

ALTERNATIVE JOURNALISM IN BRAZIL: WHICH VOICES ARE HEARD?

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PERIODISMO ALTERNATIVO EN BRASIL: ¿QUÉ VOCES SE ESCUCHAN?

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Abstract

This work presents partial findings of research that began in 2015 which aims to understand how alternative journalism is evolving in the digital sphere in Brazil. We discuss the concept of alternative journalism based on the context as well as the main characteristics of this kind of journalism, and focused our data gathering on the type of sources consulted by the websites. We considered four kinds of sources: Official, Unofficial, Expert, and Witness. We then used documental and content analysis of over 190 articles. This preliminary result shows that this kind of website cites, still, a majority of Official and Experts sources.

Keywords

Alternative journalism, types of sources, digital ambience

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta los resultados parciales de la investigación que comenzó en 2015 y tiene como objetivo comprender cómo se está desarrollando el periodismo alternativo en la esfera digital en Brasil. Discutimos aquí el concepto de periodismo alternativo en función del contexto, y las principales características posibles manejadas por este tipo de periodismo. Centramos nuestra búsqueda de datos en el tipo de fuentes consultadas por los sitios web seleccionados. Consideramos cuatro tipos de fuentes: Oficiales, no Oficiales, Expertos y Testigos. Como metodología, utilizamos el análisis documental y de contenido de más de 190 artículos. Este resultado muestra que este tipo de sitio web todavía cita una mayoría de fuentes Oficiales y de Expertos.

Palabras claves

Periodismo alternativo, tipos de fuentes, ambiente digital

1. Introduction

This work brings the analysis of eight Brazilian websites, considered websites that present contents of Alternative Journalism by means of a prior selection that involved different kinds of methodological procedures. It specifically comes with an analysis about the sources that are consulted by these “alternative medium” while they build their narrative of news. The question that leads this part of the research is: which types of sources —Official, Unofficial, Witnesses or Experts— are consulted by these websites and how much of each one is heard when they build the news?

To determine this, the paper brings a short discussion about the concept of “Alternative Journalism” used by the group of researchers to select websites that are in compliance. The methodology of this prior selection was mapping, straining, and the documental and content analysis of more than 190 news articles. Using this process, we wanted to ascertain the kinds of sources most used by these websites. We finished by bringing some critical reflections into our conclusions which tried to explain these uses of source types.

2. What is alternative journalism in this context?

Like other countries in Latin America, Brazil has a specific situation with regards to the relations built between the mainstream media and other forms of communications, i. e. grassroots, community, or alternative communications. This situation is defined largely by socio-economic and cultural context. We need to take into consideration the years of dictatorship (1964 to 1985) when any kind of political communication or free journalism was violently repressed by the government. In order to confront that, some rebel activities happened in those years. This was referred to “Alternative Press” by Kucinski (2001)¹. When

1. It is important to note that this form of alternative communication has existed since Brazil was “discovered”, pointing to the social inequalities between those who own land or business/elite and those who do not/workers.

democracy arrived, this scenario was redesigned and Kucinski understood that the mainstream media were taking over alternative media subjects during the process of transition to democracy. That meant it was no longer only the alternative media that could confront the government—the mainstream media were doing that work—.

Another reason for this “disappearance” of alternative journalism that Kucinski (2001:13) puts forward is the radical opposition to profits by some of the alternative communicators. A project that seeks national distribution but does not seek funding is destined to die. This is what happened to some of the alternative communication initiatives from the 1970s and 1980s. Finally, another reason cited by the author was the ideological crises experienced by some groups of intellectuals (some writers) that disagreed on how to conduct the activities.

Following this line of thought, in academe, a number of researchers started to settle on the idea that the “Alternative Media” did not exist anymore. For them, those materials and movements were created only as a reaction to the lack of freedom of speech. However, in a country where only five families still control television broadcasting networks², where congressmen and representatives own the majority of radio stations, where the public or community radio is still harassed by a communications law that does not allow them to broadcast beyond a one kilometer radius, and where newspapers are becoming fewer in each capital or city due to the lack of funding, being alternative, currently, means surviving. More than that, it means finding a way to give a voice to some groups that still are on the margins of society, a public that was not heard. It is possible to say, hypothetically, that the concentration of media ownership, sometimes even illegal³, can provoke an increase in alternative activity. We should add the Internet to this scenario, that environment that was born to be democratic, to guarantee freedom of speech and be cost-free, or at least, be cheap and affordable. Castells pointed out that the way

2. Biz and Guareschi (2005).

3. An exclusive survey by the National Forum for Democratization of Communication (FNDC) reveals that six of the main private national communication networks (Globo, SBT, Record, Bandeirantes, Rede TV!, CNT) are linked, including both owned and affiliated channels, representing 263 of the 332 Brazilian TV broadcasters/channels. According to data from the Ministry of Communications, two of these networks exceeds the permitted number of (radio or television) stations that can be owned, under the law. (e-Fórum 56, 2005) (Biz & Guareschi, 2005:84) (translation by the author)

the Internet was created —and, we emphasize, if it was kept in this way— to be free, democratic and open, made it the best place for the disenfranchised to find a way to be heard, a way to have their voice aired.

The social movements of the XXI century, deliberate collective actions that aim at the transformation of values and institutions of society, are manifested in and through the Internet. (...) cyberspace has become a global electronic agora in which the diversity of human divergence explodes in a cacophony of accents. (Castells, 2003:114-115)

The combination of a mass media concentrated in the hands of a few and a promising new environment in which to air different voices without being censored by only a few gatekeepers could bring a new alternative. The question that gave rise to this research project was that maybe the confluence of a crisis in mainstream journalism in Brazil, and the other two facts described above, are producing a wave of new alternative journalism on the Internet. This was the start of an investigation that began in 2015.

Based on that investigation, the research group called “Alternative Journalism in the Digital Era” wants to understand and explain the appearance of varied information proposals in the digital environment in recent years. In this process, it is necessary to work with the triangulation of key concepts in this investigation: journalism, alternative, and digital. We will work with the first two in this paper.

At a time when journalistic activity is being challenged in its old mode of production and in how the results of this activity are delivered, one of the structural issues of the work is to understand and determine what would be considered journalism within that scope. Among the investigations carried out in the first year, the group established, from Alsina (2009:14), that the production of news should follow the procedure of fact selection, agenda planning, fact-sheet preparation, writing, editing, and publication. We started from the assumption that this would be the closest way to understand what journalism is, and how journalism is done, be it analog or digital.

Additionally, the investigation tried to develop the concept of what is “Alternative”, within the complexity that it offers in relation to society mode. In it, we tried to conceptualize what alternative journalism could be. We studied Peruzzo (2008), Atton (2002), Rodriguez (2006), Downing (2002), Grinberg (1987), Kucinski (2001), and Fiesta (1987), among others, to define a concept of alternative journalism by contrasting it to community and popular journalism and alternative media and communication. And this concept is presented by Denis de Oliveira (2009):

The alternative journalistic praxis has as its outlook the reconstruction of the public sphere based on the values of equal opportunities, equity, radical democracy, and the subordination of private economic interests to collective ones. It is not only a question of defending the values of institutional democracy, but of a radically democratic attitude, which ranges from the opening of the media spaces to all social segments, breaking with the siege of the agenda of official sources; to the full reference in the production of information in the subject-citizen and not in the subject-consumer. (Oliveira, 2009:6) (translation provided by the authors)

Another criterion that guided the group in defining what journalistic production would be within the alternative scope was the format of the output, i.e. the final news article. However, here we needed to pay attention to the reconfiguration that the label “alternative” brings to what we think journalism is or, what journalism is for mainstream media.

Some characteristics observed were the use of the “lead” format, the presence of a variety of sources consulted, objectivity and informative structure, but they were not the only ones used in the evaluation of whether the material is journalistic; it must be taken into account that informative texts, mainly alternative ones, can use different formats and styles, besides making genres more flexible.

Alternative journalism may be understood as a radical challenge to the professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media. Alternative media privilege journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy and oppositional practices. Its practices emphasize first person, eye witness accounts by participants; reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspaper to recover a 'radical-popular' style of reporting; collective and antihierarchical forms of organization... an inclusive form of 'civic journalism'. In short, alternative journalism practices present ways of re-imagining journalism. (Atton & Hamilton, 2008)

Generally, the practice of alternative journalism links itself to some social groups, such as social movements, who present themselves as opposed to a current system. However, the fact that this journalism is close to some counter-hegemonic organizations does not mean that it is also counter-hegemonic itself. What we see in prior investigations is that, regarding the way it is carried out, this journalism reproduces some aspects of mainstream journalism. The published contents in the alternative websites follow a standard structure that includes the lead, the third person, the inverted pyramid, among other aspects that are known for being the principles of journalistic objectivity (Carvalho, 2014).

Atton and Hamilton (2008), studying the emergence of alternative journalism in Europe, point out that its origins date back to the mid-nineteenth century, even before the consolidation of journalism as big business in the twentieth century. The so-called "independent radical newspapers" or "popular press" of England and France were fundamental in popularizing newspapers, especially as they began to stand out for their ability to influence public opinion. One of the main consumer groups was the working class, whose only sources of small and medium-scale information were those that were able to deal with labor issues, the issue of foreigners, or subjects such as suffrage and human rights. These are newspapers that have emerged from associations and unions by geographic proximity. They had a character of political opposition to "dominant" journalism.

In Brazil, the initiatives of alternative journalism present three predominant characteristics. Firstly, this type of journalism intends to be disruptive, claiming a prominence with the intention of reversing its secondary role in relation to mainstream journalism. Secondly, this type of journalism needs to reaffirm its oppositionist character, which brings it closer to the social groups to which it is directed and who support it with information or as financiers. The third characteristic is the intention of overcoming the pamphlet stigma, which is driven by the party and superficial interests inherited from the political and trade union pamphlets that characterized the first alternatives media in Brazil.

On the other hand, the principles of objectivity and impartiality that historically define journalistic ethics, and therefore distinguish professionals from amateurs, are less present in alternative practices. In alternative journalism, the limits are more blurred, since the characteristic of this type of journalism is the explicit expression of a political position on certain issues, especially with regards to humanistic aspects. According to Atton and Hamilton (2008), this difference, compared to the mainstream, makes certain social groups aware of them, and this establishes links between journalists, alternative vehicles, and sectors of the public.

An example of this are the new narratives carried out by alternative journalists such as “active witnessing”, in which the journalist inserts him or herself into a given situation and reports events in real-time, sometimes assuming the role of activist. “These often include members of local communities, protesters, and activists: “ordinary” voices compared to the ‘privileged’ voices of elites.” (Atton & Hamilton, 2008: 89).

In part, the advantage of alternative journalists lies in their credibility with certain social groups and sources of information that feel confident in yielding information or proposing guidelines, which would not be the case with mainstream journalists.

This difference leads us to consider that not every vehicle that provides grassroots and popular content should be considered alternative journalism. But all alternative journalism can only be considered as such when it establishes relations with people's culture, consequently the importance of understanding what is popular/grassroots culture as proposed by Downing (2002). Thus, alternative journalism essentially includes a relationship with popular and grassroots aspects.

To be considered as alternative practices, the way of doing this type of journalism should go beyond aspects related to higher education or professional registration, although these are relevant indicators. We also consider financing mechanisms and non-profit purposes, which determine the degree of editorial freedom and the counter-hegemonic themes addressed by media outlets and which propose to present themes not covered in the mainstream media (Downing, 2002; Kucinski, 1991; Oliveira, 2009).

Since alternative journalism differs from what is considered mainstream journalism, it would be incompatible to reproduce themes, sources, approaches, or even contents of mainstream vehicles.

Alternative media privileges a journalism that is closely wedded to notions of social responsibility, replacing an ideology of 'objectivity' with overt advocacy and oppositional practices. Its practices emphasize first person, eyewitness accounts by participants; a reworking of the populist approaches of tabloid newspapers to recover a 'radical popular' style of reporting; collective and antihierarchical forms of organization which eschew demarcation and specialization —and which importantly suggest an inclusive, radical form of civic journalism—. (Atton, 2003:267)

The work we present explains the results obtained according to the sources of information consulted by content producers. Although alternative media/outlets largely reproduce journalistic practices of the mainstream media, this aspect, concerning the voices that speak in the alternative content, can and should represent a point of divergence. Accordingly, the question that leads to this paper is: which kind of sources between Official, Unofficial, Witness and Experts are the preference of these eight alternative websites when they produce their journalistic content?

3. Sources as a journalistic criterion

According to Rositi (apud Alsina, 2009), the phases of the informational process (included in journalism process) combine the selection and preparation of networks and channels for direct access to events, control of the relevance of the gathered events, control of the values of truth of selected enunciations, creation of the hierarchy. These steps need to occur all through the distribution of space or time, and preparation of final communications (news). When we consider these aspects of the productive routine as indispensable, we understand that its own production of the content is fundamental so there is journalistic work. In this sense, if the content is simply republished, it does not mean that there is no journalistic work, after all, someone produced the content. However, the production was not verified by the outlet or supervised by the one who republished it, which would invalidate the factors.

To Harcup (2013), alternative journalism reproduces, to a large extent, the mainstream routine. Thus, the process of making news is not that different from what is seen as a reference in the journalism market. The difference lies in the values shared by those media outlets, whose ethos can express heterogeneity in the journalism field. In this way, the media outlet's editorial position can be represented when it chooses the sources of information, and through them, is able to acquire credibility.

The cast of sources used is, therefore, the most stressed factor when we want to differentiate between mainstream journalism and alternative journalism, since the production techniques are the same. In alternative journalism, whose goals are not commercial, sources are not linked to big economic or political groups, but they express the witnesses' opinions in a stronger way, that is, the view or opinion of the social group embedded in some issues, which are silenced or hidden by mainstream journalism.

In addition, there is another aspect that makes Harcup (2013) concerned with the differences between the sources of alternative and the sources of mainstream journalism.

[Alternative journalism] not only use different casts of sources, they tend to have a different relationship between producers and sources, with alternative media sometimes blurring the lines between the two. This is the sense in which alternative media can be considered as inseparable from alternative public sphere(s). (Harcup, 2013:77)

In other words, the sources in alternative journalism are, mainly, the audience. This audience feels represented by these vehicles/outlets, which strengthens the links between journalists and sources, making this relationship reliable. Thus, alternative journalism can have access to information that is not available to mainstream journalism, bringing other kinds of fact interpretation.

The sources were identified from the information available in the analyzed contents. Statements or indirect citations recorded in the articles that referred to people showed the source to be natural persons. Reproduction of data that had organizations as sources, represented by impersonality in the article, were considered to be institutional sources. The data do not make this distinction (how the information was obtained) but consider the two types of sources to be: people or organizations.

Another observation made in the analysis, but not dealt with in the results, was whether the information searched was first-hand or second-hand, which means whether the journalist was the one obtaining the information directly from the source or if it had already been processed in another vehicle. Also, in this case, the distinctions were not considered in the sampling.

Influenced by Lage's (2001) work, we considered four categories of sources in our study: Official, Unofficial, Expert, and Witness.

Official sources are maintained by the State; by institutions that preserve some state power, such as trade boards and official notary offices; and by companies and organizations, such as trade unions, associations, and foundations, etc. Unofficial sources are those which, albeit admittedly attached to an entity or an individual, are not, however, authorized to speak on their behalf, which means that what they say may be denied. (Lage, 2001:63) (translated by authors)

In this case, it is necessary to relativize the position that a certain source holds, depending on the source's role in the news. A union that challenges the positions of a government, for example, as well as a manager who informs on issues that oppose an organization, in this case, even if they are linked to institutions, speak as Unofficial sources, they are dissonant voices.

In general, Unofficial sources shall be taken to mean those who expose contradictions, denouncing problems or irregularities that may represent crises for Official sources. The Official sources are normally those that receive the most attention from the mainstream press and gain a privileged position in the news. Among the factors weighing favorably towards Official sources are the resources available, such as specialized press and public relations services. Therefore, commercial relations established between government institutions and the Brazilian press throughout history speak in favor of the Official source, demarcating the financial dependence of the private media on public institutions. This is a fact that makes this kind of source unquestionable in journalism and characterizes the Brazilian press as an "Official" press due to a tendency to reproduce government interests. Finally, this "officiality" happens because of the difficulty of the Brazilian media to invest in newsrooms capable of carrying out the information gathering process associated with the requirement for high productivity, which leads many writers to adopt the press releases sent by Public Relations personnel as essential content for finalizing editions or publishing content.

Witness sources, however, refer first to those who experienced a particular situation and are not tied to any organization. They are usually victims of certain circumstances and they are closer to the phenomenon. While they are voices that express greater involvement with events, they are sources not willing to relate to the press. The Experts are independent sources who draw on their in-depth knowledge of a particular subject and make them legitimate to the public to express opinions on certain facts. This is the case of researchers or professionals of a certain area who are consulted to express a version that is distant in relation to those involved, however they a privileged position and greater credibility in the journalistic content. Expert sources are not necessarily independent, as they may be linked to particular organizations with particular interests⁴.

Regarding the position these sources held in some institution (i.e. a community representative that is working in a government institution), what was taken into consideration was the “subscription” or “title” that the website used to introduce this source. The researchers took into account that some sources could represent more than one of these positions, as they belong to some institution or community and maybe they were talking about a subject that concerns both places. The researchers created a pattern to determine the type of the source: Official, Unofficial, Expert and Witness using the information that introduced the sources in the article. For example, if the source was interviewed because he or she witnessed a car accident (because he or she was actually there) but also works at the Traffic Department, the classification was as Witness and not Official source, since the person saw the accident but was not speaking on behalf of the Traffic Department.

4. In this study the sources were classified and counted only. At this stage of the research, the group did not analyze the order that these sources appear in the article. It is clear that the organization of the information in an article makes an ideological difference, giving more importance to those who appear before in the development of the story. But this view was not analyzed in this study.

The sources verified lead to the technical aspects of the production, since the references are mechanisms that show the accomplishment of the journalistic work of investigation with regard to the events. The use of “quotation marks” or statements in direct quotes are resources used by journalists to give veracity to the narratives. The same can be achieved by using indirect citations, which represent what someone or an institution wants to say, but with other words that make the text more fluid. The citation of the sources used indicates the fulfillment of a productive process, according to Alsina (2009), which is one of the stages of journalistic work.

Another key aspect of the use of information sources concerns ethical issues. *The Code of Ethics for Brazilian Journalists* prescribes two clauses that refer to the use of information sources. The first concerns plurality of opinions, which means that a journalist is ethical when he or she ensures that different people or institutions are consulted about a particular subject or fact.

The Code also directs that journalists, when producing content that implies denunciations, guarantee the right of the accused to express himself or herself and to give the accused’s version of events. This is called the Right to be Heard or the Right to Reply to content that could harm the image of the person or institution involved.

According to article 12, clause I of the Code (2007: 3), the journalist should “always keep in mind the specific characteristics of the press office, always to hear, before the disclosure of the facts, the largest number of people and institutions involved in the coverage, mainly those that are the object of accusations that have not been sufficiently proven or verified”.

By its characteristics, alternative journalism should express more forcefully the social contradictions, allowing more space, therefore, to Witness sources or Unofficial sources, if compared with what is observed in mainstream journalism. Thus, the understanding of certain events would be constructed on the basis of a closer perception of those who experience facts, which in general would lead to a more critical perception of institutions.

Moreover, the greater variety of source types could be associated with the ethical principle of journalism, which has as one of its foundations the plurality of opinions. Thus, the more distinct the origin of the sources consulted, the better equipped the public would be to understand the facts and draw their own conclusions. Conversely, the fewer sources sought, the less equipped the public is to understand the totality of the events. Higher quality news, therefore, is associated with the variety of source origins and the places they occupy in the events.

4. Methodology of the Project “Alternative Journalism in the Digital Era”

The research group, after establishing a concept that can be used today as the alternative journalism that occurs in the digital environment, proceeded, in that same stage of research that was conducted in 2015, to the mapping of the sites that were named *Possible Journalistic Sites with Potential to be Alternative (PJSPA)*.

4.1 Mapping

During the mapping procedure, in order to select the sites that would be a part of the list that handles *Possible Journalistic Sites with Potential to be Alternative (PJSPA)*, we randomly searched using the knowledge of the researchers themselves and Internet search engines, like Google, using keywords such as “alternative

journalism,” “independent journalism,” “alternative media,” “independent media,” and pages featuring lists of journalism sites. Some of the sites have lists or banners of partners that, in general, propose something similar and, therefore, have entered the list of sites to be studied. With this selection, we tried to identify, from among possible alternative journalism sites, those that had some relevance on the Internet, positioning themselves among the first links of the search engine. In this first stage, we identified approximately 56 Brazilian sites.

4.2 Straining

In the second step, the selection stage, we excluded those sites that did not fit the criteria established by the research and the concepts we were using. Therefore, 33 Brazilian sites were listed based on the following criteria:

4.2.1. National coverage: content should address national issues, excluding, therefore, those dealing predominantly with regional themes.

4.2.2. Issues related to appearance: we observed the layout of content so that it can be classified as websites and portals and not as blogs or social networks.

4.2.3. Volume and frequency of posts: we tried to observe sites that maintained a minimum daily rhythm of posts, and published content with some kind of profundity.

4.2.4. Durability: we considered sites that, until the end of this survey, were still active. Thus, websites previously created but removed were disregarded.

4.2.5. Journalistic appearance: those sites that had some identification of apparent journalistic content and, in that sense, showed a minimal degree of professionalism were selected. We understood that this criterion had to be observed from the point of view of a preliminary analysis, which required qualitative research with each case. This research would identify what could, in fact, be considered journalism, if we observe as journalism not what brings a technically constituted appearance, but what comes from the production routine.

4.2.6. Alternative themes: we selected those whose themes addressed in the publications had some alternative character to mainstream media.

4.2.7. Financial Independence: we tried to include in the list only sites that would not have any type of advertisement. This criterion is based on the principle that these sites constitute non-profit organizations.

4.2.8. Journalistic core activity: we considered only those sites whose core activity was journalism itself.

These criteria therefore excluded sites whose contents were clearly activists, such as those of trade union organizations, social movements, NGOs, political parties, among other sites whose journalism is a non-core activity or whose goal is profit or party-political interest. Pages whose publications are merely analytical or seemingly amateurish at first glances, such as those seen as in blogs, have also been disregarded.

The analytical results of this theoretical discussion and the mapping were explained and published in periodicals and/or presented at events.

4.3 Content Analysis of eight websites

At this stage of the study, we chose eight websites from the mapping procedure for more an in-depth study. The number of websites corresponds to the number of researchers presented in the group at that moment. The websites are: Brasil de Fato, Carta Maior, Agência Pública, Vice, Jornalistas Livres, Mídia Ninja, Caros Amigos, and Repórter Brasil⁵. The first six had a good variety of articles to analyze, between 2 and 13 published per day. The last two had, respectively, 13 and 7 articles during 30 days of analysis. In this work, we are not conducting a comparative study but it should be taken into account that the number of sources can change due to the number of articles published when we did the analysis.

Documentary research and content analysis procedures were carried out in this study. In the previous case, we considered the consultation of sites and their contents as a procedure that includes the search and cataloging of information, according to Moreira (2005). In the latter case of content analysis, we used a procedure that allowed the quantification of data considering the categorical analysis technique (Fonseca Junior, 2005).

Each of the researchers (eight in total) was responsible for monitoring one website. For the daily data collection, a spreadsheet was created on the GoogleDocs platform, shared among all, in which it was possible to monitor the work collectively.

Prior to the start of the data gathering, orientation meetings were held with the researchers. Each researcher had to access the site for which she/he was responsible for 30 consecutive days (13/jun/16 to 12/jun/16), in varied shifts. On the first day the access was in the morning, on the second day, it was in the afternoon, on the third, in the evening and so on, including weekends. The objective was to enable a random approach to the collection of data in order to avoid results distorted by issues such as posts by journalists that work only during one period or themes defined by the time of the day.

5. In section 3 we briefly describe these websites.

Every day, the researchers had to analyze the highlighted posting on the homepage, observing 42 variables, including informative properties, textual resources, visual resources, and audio resources. If the main content was repeated in relation to the previous day, the researcher should have proceeded to the secondary or equivalent highlight, privileging the newest text. The third option, in the case of repetition, would be the list of the latest news, if any, or tabs available on the homepage. Finally, if all the texts remained the same in the next collection round, the researcher should have repeated the data from the previous day, which occurred rarely, except for Reporter Brazil, which has a low frequency of posts.

A pre-test was conducted one week before the survey began with two grantee students in order to identify possible flaws or inconsistencies in the worksheet and the average time to complete the task. The researchers would take 10 to 15 minutes each day to complete the work.

In addition to these data, each researcher also had to insert the title of the post, the layout on the homepage at the time of analysis, the link, data and time of the post, and date and time of visualization. It was considered important to vary those times because the pages are dynamic, the contents change places frequently, or they can be updated or even removed from the page. Furthermore, this was also a mechanism to ensure that the researchers strictly followed the agreement, in a way that all the data gathering could be verified. In addition to these items, researchers could also make notes (in the notes field of the worksheet) on issues that caught their attention and had to be observed at another time. The purpose of these notes was to function as a field diary.

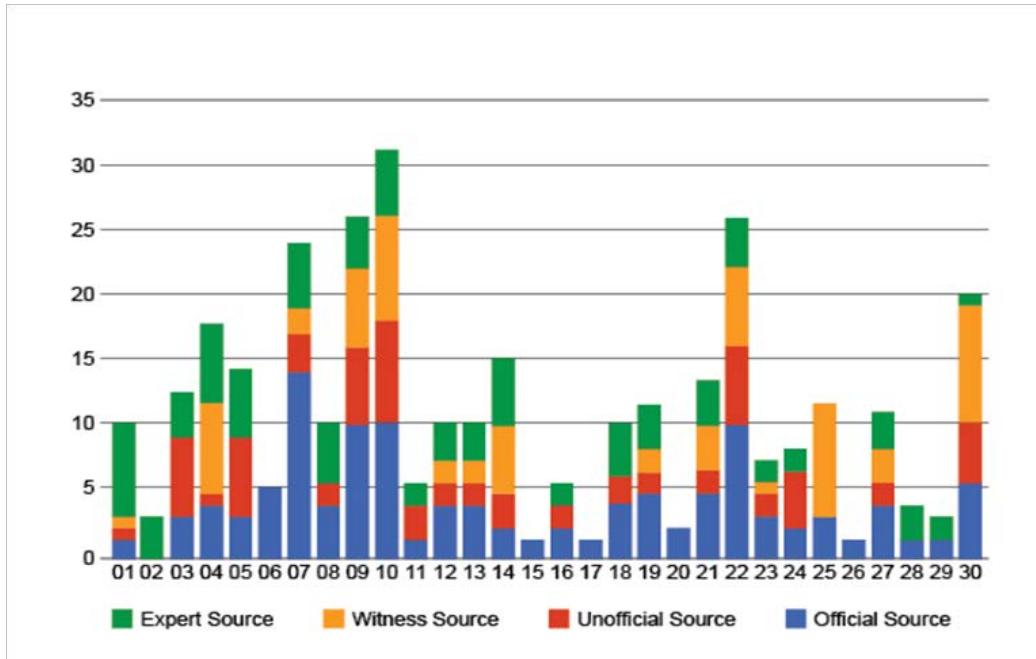
Finally, filling in the spreadsheet was also monitored daily by the group coordinator and revisions were made every weekend to ensure that the work was done thoroughly. This stage was considered fundamental to avoid the invalidation of the data or prevent the data gathering from being performed differently by each researcher, which would nullify any comparative analysis between the sites.

5. Website Analysis: kinds of sources consulted

5.1 Agência Pública⁶

During the data gathering period, 339 sources were checked from 30 posts published on the page of Agência Pública. Of this total, most are Official sources, accounting for 34% of the total volume of sources. Witness sources account for 20%, Unofficial 21%, and Experts 23%. In the following chart, it is possible to see the variety of types of sources consulted. The more colors displayed in within a column indicates greater the plurality of opinions in each post. In 14 posts, the use of the four types of sources was observed; in six posts, only one source of information was verified. This result is associated with the type of content produced by Agência Pública, which endorses the verification of greater plurality, leading to more in-depth reports. In addition to more time for production, journalists have more space for writing, producing texts with more than 8,700 characters on average.

6. <https://apublica.org/>

Graph 1. Types of sources consulted by Agência Pública

Source: made by the authors

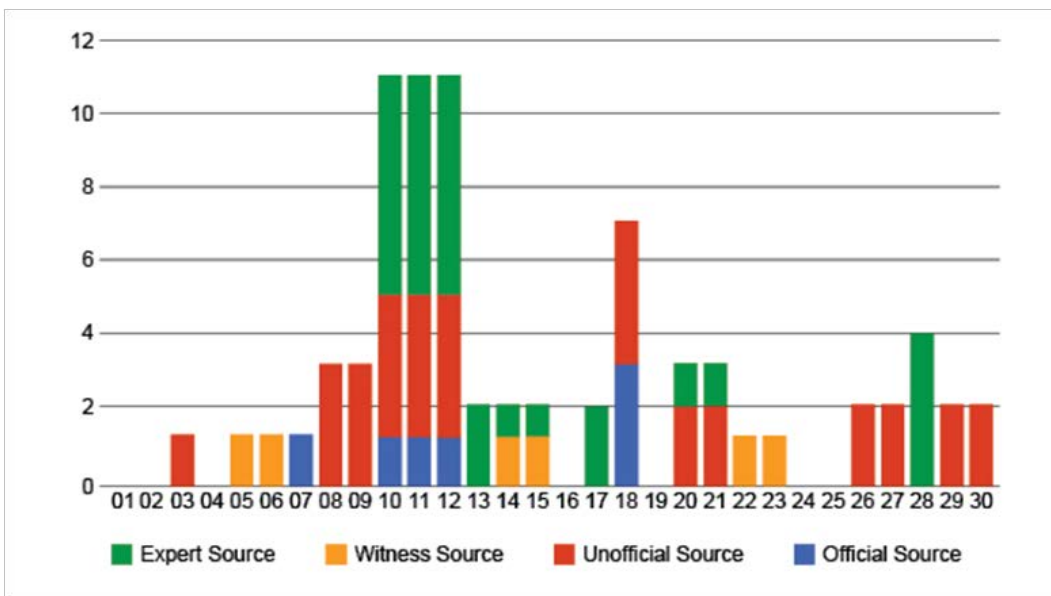
5.2 Mídia Ninja⁷

The Mídia Ninja differs from other sites to a great extent because, according to results obtained, it cannot be classified as a journalistic website, since their publications do not point to a productive process, in most cases. Thus, it is more of an alternative media site, in terms of sources of information, which highlights the low consultation of first-hand sources. Most of the posts are a type of fact analysis, in which the origin of the information is not apparent but comes from content published in mainstream journalistic outlets or from witness reports of the author of the text.

7. <http://midianinja.org/>

Of the total of 78 sources consulted, 44% are from Unofficial sources, representing the majority. Second, Expert sources seem to have an average volume of 38%. Official sources represent 9%, and Witnesses only 8%. As can be seen in the graph, the plurality is very low. None of the posts include the four types of sources simultaneously, and in six of them, it is not possible to verify the use of any source of information. In most cases, 14 to be more precise, only one source of information is used indicating that plurality is not one of the criteria used, also that the right of the “other side” to be heard is not observed in the same post.

Graph 2. Types of sources consulted by Mídia Ninja



Source: made by the authors

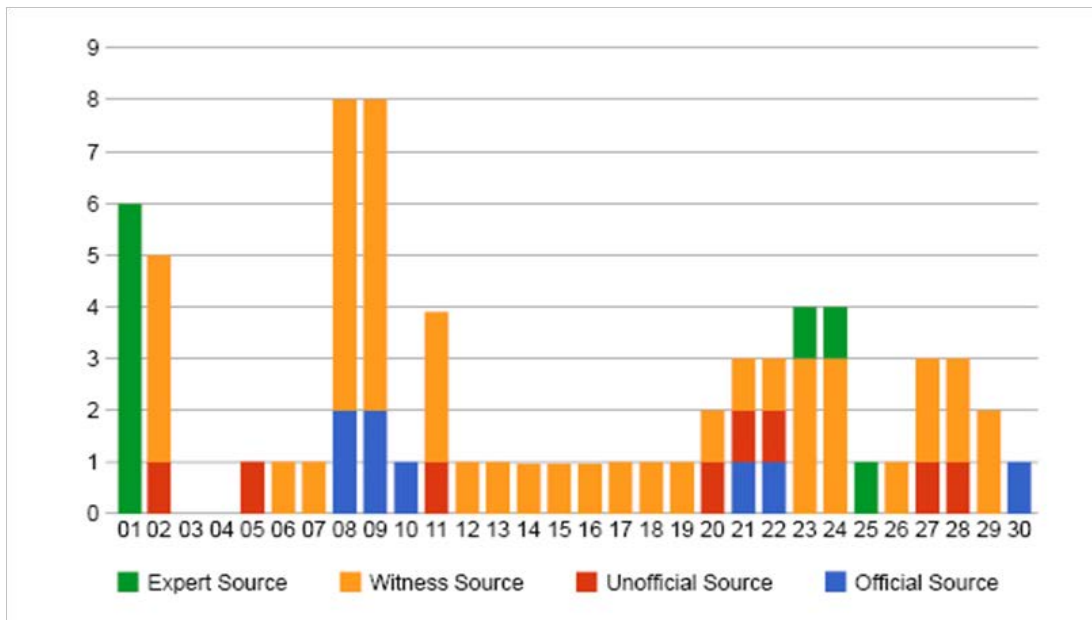
5.3 Jornalistas Livres⁸

The Jornalistas Livres website presents data that resemble those of the Mídia Ninja, demonstrating that there is a low demand for information sources, a total of 68. What differentiates one site from the other is that, in this case, there is a

8. <https://jornalistaslivres.org/>

much greater predominance of Witness sources in the posts, reaching a total of 63%. Experts represent 13%, and Official and Unofficial 11% each. Also, the small amount of plurality of opinions is observed since in 15 posts only one type of consulted sources is found, also indicating the absence of the principle of the right of the other side to be heard. In none of them are the four types of source found.

Graph 3. Types of sources consulted by Jornalistas Livres

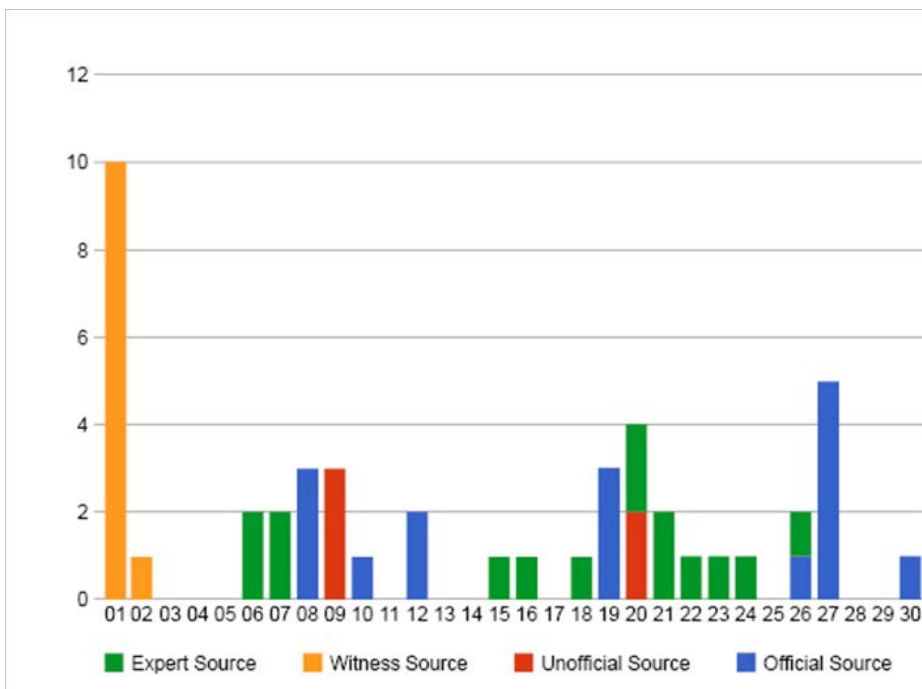


Source: made by the authors

5.4 Carta Maior

The Carta Maior website is the one with the lowest volume of sources consulted. Of a total of 30 posts, we verified the use of only 47 sources. Having said that, in 10 posts no source was verified. The data can be explained by the type of content that Carta Maior publishes, composed in almost all the cases, by the use of second-hand information whose source is not cited in the posts. Of those that present some type of source, it is verified that the largest volume corresponds to Official sources, 34%, followed by Expert sources at 32%. Witness sources appear in third place, with a volume of 23%, and Unofficial sources account for only 10%. The data also indicate that there is a very low plurality and the virtual non-observance of the right of the other side to be heard since the use of different types of sources is verified in only two postings.

Graph 4. Types of sources consulted by Carta Maior



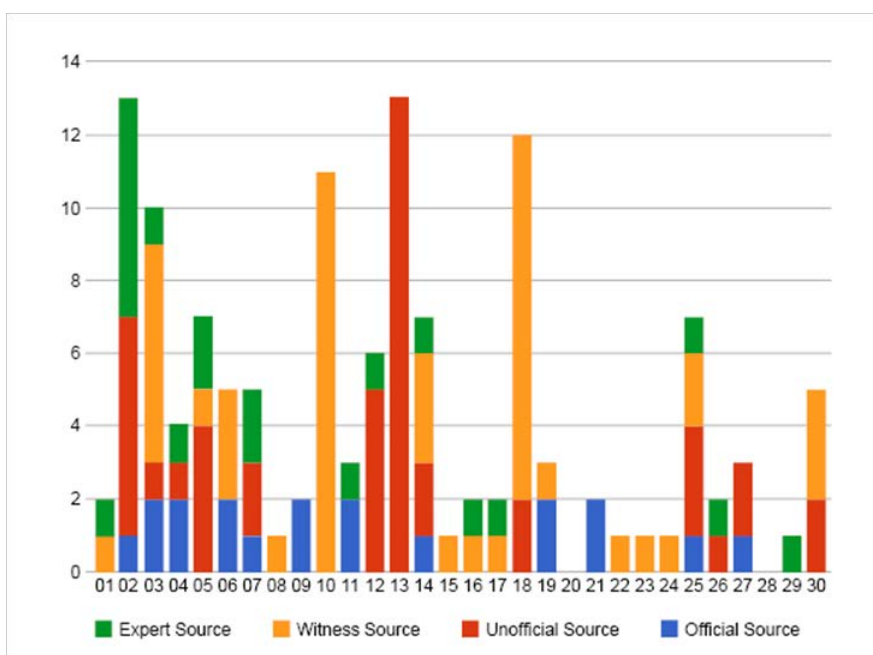
Source: made by the authors

5.5 Vice⁹

The Vice website presents a significant number of sources, a total of 132 consulted, which represents an average of four sources per post. In most cases, it is possible to notice the use of two, or at least three, types of sources. Despite this, in nine posts, only one type of source is noticeable and on two occasions there is no verified source.

The largest volume of sources is the Witness, representing 36% of the total sources consulted. Unofficial sources come next with 33%, while Experts represent 16% and Official 14%. As can be seen, there is less space for Official sources, indicating a tendency to present more critical contents, but at the same time, Vice ensures little space for exercising the right of the other side to be heard.

Graph 5. Types of sources consulted by Vice



Source: made by the authors

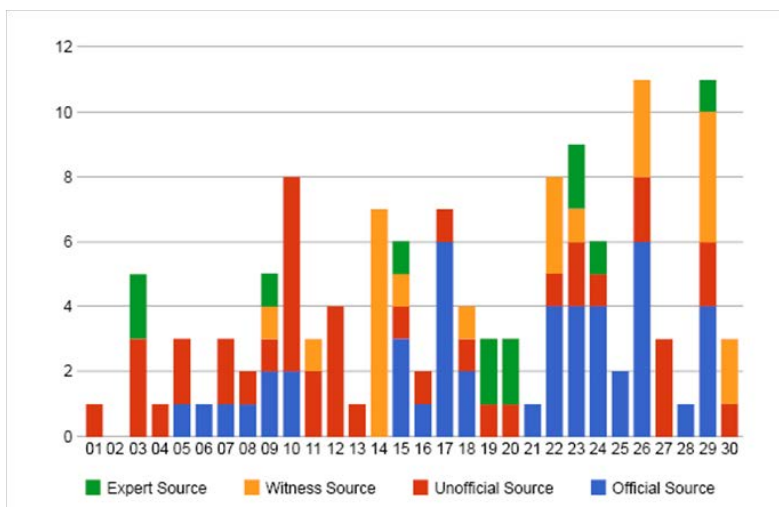
⁹ https://www.vice.com/pt_br

5.6 Brasil de Fato¹⁰

Brasil de Fato presents a total of 124 sources consulted, making it the site with the best balance between the four types. Most are Official sources, representing 37%, followed by Unofficial sources with 33%, Witnesses 19%, and Experts 9%. In four posts we found the use of the four types of sources and, in ten, we have only one type of source consulted.

One of the factors to be considered in this analysis is that Brasil de Fato is a site whose coverage of subjects of national relevance is predominant. This feature makes sources from the federal government the ones more often consulted. However, the period of analysis occurred at the time that Michel Temer assumed the presidency in place of the impeached Dilma Roussef, who used to maintain strong relations with social movements, mainly due to the historical relations between them and her party (PT). Therefore, it is necessary to consider the critical tone that the newspaper has adopted in relation to Temer, quoted several times from second-hand sources by the journalists of Brasil de Fato.

Graph 6. Types of sources consulted by Brasil de Fato



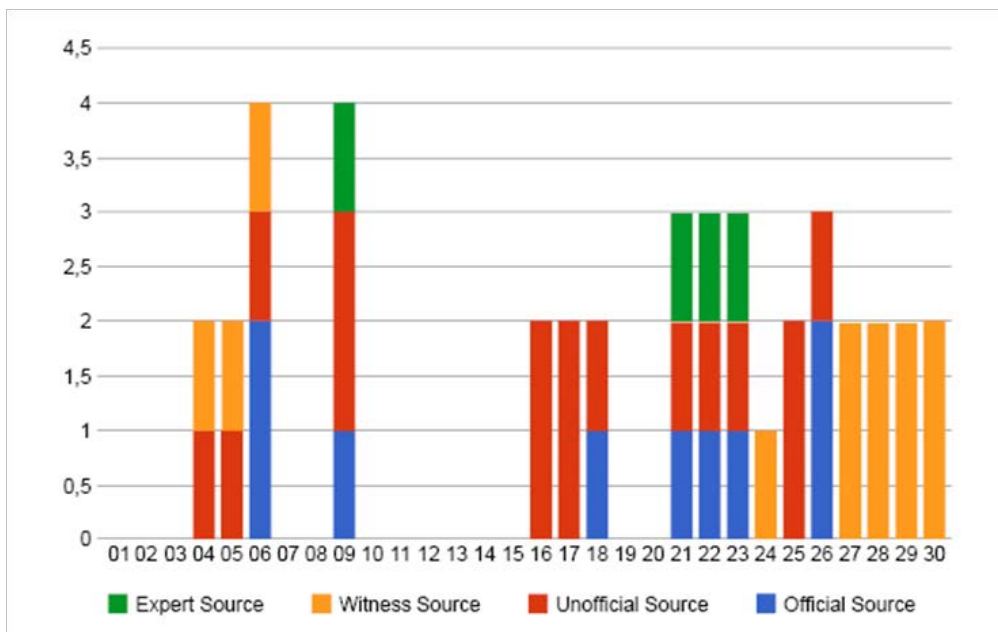
Source: made by the authors

¹⁰ <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/>

5.7 Caros Amigos¹¹

Caros Amigos published, in the main part of the website and in secondary pages, 18 articles in the period of 30 days. As the methodology was to repeat the main article if nothing changed, we can see in the chart the information that was repeated by the researcher. But more important than that was the gap in the middle of the chart showing the days without any source being consulted. This absence of sources is explained by the text genre: opinion, which means that the source is the author.

Graph 7. Types of sources consulted by Caros Amigos



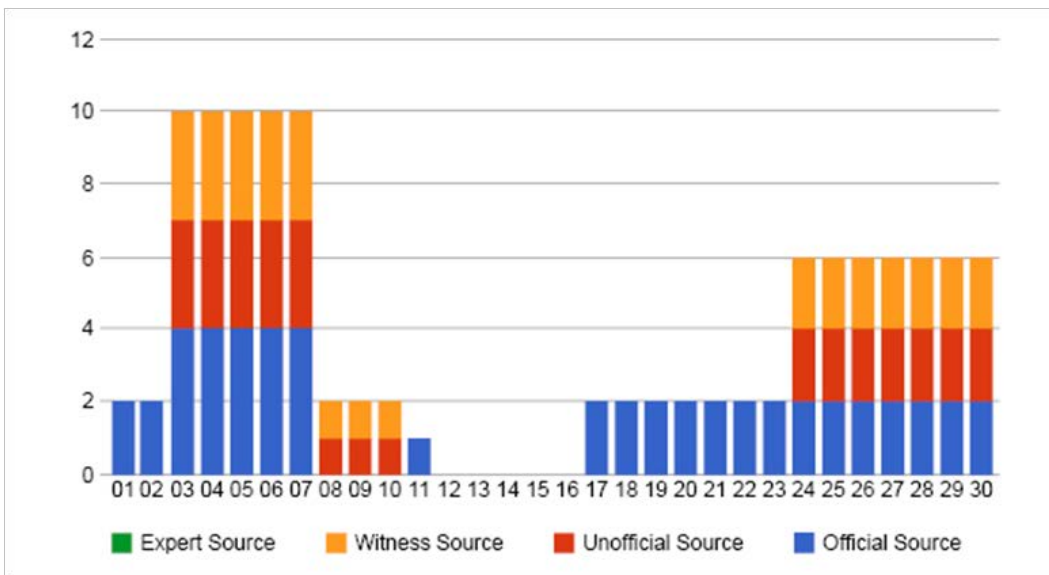
Source: made by the authors

¹¹ <https://www.carosamigos.com.br>

5.8 Repórter Brasil¹²

Repórter Brasil had seven articles published in the period of 30 days. As with Caros Amigos, we can see a gap over which no sources were consulted. That is explained by the methodology used —repetition of text when there is no new one— and by the ideological position of this website: besides presenting informative material, they produce educational material about work in conditions akin to slavery in some kinds of occupations in Brazil. They are so specialized in the subject that all the articles analyzed in those 30 days were about work in conditions akin to slavery. Another piece of data that should be noted is that they did not use Expert sources.

Graph 8. Types of sources consulted by Repórter Brasil



Source: made by the authors

¹² <https://reporterbrasil.org.br/>

6. Some conclusions

Although we understand this is part of a study, we can bring some findings that can challenge the concept of Alternative Journalism, as referenced earlier, as the one we can use in our current days and digital ambience.

So, data on source types vary widely from one site to another. Brasil de Fato is the one with the highest rate of Official sources, with 37%, followed by Agência Pública, with 34%, which has a better balance between sources, and Carta Maior, also with 34%. In all three cases, Official sources are predominant. From the two first websites, we can raise a hypothesis that can explain this result: most of the workers that produce the content for them are, possibly, professional journalists since we can note the construction of the news following the mainstream pattern. The last website, Carta Maior, is more of a space to “analyse” the mainstream media giving another approach to the news. Thus, they use the same kind of source, perhaps, to find the same strength and legitimation in arguments as the mainstream media.

Mídia Ninja has the highest percentage of Unofficial sources, at 44% leading the researchers to assume that Mídia Ninja tends to be much more activist than the others, a suspicion that needs to be confirmed with discourse analysis.

Witnesses are the major source on Jornalistas Livres, with 63%, a percentage that indicates a greater imbalance between the types of sources throughout the analysis. Vice brings 36% of Witnesses as well. We can infer that in both of them this imbalance comes from an intentional effort to give the “other versions” of some facts, fulfilling then, the concept of Alternative Journalism that brings the voices that are not always heard on the mainstream media.

The study challenged our way of understanding what journalism is and what alternative journalism is, as we have already discussed. That said, some questions that remain. Why do the websites we studied not use the variety of sources expected of a journalism outlet? After checking the sources exhibited in over 190 articles posted on those websites, we can infer that those sites could not be called alternative journalism. One reason for this would be the absence of the variability of sources and the failure to hear the other side even if this other side always appears in the mainstream media. These two actions are required by a journalistic practice as we saw in the Ethics Code for Brazilian Journalists.

The second reason appears when we compare those sites and this analysis to the concepts of alternative journalism. Alternative journalism should give voice to the disenfranchised. In 30 days, there were only a few of them that could be in the Witness or Unofficial category. The other sources (Official and Experts) already have a lot of space in mainstream journalism. From what we have seen being presented as alternative and representing the other side of voices on these websites, and from what we understand the alternative should offer, we can point to two conclusions: these websites cannot be considered alternative journalism or the concept of alternative journalism should be changed to include opinion and biased articles. Or more than that, we need to understand the processes of making the news in alternative journalism as something that needs some kind of financial support to compel the websites to bring forward more plurality of sources.

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