two of the articles were located in the opinion section of two national papers, and the other newspaper was regional. Both articles located in the opinion sections had relatively large word counts. This frame is premised on the monetary costs to society which are attributed to the maintenance and rehabilitation of PWTBI. It is very evident in "*People who have suffered brain injuries do not belong in psychiatric hospitals*", where the cost to society of keeping someone "*under constant supervision*" is illustrated in the following quote from the same article; "*spent almost €1 million on keeping a single patient under lock and key*". The use of generalisation or stereotype here is evident as this case is presented as typical whereas in reality it is most likely the exception.

While we can assume the author of the piece did not view PWTBI as 'cost to society', he still reproduced the language that underlies the traditional model, i.e. "*languish*" and "*lock and key*" (The Irish Examiner 4 October 2010). His reproduction of this language was in order to use people's identification with the frame to show the costs of inappropriate care. The author's use of the frame

in this case shows the cultural resonance of the traditional perspective when viewing PWTBI.

The frame is also evident in the *Coma study......* article which weighs up the benefits of keeping PWTBI alive against the financial costs of technology that they would require and questions whether the costs of keeping the person alive "*could lead to unexpected pressure on intensive care beds?*" (The Irish Times 5 February 2010). In an NDA study (2005) examining the participation of PWD within society, it is clear that they are at the low end of scale in relation to economic participation. Wilton and Schuer (2006, p.187) state, that neo-liberalism equates citizenship with paid work, or the view that one must contribute to the labour force in order to gain citizenship. Essentially, from a neo-liberal viewpoint PWTBI are merely (un)economic units and a financial burden on society (Chamberlain 2010, p.408). This frame positions them as not only a burden, but it also raises the question of whether the money spent, or indeed the life of a severe PWTBI is worth maintaining. Due to the high cost to the state, it is important that they are not framed as wasted money, or just as a cost rather than a contributor.

**Frame 4: PWTBI are objects of charity**

This frame appears in two articles and portrays PWTBI as objects of charity. They are shown as not being independent financially, but rather, as looking to the state or NGOs for financial support. The presentation of PWTBI as objects of charity is elicited by the language used in the title of the article "*On their bikes: gardai take part in charity cycle for St. Gabriel's*", which depicts PWTBI as routinely requiring charitable interventions. In the body of the article, the perceived mentality of organisations that provide services for PWTBI is expressed through the theme of the archetypal charity type, i.e. one that should be grateful for support rather than one that should be entitled to these services.

This is exemplified by the fact that the charity is depicted as being extremely "......grateful to Sgt Nash for nominating us as their chosen charity" to receive funding (Limerick Leader 14 August 2010). I would argue that the language of gratitude on behalf of their clients is contrary to a rights-based approach, and implies that these funds and rehabilitation facilities are legitimately a gift or a service rather than an entitlement. In addition, in the article "*Bionic Implants*"*,* Headway Ireland is profiled as a charity rather than an organisation working with PWTBI.

Both articles depict PWTBI as being grateful for these funds rather than stressing any sense of obligation on society to provide such supports. This frame also reflects the work of Radtke (2003) who considers this presentation and depiction of PWTBI as one of them being 'beggars'. He maintains that a beggar is a "person that cannot do anything without the help of others, a passive object of charitable actions" (Radtke 2003, p.5). The "*On their bikes*" article appeared in a regional newspaper, and this maybe a reason it chose not to tackle the chronic lack of funding or entitlement of Irish citizens, and instead portray it as a local human interest piece.

**Frame 5: PWTBI are responsible for their own impairments**
This is a particularly prevalent frame featuring in seven articles, which are primarily in Sport or Health sections. The frame uses Van Gorp's (2010, p.98) "virtue or sin" to depict people who sustain a TBI as a result of alcohol use as responsible for their own changed circumstances. People who drink alcohol do not have the power to exercise self control; thus they are ultimately responsible for their actions which caused the injury. This is evident from the quote "alcohol *was present in the bloodstream of some 59 percent of pedestrians whose deaths were investigated*" and "*intoxicated pedestrians are more likely to suffer severe trauma to the head*" (The Irish Times 14 December 2010). It

frames PWTBI as risk takers whose 'laddish' behaviour led to their injury. This behaviour is contrary to the social norm that people should be responsible for their own welfare and should not take risks with their health (WHO 2002). This understanding is exemplified in lines like, *"I don't know how many times I've heard a player saying, I'm grand it was just a knock.......these knocks are in fact mild traumatic brain injuries"* (The Irish Times 13 November 2010). Further evidence of this frame lies in the language in the following quote from the article *"Out there on the frontier, full of possibility "it's beyond dangerous. Its madness breathtaking madness..."* (The Irish Times 20 February 2010). The descriptive language alludes to the depiction of PWTBI as risk takers. PWTBI are depicted as archetypal risk takers, again painting them as individuals responsible for their own injuries. *"Crowd surfing, moshing and stage diving are part of the music scene and they accept the risks"* (Irish Independent 31 May 2010). Thus, I argue that the journalist's use of the traditional media models legitimises their exclusion from society, and portrays PWTBI as deserving of their injuries.

These findings are very significant given that Linden *et al.* (2007, p.666) contend that where TBI is framed as a result of self-initiated actions such as drink driving, irresponsible behaviour or dangerous activities, people were viewed less favourably than those whose TBI was as a result of an "organic episode" or the manner in which they received their injury (Redpath and Linden 2004).

## Conclusions

My research identifies that Clogston's (1990, 1993) traditional model of disability was the most common model used to portray PWTBI in the articles sampled. Irish newspaper's portrayal of PWTBI ignores wider social issues, and all but one of the frames focus on individual stories. This emphasises their

impairment and the disadvantages that accompany it. The frames do not depict political, critical pieces, which might contribute to the establishment of a group identity, creating a viable political movement or public awareness of TBI and its manifestations. Newspaper articles also present the cultural depiction of PWTBI as 'super cripples', through human interest stories of someone overcoming the odds. The framing of stories like these, devalues PWTBI who do not perform heroic tasks or need special provisions to accommodate them. These episodic frames reflect narrative stories which serve to undermine PWTBI identity.

Clogston's (1990, 1993) progressive model is also present in the sample, in that a minority/ civil rights theme was identified. However, it is only evident in one article, situated in the opinion section, which suggests, that the abuse of PWTBI's rights was not seen by editors as an issue of great importance. Significantly, a cultural pluralism model of disability was not present in the sample. The absence of this model further cements the idea that a traditional model of disability dominates in the media.

In relation to issues on which people have little prior knowledge, they are very likely to accept the understanding of the issue presented to them in the media. It is only where people have prior knowledge of an issue that they have the capacity to negotiate media framings (Philo 1993, p.262). In Ireland, Headway (2012c) continues to work towards using the media to "heighten public and political awareness of acquired brain injury and the impact it has on individuals, families and carers". The research has identified a need for more media coverage from individuals or groups like Headway, which in turn would lead to a more progressive or rights based depiction of PWTBI.

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