

PREACH WINE AND SERVE VINEGAR: PUBLIC RELATIONS, RELATIONSHIPS AND DOUBLETHINK

1. Introduction

The purpose of this study is to highlight a particular disconnect between how the field represents itself in an organization-public relationship (OPR) context and the existence of specific attitudes and practices in the profession and academia. It shows that situations exist where both practitioners and scholars fall short of the challenges they set themselves in an OPR context. This includes the failure of practitioners to marry rhetoric with action and a gap in how researchers frame and then study organization-public relationships. To illustrate these examples of preaching wine and serving vinegar the study uses the Orwellian concept of doublethink as a conceptual device to tease out such tensions. These contradictions are framed as public relations doublethink and presented as critical propositions designed to illustrate the gaps that can exist between representation and reality. This highlights that organization-public relationships (OPR) generate challenges for PR as both a practical and theoretical discipline.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998, 2000) have been at the vanguard of the OPR research movement since the late 1990s although other scholars promoted the need for public relations to focus on relationships (Ferguson, 1984; Cutlip, Center & Broom, 1987) earlier. All argue that the central focus of PR should shift from communication to relationship management. They define organization-public relationships as “the state that exists between an organization and its key publics” providing “economic, social, political and/cultural benefits to all parties involved” creating a situation that is “characterised by mutual positive regard” (Ledingham & Bruning, 1998, p. 62). Although it is commonly cited, this definition of OPR should be treated with caution. According to Pohl (2010), for example, it excludes the negative relationships that can develop between an organization and other groups. Such an argument highlights that even formative thinking around OPR is contested territory and Macnamara (2012) provides a useful summary of the key disputes in this area.

This article’s exploration of doublethink is timely due to the increasing pre-occupation with the idea of organization-public relationships in both PR practice and theory. First, in the professional realm as evidenced by the recent activity associated with the re-imagining of PR as an industry underpinned by the idea of relationship rather than perception management (The Global Alliance, 2013a). Second, in the academy the complementary surge of scholarship concerned with understanding the nature of relationships is noted (Huang & Zhang, 2013). For the first, this article argues that such aspirations are blighted by issues associated with the willingness and capability of organizations to listen to their stakeholders. For the second, it highlights a disconnection between a discourse that acknowledges the complex nature of relationships and the reality of how they are being studied in PR.

The article also debates the implications of these examples for the practical and theoretical development of public relations using research that considers how organizations listen to stakeholders on-line. It seeks to stimulate further debate on this subject through a new

conceptualization of social media listening, as well as a set of inter-disciplinary insights concerned with the study of complex phenomenon.

2. Doublethink as a lens of inquiry

The term doublethink originates from George Orwell's (1959) book *Nineteen Eighty Four*. This is a work of dystopian science fiction in which Orwell describes a totalitarian world of oppressive surveillance and mass mind control. It is the source of several terms that have now become embedded in the English language, the most well-known and popular being *Big Brother*. In Orwell's novel, doublethink refers to the idea that people can simultaneously hold two opinions at the same time while "knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them" (Orwell, 1959, p. 31). In these situations they apply first one statement and then its opposite without regard to the tension that exists between them. For example, in *Nineteen Eighty Four* democracy in the state of Oceania is talked about as an impossibility and yet, at the same time, the ruling party is positioned as the guardian of democracy.

This article uses doublethink as a lens through which to examine how organization-public relationships are discussed in the PR field. Its way of approaching the subject is influenced by scholarship from outside of public relations, most notably Stacey's (2012) complexity-inspired application of doublethink to leadership and management. By focussing on the contradictory elements of this rhetoric, Stacey (2012) observes how leaders state explicitly that micro-management is bad but then later, in another context, "claim that it is something they have to do and so something good" (p. 64). He then underlines the negative role that doublethink can play in organizations, particularly as a way of legitimising activities associated with power and control. This is achieved by falsifying reality while simultaneously allowing people to think the reality they operate in has not been compromised.

Stacey (2012) frames this as a "conscious deception" that retains a "firmness of purpose with complete honesty" (p. 90). For example, despite leadership programmes claiming to be about change Stacey argues they amount to little more than training activities designed to maintain the status quo. Crucially, the contradiction inherent in this process of doublethink - along with the other illustrations he provides - is not noticed. Such dualism flourishes because people disregard inconvenient facts and truths. This article argues that comparable tensions can be identified in the discourse around organization-public relationships in PR and that this is evident in both practice and research. The study now shifts to a discussion of doublethink in both of these areas, concentrating first on PR practice and the context surrounding recent developments in the field.

3. A brave new world: re-imagining PR

The current emphasis public relations places on effective relationship management is underlined by the work of a leading professional organisation. The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management (GA) is a confederation made up of professional associations and institutions from around the world. It purports to represent 160,000 practitioners and academics worldwide (Global Alliance, 2013b). GA's new mandate for public relations, endorsed at its annual congress in Melbourne in November 2012, states that PR's role is to "build and sustain strong relationships between an organization and its publics and, in doing so, contribute to society" (Global Alliance, 2013a). This declaration is

an attempt to distance PR from the traditional framing of the profession as perception management to embrace instead the concept of relationship management.

This emphasis and the Global Alliance's new positioning of public relations reflects, as much as it seeks to shape, what is happening in practice. This is illustrated through the case of Centrica, the United Kingdom's biggest energy retailer and one of the country's most prominent organizations. On its website Centrica (2014a) links its continuing success as a business with its ability to establish and maintain relationships with a wide range of groups and individuals. These include customers, employees, shareholders, suppliers, other partners, as well as the communities in which it operates. This capacity is strongly associated with its goal to become the country's most trusted energy company. It further recognises that inherent in this mission is a commitment to stakeholder engagement as a means of listening and responding to a wide range of societal obligations and expectations. This focus is also reflected in the call-to-action at the heart of GA's new mission. That is, the specific requirement in The Melbourne Mandate for PR practitioners to contribute to the development of a culture of listening in their organisations.

4. Public relations and listening: living the dream?

According to Macnamara (2012) such auditory aspirations run against a prevailing tide in Western management thinking and Bowen (2010) notes that listening is "inadequately studied in public relations" (p. 573). Macnamara has, however, done more than any other scholar in the field to consider the theoretical and practical implications of organizational listening. He notes that "despite a preponderance of theory, logic and evidence that communication requires two-way interaction, one-way transmissional notions of communication remain pervasive" (Macnamara, 2012, p. 439). He concludes that while many organisations invest heavily in the architecture of talking they pay little attention to the infrastructure and resources devoted to listening. For him addressing this imbalance becomes one of the major challenges for PR practice if it is serious about repositioning itself as a more socially engaged discipline.

Confronting this structural imbalance at the heart of public relations is not just a question of attitude and aspiration. It also represents a considerable practical and logistical undertaking. In his recent research on the subject Macnamara (2013) scopes out what large-scale listening on behalf of an organisation looks like. It requires policies, systems (such as two-way interactive sites), tools that enable organizations to monitor what is being said, technology (such as text analysis software), people (moderators and editors), as well as processes that analysis these discussions for decision-making purposes. Given these requirements the multi-faceted job of listening in organizations essentially becomes a structured, systematic and social process.

Such attributes are crucial to both the GA project and the aspirations of companies such as Centrica. This is because the goal of listening for PR practitioners in an OPR context is to facilitate a meaningful and constructive dialogue with stakeholders. This reinforces the particular importance of content to the listening project. Indeed, content in a dialogic context is of greater significance than the mere existence of structures and mechanisms for interaction. As de Bussy (2010) makes clear in his inter-disciplinary discussion of the theory and practice of stakeholder management, listening must be at the heart of the dialogic process. He highlights how listening, suspension of judgement and empathy are entwined

and crucial to operationalizing dialogue in an OPR setting so that dialogue becomes more than the “exchange of ideas” (de Bussy, 2010, p. 133) and “participants must enter into dialogue with the intent to reach an understanding” (p. 133) while the key to achieving this “is a preparedness to change one’s own position in response to the other” (p. 133). This is what Hargie (2011) frames as dialogic listening where meaning is co-created through conversation and two-way listening: “it is of benefit to both sides, as we share views with one another in an attempt to reach a mutually agreed position” (p. 187). The content of conversations therefore becomes the barometer for whether effective listening has taken place rather than the presence of particular functional capabilities such as feedback channels on websites (see Kent & Taylor, 1998) or the ability to rapidly exchange messages with others on social media.

This form of dialogic listening is crucial to organizations seeking to develop and sustain constructive relationships with a range of stakeholders. Indeed, in Wilson and Pickett’s (2009) stinging critique of global inequality the antidote to the challenge of corporate power in modern life is “how we relate to each other” (p. 247). This requires the development of adaptable societies in which communities are well-informed and “able to respond generously to each other and to needs wherever they arise” (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009, p. 263). Such sentiments reinforce the earlier call for empathy and echo GA’s quest (2013b) for listening to be embedded in the DNA of the modern communicating organization.

5. Social media’s unfulfilled promise: surveillance isn’t listening

In this context the functionality of social media and its potential for listening has been promoted as a panacea. However, in contrast to the previous picture of interaction and mutuality, the social media activities many organizations frame as listening are little more than stakeholder surveillance (Peacock, 2012). That is, activities with a narrow concern for monitoring the pronouncements and behaviour of others (Lyon, 2007). In their UK study of the motivations behind the use of social media by communication professionals, Carim and Walker (2013) underline this point by noting that any acknowledgement of listening on-line by the professionals in their research is usually a reference to the monitoring of organisational mentions in social platforms such as Twitter. While such environmental scanning can be positioned as a basic form of listening it is a far cry from the aspirations inherent in GA’s new vision for PR and the requirement for dialogic stakeholder listening (de Bussy, 2010).

In her reflections on listening in social media Crawford (2009) notes that such on-line activity is characterised as lurking and refers to those who “prefer to inhabit the margins of debate, rarely or never contributing in public” (p. 527). Drawing on the work of scholars who researched the development of the Internet in the 1990s she notes that this group has been categorised as more like readers than writers (Sharf, 1999), as resembling passive television viewers (Morris & Ogan, 1996), and as freeloaders who feed on the energy of online communities without offering anything in return (Kollock & Smith, 1996). By acknowledging that some studies have sought to remove the stigma attached to the term, Crawford argues for lurking to be reconfigured as listening. While an organization can make a valid case for on-line surveillance, monitoring and even lurking, it should not delude itself that it is listening in a way in which most people would understand the term in the context of a relationship. Furthermore, research in the PR field suggests that such passive activity often

does not even represent one end of a spectrum of listening that is being enacted by organizations during their social media excursions.

Kent (2013) argues that if we examine how social media is used by most large corporations we see a situation in which the communication tools that were invented for what he calls sociality are “typically used in a one-way fashion to push messages out to the public” (p. 342). He suggests that communication professionals need to stop seeing social media as a sales tool and instead consider how it can be applied to activities such as relationship building and problem solving. Echoing earlier research (Taylor & Kent, 2010), he laments social media’s continuing “untapped potential” in public relations (Kent, 2013, p. 340). This view is supported by Avidar (2013) who accuses not only business but also non-profit organizations of failing to “utilize the Internet’s advantages as a tool for relationship building” (p. 443).

Overall, little evidence has been uncovered to provide much ground for optimism. Research articles on the subject usually begin with an upbeat appraisal of social media’s potential but end with empirical findings that douse the promise of interaction and dialogue. As Kent (2013) notes “study after study posits that social media are dialogic, but the operationalization of dialogue often looks like on-line advertising and product promotion” (p. 344). This trend is evident in research spanning different sectors and countries suggesting that researchers seeking to unearth good organizational practice should travel more in hope than expectation. This is because of the void that emerges in the research between technological capability and an organization’s ability and desire to make use of that capability.

Avidar (2013) provides a useful overview of early explorations in the field that support this thesis and it is also evident in more recent research on social media. For example, Saffer, Sommerfeldt and Taylor’s (2013) study of Twitter found that businesses such as Starbucks, Gatorade and Target generally did not use this platform beyond the delivery of one-way messaging, despite it being “functionally interactive” (p. 214). Lovejoy *et al.* (2012), in their investigation of how non-profit organizations use Twitter, support these findings. Indeed, they conclude their work reflects “similar studies in that one-way information dissemination (e.g., hyperlinks and retweeted messages) were the dominant communication tools” (p. 316) used by their sample. Little evidence exists for social media being implemented to foster conversations and Waters and Jamal’s (2011) Twitter study even detects an “unwillingness to answer questions or respond to others’ comments” (p. 323).

Unlike these other studies, Briones *et al.* (2011) sustain their optimism in their search of best practice. This involves an exploration of how web 2.0 platforms are used by the American Red Cross. They claim the organization is a “well-known, respected leader in managing social media” (p. 37). The study appears to offer a glimmer of hope by suggesting the existence of some form of two-way communication between the organization and its stakeholders. Crucially, however, the argument presented is based on what they were told by Red Cross employees rather than what these people actually did on behalf of the organization. Wright and Hinson’s (2009) international survey of 574 PR professionals highlights why such research needs to be treated with caution. They examined how social media was being implemented in practice and illustrate the differences that exist between what practitioners claim is happening and what should be happening.

6. From engineered silence to serve and volley communication

In her study of how universities use social media McAllister (2012) reinforces Wright and Hinson's (2009) insight while also undermining the idea that organizations use on-line technologies for listening. Mirroring Wright and Hinson's work she found that higher education institutions "are not adequately utilizing new media tools to generate dialogic communication, and that there are gaps between relationship-building goals, implementing on-line strategies, and actual dialogic engagement" (McAllister, 2012, p. 326). More specifically, she found that the "absence of feedback opportunities essentially makes these sites one-way communication tools" with a strong "sender-to-receiver" focus (p. 326). McAllister then concludes with more than a hint of irony that "the voices of key stakeholders are being silenced via a media that is intended to provide forums for open dialogue" (p. 326).

Even when organizations appear to encourage a conversation with stakeholders it is still prudent to approach such situations with a degree of scepticism. For example, if we return to Centrica and how it uses social media to engage with stakeholders on corporate social responsibility issues, its chief executive can be seen to respond in a range of on-line interviews to a series of questions generated by tweets and a blog (Centrica, 2014b). The exchanges are, however, restricted to a limited question and answer format. This is characteristic of what this study would term as 'serve and volley communication'. That is, a process which consists of an organization asking a stakeholder (or stakeholders) whether they have a question on a particular topic; receiving a response; and then providing an answer which ends the exchange between the two parties. Such an interaction is further limited as a form of listening if the agenda of the discussion is driven by the organization. In short, the organization might be listening but only on those issues in which it is interested. This state of affairs is associated with the notion of a self-fulfilling prophecy in terms of dialogue. Golob and Podnar (2011), as well as Morsing and Schultz (2006), highlight the dangers that can accrue if organizations only ask questions on issues they would like to hear answers to.

This discussion of relationships and listening in the context of public relations social media practice leads to the first example of doublethink in the field. That is, *organization's might talk about how they listen to stakeholders (a good starting place for most relationships) but when pressed on how they actually spend their time they fall back on talking about activities that support PR's old broadcast model.*

7. Future directions (1): social media listening through a PR lens

This form of doublethink underlines that PR practice needs to address the communicative imbalance that exists in organizations between talking and listening to stakeholders. The supporting discussion also highlights how the listening capacity of social media is being under-utilized. As a way of tackling these issues in tandem a new conceptualization is introduced for social media listening. This is intended to provide a framework against which PR professionals can reflect on the existing and future practices of their organizations. It is proposed that by reconfiguring and expanding Crawford's (2009) work on what she calls the different disciplines of social media listening, it is possible to begin the process of identifying different organizational approaches from a public relations perspective. This is sympathetic to Kent's (2013) view that PR's "use of social media should be different than advertising or

marketing's use" (p. 342). The questions which shape the typology of listening that follows therefore become progressively more aligned to organizational goals such as stakeholder dialogue and problem solving.

The first question concerns whether the organization is just broadcasting on-line (*not listening*)? Second, is it monitoring what others are saying in social media to gain a better understanding of its operating environment and/or who is aware of the organization and their perceptions of it (*surveillance*)? Third, does the organization use social media as a customer service channel to respond to complaints and praise related specifically to its own products and services (*sales feedback*)? This positions listening activity in the realm of marketing rather than a wider strategic communication context. It includes responding to relevant media enquiries on customer service issues. Fourth, does the organization detect and then respond to specific questions generated by stakeholders that are not directly associated to its products and services (*reactive stakeholder listening*)? A good example of the types of issues covered by this form of listening would be the policies and practices associated with corporate social responsibility. Fifth, does the organization use social media as a tool to ask for - and then respond to - the views and opinions of stakeholders on issues that are beyond the realm of customer service (*pro-active stakeholder listening*)? It is important to pause and note that both forms of *stakeholder listening* are characterised here as discrete, one-off exchanges on a particular issue and therefore still a form of "engagement-at-arms-length" (Crawford, 2009, p. 531). Sixth, is the organization using social media to create environments that allow relevant stakeholders to contribute to dialogue and decision making on issues of mutual concern (*dialogic listening*)? This use of social media might assist with the collaborative management of a range of social dilemmas and wicked problems, such as in the sphere of environmental management and sustainability (Willis, 2012). In contrast to both forms of *stakeholder listening* this suggests an on-going, deliberative dialogue between an organization and its stakeholders.

The questions that make up this typology can help PR practitioners to audit their organization's listening activities. For example, does the organization do a combination of all of these forms of listening or deliver a matrix of activity involving some elements and not others? How does this correspond with its strategic objectives and the expectations of stakeholders? Where are the gaps in the organization's listening capability? What are the resource implications of filling these gaps? Attempting to address such questions is opportune given the growing focus in the PR field on relationship management and the need to ensure the views of stakeholders are heard.

8. PR scholarship and relationships

Doublethink is also a useful lens through which to view aspects of scholarship concerned with relationships in an OPR context. This is a crucial line of inquiry given that relationships are central to any discussion of OPR as they represent its core unit of analysis (Broom, Casey & Ritchey, 1997). Relationships are, however, a complex phenomenon and the OPR literature appears to acknowledge this challenge explicitly. For example, Bruning and Ledingham (1999) in their influential study talk about "complicated human behaviour" and a "mix of complex interactions that combine to influence human perceptions and behaviour" (p. 159). Heath (2013) has also warned recently that in its study of relationships the PR field

“must be aware of their complexity, multidimensionality, and the multiple layers of meaning that derive them and result from them” (p. 428).

This explicit association of complexity with the notion of relationships suggests there are limits on the ability of scholars (and indeed practitioners) to predict the relational outcomes of an organization’s actions towards its stakeholders (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010; Allen & Boulton, 2011). The interplay of intentions, choices and behaviour will yield unexpected and undesired outcomes. This means that people (whether academics or practitioners) cannot control the future direction of organization-public relationships. Indeed, Gilpin and Murphy (2010) highlight how changes in the media environment have undermined the extent to which an organization can legitimately try to exercise control over its relationships, “many of which are negotiated in publicly visible spaces of digital media” (p. 72). The communication and interaction that can help to create and sustain a positive relationship is now “rarely centralized” (Gilpin & Murphy, 2010, p. 72) and instead dispersed across a dynamic global eco-system of different groups and individuals. This contributes to a context characterized by relational turbulence, non-linearity and unpredictability.

Yet, at the same time as scholars seem to acknowledge this level of complexity and the uncertainty inherent within it, there is a persistent contradiction at play in the OPR field. This focuses on the need amongst researchers to measure, quantify and predict relationships. Such a linear mindset suggests that if practitioners in an organization do “x” or “y” then “z” will happen in relational terms. For example, Huang and Zhang (2013) in their overview of the OPR literature talk about a methodological preference for quantitative approaches. Given the envelope of complexity that surrounds OPR, they conclude unsurprisingly that the quest for “definitive measurement criteria for OPR, such as “relationship dimensions”, “relational features”, and “relationship quality indicators,” continue to be elusive” (p. 87).

9. The importance of context in relational expertise

The pursuit of predictive theory in the OPR literature runs the risk of undermining the credibility of academic research with practice. While prescribed relational rules and indicators may help PR practitioners to understand some of the features of relationships they will not get them very far when guiding performance in complex social situations. Indeed, the types of rules and other abstractions of relationships highlighted by Huang and Zhang (2013) have to be particularised for specific situations. As Stacey (2012) notes these are never the same as the original context of the research leading to ambiguity, uncertainty and unpredictability in how different relational tools and techniques are used. The pioneering work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) highlights that those who are expert and proficient in different fields do not rely on rules. Indeed, insisting that rules should be followed can undermine understanding of what really counts in these situations. Dreyfus and Dreyfus specifically refute the idea that people generally follow a linear and rational method of reasoning involving sets of formulas, rules, plans and decisions. While such an approach might be effective in situations involving well defined tasks and solutions, they argue it is much less useful when confronting problems that are harder to define, such as how a PR practitioner might seek to develop a relationship with a key stakeholder.

This thinking leads Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) to conclude that there are different kinds of intelligent behaviour to analytical reasoning and that these are particularly prevalent

amongst individuals who are experts in their fields. The most accomplished performers not only understand methods and routines but also have a heightened appreciation of how and when to use them. They exhibit situational sensitivity, flexibility and improvisational capability. The emphasis therefore becomes about contextual intelligence and how individual practitioners continually adapt and reconfigure their technical knowledge to cope with an uncertain environment.

The key insight to be drawn from Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) for this study is that context becomes increasingly important the further someone moves up the different levels of learning. For the Dreyfus brothers context and knowledge are indivisible at the level of the expert practitioner. Rather than being characterised by specific skills, rules and routine, the upper echelons of performance are characterised by heightened situational awareness and decision making. This sensitivity to a given situation, as well as the ability to use and adapt existing knowledge, forms the essence of human expertise.

10. Future directions (2): phronesis, relationships and public relations

This discussion leads to the study's second example of doublethink. That is, *scholars highlight the complex nature of relationships but then disregard the uncertainty inherent in complexity to engage in research underpinned by the belief that stakeholder relationships can be predicted and managed*. It is argued that a better appreciation of the context in which PR professionals operate will provide scholars with a more rounded insight on what is going on in organizational practice around relationships. Avoiding a reductionist view of the nature of organization-public relationships feeds into a wider debate about the role and purpose of social scientific inquiry. In his influential polemic on the subject Flyvbjerg (2001) warns social scientists against the dangers of trying to emulate natural science by seeking to produce explanatory and predictive theory. As a counter-weight to this he develops a conceptualisation of social science based upon an interpretation of Aristotle's concept of phronesis. Flyvbjerg argues that phronesis goes beyond both analytical and scientific knowledge, as well as technical know-how (what Aristotle refers to respectively as *episteme* and *techne*). Drawing on the work of Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986), he suggests that phronetic research focusses instead on the judgements and decisions people make in social contexts. This is because, according to Flyvbjerg, "attempts to reduce social science and theory either to *episteme* or *techne*, or to comprehend them in those terms, are misguided" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 2). He goes on to add that personal experience via trial and error is more important than context-independent, explicit, verbally formulated facts and rules.

Phronesis therefore advocates a detailed understanding of organizational context and how practitioners react to emerging situations. This suggests a greater emphasis in OPR scholarship on case study research, a view endorsed by Heath (2013) in his state-of-the-art reflections on the study of relationships in public relations. Flyvbjerg (2001) notes that case studies produce precisely the type of context-dependent knowledge which makes it possible to move from the lower to the higher levels in the learning process" (p. 71). Given context-dependent knowledge and experience represent the essence of expert activity this places the case study centre stage as a research and teaching method in OPR "or to put it more generally, still: as a method of learning" (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 71).

11. Conclusion

Aspects of practice and scholarship in the field of OPR are not living up to their promise. Wine might be expected but vinegar is often served. These failings are characterised in this study as a form of disciplinary doublethink. At the heart of these contradictions is a tendency to ignore a number of inconvenient truths. In the area of PR practice these relate to the logistical and attitudinal challenges associated with organizations investing greater resources in the architecture of listening. Social media activities associated with listening to stakeholders are used to illustrate this point. In public relations scholarship the contradiction is associated with research outcomes based on the misguided premise that human relationships are linear and predictable. The idea of doublethink in these two contexts serves as a counterpoint to representational rhetoric that seeks to position PR as a practical and/or theoretical discipline able to tackle the challenges inherent in organisation-stakeholder relationships. It calls instead for approaches that seek to address the true complexity of the challenge. This involves new explorations on the nature of listening in PR practice, as well as accepting the necessity of understanding the fine grain of how human relationships play out in different organisational contexts.

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