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# **School Discipline Coverage in Australian Newspapers: Impact on Public Perceptions, Educational Decisions and Policy**

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## **Abstract**

The role of the media in shaping public perceptions and opinions about significant political and social issues has long been the subject of both speculation and research. It is widely accepted that what we know about, think and believe about what happens in the world, outside of personal first-hand experience, is shaped, and some would say orchestrated, by how these events are reported in newspapers and communicated through the medium of radio and television. This paper explores how the topic of school discipline is covered by Australia's major newspapers. Newspaper reports on discipline and related topics such as behaviour management, disruptive and antisocial behaviour in schools were examined for the period 2000 – 2004. The analysis focused on the types of topics covered, evidence of bias and the 'message' conveyed in the reports about this important and highly contentious subject. The paper concludes with a commentary the relationship between how discipline is reported on in the media and what actually happens in schools and how educational decisions and policy might be influenced by such reports.

The role of the media in shaping public perceptions and opinions about significant political and social issues has long been the subject of much speculation and debate (Maeroff, 1998; Spitzer, 1993; Wilson & Wilson, 2001; Wimmer and Dominick, 1991). It is widely accepted that what we know about, think about and believe about what happens in the world, outside of personal first-hand experience, is shaped, and some would say orchestrated, by how these events are reported in newspapers and communicated through the medium of radio and television.

Few people experience first-hand a terrorist attack, most don't know what it is like to be held in a foreign prison while undergoing a trial for suspected drug trafficking. Thankfully, relatively few of us are the victims of a violent crime or are close to those who are the victims or even the perpetrators of such acts. The reality of those events and our responses to them are experienced vicariously through the word pictures created by journalists and the visual and auditory realism of television reports. The mass media brings simulated reality into our lives and we find ourselves relying on those sources to provide a conceptualized image of the real world.

This view of the influence of the media is elaborated on in what is called 'Cultivation Theory' (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorielli, 1980). Cultivation Theory holds that the popular media, such as television, has the power to influence our view of the world and it is "primarily responsible for our perceptions of day-to-day norms and reality" (Infante, Rancer & Womack, 1997, p. 383). Television, in particular, is our major source of information today and has become a part of us and part of our family life. George Gerbner likened it to a "key member of the family, the one who tells the most stories most of the time" (Gerbner et al 1980, p. 14). Research has taken this one step further. According to Severin & Tankard (1997) heavy television viewers are more likely to perceive the world as it is portrayed on the television screen. The limitations of such a 'world view' are strikingly portrayed by the character Chance in the movie *Being There*, the story of a gardener who had spent his entire life in the house of an old man and whose only knowledge of the world outside the house was through television. When the man dies, Chance is put out on the street with no knowledge of the world except what he had learned from television.

'Cultivation Theory' is not without its critics, particularly those who argue that the capacity of the mass media to shape our thinking is exaggerated. Another explanation of the influence of the media, 'Agenda-Setting Theory', places somewhat less emphasis on the impact of the media on public opinion and more emphasis on what issues are actually covered in the media (Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Bernard Cohen was one of the earliest authorities to pick up on this in respect of the print media when he stated "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen, 1963, p. 13).

It is likely that both theories or explanations of the media's influence describe, to some extent, what actually happens. The media can and often does decide what is reported, and these stories, in whole or in part, are assimilated and accommodated into the emotional fabric and cognitive structures of individual readers and viewers. How the media chooses to report and to comment on those events and issues will also have an impact too and will inevitably influence the thinking of many.

## The Media and Education

Unlike many world events, when it comes to education and schools, almost everyone has first-hand experience of the teaching-learning process. For most, that has entailed six years of primary and six years of secondary education - a very long exposure indeed to the workings of the classroom, school curricula and the dynamics of school life. Parents relive that experience from another perspective when their children go to school. Many in the community would regard themselves as knowledgeable about the education process and some would regard themselves as 'experts' on every school education related topic or issue.

One could expect that with this level of experiential background on the subject of education, the public would be well informed and far less susceptible to distorted, biased, or in any way manipulated media coverage of the education enterprise. This is not the view taken by educational researchers and commentators David Berliner and Bruce Biddle. In their controversial book *The Manufactured Crisis* they provide a sharp critique of U.S. media coverage of school reform initiatives and student achievement data. They claim the public is being manipulated into believing that the schools, particularly public schools in the United States, are failing in their responsibilities to students and the community (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

Berliner and Biddle's report card on press coverage of educational issues lists seven deficiencies. These included the media's propensity to cover negative stories over more positive news, its simplistic and incomplete treatment of what are often complex social as well as educational problems, and the misuse and abuse of statistical data when reporting on national and international student achievement studies (Berliner & Biddle, 1995).

It's not just the weaknesses and limitations of educational reporting that Berliner and Biddle write about. At the heart of their criticism of the media is their argument and belief that, in America, there exists an orchestrated conspiracy in the media to criticise and undermine the public school system. The schools are blamed for the reported (some would say distorted) poor results of American school students in international comparative studies of achievement in Science and Mathematics. And the schools are also seen as sharing in the blame for perceived soaring levels of youth violence and crime. The interests of the wealthy and of those who would promote the privatization of schools are behind this conspiracy Berliner and Biddle believe, and in the media they appear to have a willing ally:

Powerful people were... pursuing a political agenda designed to weaken the nation's public schools... To this end they have been prepared to tell lies, suppress evidence, scapegoat educators, and sow endless confusion. We consider this conduct particularly despicable.

(Berliner & Biddle, 1995, p xi)

Conspiracy theory aside, Berliner and Biddle do more than just hint that in Agenda-Setting Theory there is a perfect explanation for how the U.S. media approaches its coverage of educational issues.

Not everyone, including educators, share Berliner and Biddle's conspiracy hypothesis, but these same authorities are not shy in expressing their frustration with educational reporting in the media. A constant source of concern is the targeting of the more dramatic problems confronting schools for news items, the "if it bleeds, it leads" mentality. Newspapers are businesses and as such are driven by economic not philanthropic forces. Editors are constantly demanding and fashioning news items that will attract the attention of readers or viewers and in turn advertisers. Stories about declining levels of student respect for teachers, of declining test results, of teachers with poor literacy and numeracy skills, of out of control classrooms, of drug trafficking, theft, vandalism and shootings will get coverage over promising educational reforms, innovative teaching techniques, exceptional and dedicated teachers and poor and disadvantaged students who have managed to achieve at the national average on academic achievement tests. Another equally disheartening approach evident in much of the U.S. media is what is known as the "gotcha" mentality of many investigative reporters, where someone or some agency is found to be at fault and is exposed for incompetence or actions not in the best interests of students or the public.

In their defence, journalists and reporters argue that they are simply covering what happens in schools. Discipline is an issue in many schools as is safety. They point to public opinion polls, particularly in the U.S., that have for decades found that the public considers discipline the biggest problem facing schools, along with drugs, violence, declining moral behaviour and lack of respect for authority. Other things happen in schools, but the public is less interested in these problems or achievements. It is little wonder then that the media shares this lack of interest.

## **Australian Media and Schools**

The power and influence of the media in Australia is no less than that of its American counterpart (Balsom, 1999). Australian journalists and reporters are known for their aggressive pursuit of a story. Politicians and big business cross media barons at their peril. On the subject of media coverage of schools and school education though, we know very little. There is little, however, to suggest that the print or television media engage in an orchestrated campaign to undermine or to favour either our public or private school systems nor indeed any education agency or interest group. How do the media, and specifically the press, cover important educational topics and issues in Australia? What images and understandings of schools and school education are created by this coverage? What potential impact might newspaper reporting have on the formulation of educational policy? These questions were examined in the exploratory study reported here – an analysis of newspaper reporting on discipline and related issues in schools - an area that receives considerable press coverage and for which the public has a keen interest.

## **An Analysis of Australian Newspaper Coverage of Discipline in Schools**

### **Methodology**

All major Australian capital city, territory and many provincial city newspapers made up the study's sample, a total of 21 newspapers (see Appendix 1 for a list of all newspapers). Using electronic data base sources e.g. Factiva and on line newspaper

archives, a search was made for articles on discipline in schools and related subjects such as behaviour management and student behaviour, for the five year period 2000 -2004. An initial content analysis was carried out on a sample of these articles and this analysis led to a number of additional topics being identified for an expanded data base and archive search. These topics included: drugs in schools, violence in schools, bullying and victimization in schools, truancy, student suspensions and expulsions. One hundred and sixty-one articles were identified as meeting this broad search criteria and were used in subsequent analyses.

The content analysis represented the first level of analysis of newspaper coverage of discipline in Australian schools and was the source for identifying what stories and issues were typically reported in the press. In effect, these stories constitute the press 'agenda' on the subject of discipline in schools and are one means by which the public's understanding of the status of discipline in schools is formed. A second level of analysis, an analysis of bias in reporting, was employed as a means of identifying the message conveyed in the newspaper reports i.e. what images of discipline in Australian schools were being portrayed and what recommendations or actions were directly or indirectly communicated as needing to flow from the situations described in the reports. These messages were viewed as a further means by which public opinion about discipline in schools can potentially be influenced, if not shaped, by media reporting. In addition recommendations and calls for action in press reports have the potential to influence school policy where politicians and to some extent school administrators perceive that the reports reflect broad based public opinion.

In the literature on detecting bias in newspapers and other print media, eight categories of analysis are typically cited and used (Media Awareness Network, 2005; Lee and Solomon, 1990). These are:

1. **Bias through selection and omission.** What stories, events or perspectives are included or not included.
2. **Bias through placement.** The importance attached to the story by where in the newspaper it is placed.
3. **Bias by headline.** The message conveyed about the story by the words chosen for the headline.
4. **Bias by photos, captions and camera angles.** The emotive nature of the image used to illustrate the story.
5. **Bias through the use of names and titles.** How an individual, group or organization is designated and the labels used to describe them.
6. **Bias through statistics and crowd counts.** Incomplete, inaccurate or selective use of statistics. Words chosen to describe crowd size.
7. **Bias by source control.** Sources of information and the status of those sources.
8. **Word choice and tone.** Use of positive or negative words to describe a person or situation.

While the above criteria provide a relatively comprehensive and detailed basis for examining bias in newspaper reports, they require a subjective judgment on the part of the rater (the researcher in the case of this study). As a reliability check, an additional rater was employed (graduate student in education) to analyse all the newspaper articles. Where discrepancies in analysis were found these items were analysed a third time, jointly by the researcher and second rater, to achieve a consensus.

## Results

### Content Analysis

The parameters set for the selection of newspaper articles for this study, along with the media's propensity for covering more sensational news events, were such that 'negative' stories about the status of discipline in schools were more likely to be found. This was borne out in the content analysis of the 161 articles generated by the search (see Figure 1). Violence, both physical and verbal, in classrooms, in the playground and to and from school, featured in 23.84 percent of the articles analysed. The great majority of these items were about threats and assaults on teachers by students and, in more recent reports, threats and assaults by parents and former students. Bullying and other forms of student-student harassment (including sexual harassment) also featured prominently. There were few reports of physical aggression involving a weapon. Where weapons were involved these were knives.

Thirty-seven percent (37.77 percent) of the news reports related to a cluster of broadly associated behaviour management topics. These included suspensions and expulsions (13.24 percent), disruptive behaviour in the classroom (9.93 percent), teacher stress brought on by the demands of behaviour management (5.96 percent), student drug use at school (3.97 percent), truancy (2.65 percent) and teacher industrial action stemming from discipline issues (1.99 percent).

The largest single category of news items centred around news stories describing and commenting on policies, programs and strategies for managing problem behaviour and problem students. Many of these items were framed in positive terms, providing readers with the view that governments, departments of education and schools were investigating, trialling or employing innovative and promising ways of reducing discipline problems.

**Figure 1**  
**Content Analysis of Major Australian Newspapers\***

<b>Category</b>	<b>Percentage of all Articles on Discipline</b>
Policies, programs & strategies	26.49%
Violence	23.84%

Suspensions & expulsions	13.24%
Disruptive classroom behaviour	9.93%
Teacher stress	5.86%
Drugs	3.97%
Funding, resources, support services	3.31%
Student rights	3.31%
Truancy	2.65%
Teacher industrial action	1.99%
Other: (ADHD, school uniforms, litigation, corporal punishment, etc.).	5.31%

\*Many articles covered several topics. In these cases the topic given the most prominence was used in assigning the article to a content category.

### **Placement and Headlines**

Front page stories and news items that appear earlier in the newspaper are perceived as more important by both newspaper editors and the public. Few of the 161 reports on school discipline and related issues achieved front page status. Student behaviour issues that did make the front page were often youth issues of a broader community nature including, drug and alcohol abuse, youth gangs, juvenile crime and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Most stories specifically on school discipline were placed several pages into the newspaper.

The importance of headlines cannot be underestimated. It is widely recognised that many readers 'scan' newspapers rather than read all of a news story. Often just the headline is read and perhaps an initial paragraph or two. In newspaper reports paragraphs frequently are just one or two sentences in length. Readers who adopt this strategy rely on limited and often sensationalised information. Figure 2 lists some of the more sensational headlines employed in newspaper reports. These headlines send a clear and unequivocal message that violence is rife in Australian schools and the safety of teachers and students is under threat. This message is conveyed despite evidence, sometimes cited in the same reports, that contradicts this conclusion. Frequently headlines are not representative of the associated news item, focusing on just one of the more dramatic aspects of the event covered. Just how many readers can see through this journalistic hyperbole is not known.

**Figure 2**  
**Sensational Headlines**

Students Fear Riot at School	Teachers Fear Weapons and Death Threats
Teachers Seek Police Shield	The trauma of Living on a Knife's Edge
Rage Hits Schools	Classroom Violence Against Teachers Soars
Teachers Demand Protection from Louts	Teachers Rebel
Disturbing Trends in Schools	Out of Control – Shock Statistics as Students
New Menace in Schools	Run Wild in Queensland Schools

### **Story Sources**

Where the story ‘comes from’ and the sources quoted in news reports shape the story and the nature of the message conveyed. Bias by source control is a major issue in political reporting. It would appear that bias of this nature is not a significant feature of reporting on the issue of discipline in Australian schools. Journalist and editor manipulation can and does occur in the construction of headlines, but framing of an entire story was not evident in the sample of 161 newspaper articles analysed in this study. Most articles were news reports rather than feature articles or editorial commentaries and reporters relied on information from key players and stakeholders to build a story. Teachers were represented by a teacher union president or official in the main. Principals spoke for themselves or were represented by an officer of a principals association or a department of education spokesperson. Where parents were directly involved they spoke for themselves or their views were expressed by presidents of parents and citizens organizations. Reporters frequently sought out comments and viewpoints from students. The views of Ministers of Education, directors of state and territory education departments, politicians and premiers all featured in stories about school discipline and student behaviour problems. Where ‘experts’ were called on to comment, these were invariably university academics and psychologists. Most stories were built around two or more different and sometimes competing sources.

### **Names, Word Choice and Tone**

News media often use labels and titles to describe people, places and events. The nature of these labels and titles set the tone of the story and can influence how readers view the news story and the individuals or organizations that are the focus of the news item. A journalist’s decision to use labels such as “terrorist”, “insurgent” or “freedom fighter” often reflect a deliberate choice and provides an indication of how the journalist attempts to frame the story. On the subject of discipline and problem behaviour students, when a reporter uses labels such as “louts” and “thugs” the established tone is one of fear, outrage and hostility. These may be perfectly natural emotions in response to violent and threatening student behaviour, but they also can lead to emotional (punitive and retaliatory) as opposed to considered and rational responses to the problem. Apart from the use of overly dramatic and misleading headlines, the great majority of news

stories examined in this study involved accurate and fair labeling and little obvious attempt to use language to create an emotional response in readers. Overall, journalists were measured in any commentary they provided and almost mechanical in seeking and reporting information and viewpoints from a number of sources including those with competing viewpoints.

### **Bias Through Statistics**

Journalists have been criticised by educators and others for both their lack of understanding of statistics and their manipulation of statistics in news reports. Two areas stand out as being problematic when the subject is school discipline. These are, statistics on the number of problem behaviour students in schools and data on the number of students who are suspended and expelled from school. The former statistic is further complicated in that educators themselves can't agree on just how many school students present problem behaviours. Additionally, there are different types of problem behaviours and degrees of severity within those categories. One educational authority quoted in one news story identified that one in five student's present problem behaviours in school. It was not clear what categories and what levels of severity the authority included in the one-in-five figure. What became a problem in that story was that the story's focus was on violence in schools, leaving readers with the understanding that as many as twenty percent of students are engaging in violent acts of the magnitude described in the article – a clearly erroneous assumption.

Data on the number of student suspensions and expulsions from schools has been a rich source of news items in recent years. Tens of thousands of such incidents are recorded each year and since the abolition of corporal punishment in state schools around Australia in the 1990's the numbers have been increasing dramatically. In Queensland, journalists initially need to extract the information from Education Queensland using the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act. Their persistence and the nature of the stories they produced resulted in the state government agreeing to make the data accessible to the public.

The large numbers of exclusions make for compelling and some would say disturbing reading. In 2001 in NSW there were 40,819 reported suspensions. How is the public to interpret this figure? What is not made clear in many news reports is whether this figure represents 40, 819 students (i.e. different students) or a smaller number of students who happen to be suspended multiple times. Not all news reports on the subject provide the total number of students in the school system in question, thus allowing a better judgment of the magnitude of the problem. Accuracy would be further enhanced by information about the duration of suspension. Presumably a suspension of one day is indicative of a less serious problem than a suspension of 15 days. Few news reports provide this level of detail. A study of suspensions and expulsions in NSW commissioned by the government revealed that public schools in that state had an average of 1.6 serious behaviour incidents in a year and that many schools reported no incidents (Gonczi & Riordan, 2002). This led the author of the study to conclude that serious violence in NSW schools is rare. The study's report has received very little attention in the news, an omission, calculated or not, that does little to allay the fear prevalent in the community that discipline in schools is out of control.

### **Policies, Programs and Strategies**

The news reports analysed for this research were abundant with suggestions and recommendations for how to deal with discipline problems in school (see Figure 3). The

security of schools and the safety of teachers and students featured strongly along with recommendations for zero tolerance of and mandatory suspensions or expulsions for student violence and drug use. There were repeated calls to remove chronically disruptive students to separate facilities so that the learning of well-behave students would not be interfered with. A number of reports dealt with regulations governing

**Figure 3**  
**Policies, Programs & Strategies**

<p><b>Security</b> Security guards Police stationed at schools Surveillance cameras Mobile phones for teachers</p> <p><b>Resources and Facilities</b> Behaviour management schools/centres Behaviour management specialists Social welfare officers Additional school counsellors Reduction in class size Increase in teacher aide support</p> <p><b>Programs and Strategies</b> Social skills training programs Anti-Bullying programs Alternative education programs Restorative Justice programs Mental health programs Responsible Thinking Classrooms Code of Behaviour Professional development for teachers</p>	<p><b>Policies and Regulations</b> Database of expelled students Zero tolerance for violence and drug use Mandatory suspension or expulsion for violence and drug use Laws and penalties for violent intruders and threatening behaviour by intruders on school campuses Regulations governing restraint of students Isolation and time-out regulations Regulations governing searches of student bags and lockers</p>
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teacher use of restraint on students, time out or withdrawal rooms and the searching of student bags and lockers. The capacity of teachers to manage groups of students was linked to issues of class size and funding for teacher aide support. The provision of professional development for teachers in the area of behaviour management was seen as a priority. Numerous programs and strategies for behaviour management were identified and promoted. Without exception these were positive and supportive in nature reflecting an emerging view that traditional punitive responses were failing or limited in their capacity to reduce disruptive and anti-social behaviour, particularly for more serious types of behaviour and chronically misbehaving students.

**Influence on Decision Making and Policy Development**

The media can and does wield a lot of influence. We have seen how media pressure influenced the Queensland government to make state school suspension and expulsion data available to the public. We have seen how persistent media reports about violent and disruptive behaviour in schools and the rising tide of suspensions and expulsions prompted the NSW government to support an independent report on the situation

Gonczi & Riordan, 2002). A plethora of news reports on unruly student behaviour on school buses prompted the NSW government to pass the Passenger Transport (Bus Services) Regulation, 2004; a regulation allowing for fines and the banning of students from school buses. Both Queensland and NSW have passed laws providing for fines and jail sentences for intruders on school campuses who threaten or assault students or staff. Queensland has introduced a police presence at some schools, a measure spurred on by news reports about the safety of students at school. Queensland's 'Education Laws for the Future' discussion paper has prompted a proposal that parents be required to sign a document that they support the Code of Conduct of their children's school (Department of Education & the Arts, 2004).

One of the most significant educational decisions made by a state government has been the introduction of separate educational facilities for chronically misbehaving students. The facilities, behaviour management schools and 'suspension' centres, have been established in NSW. The efficacy of such segregated facilities has been questioned on educational and social justice grounds. Their establishment is no doubt based on political reasoning that public opinion is firmly behind removing disruptive students from regular schools. The media has been at the forefront of reporting these opinions and similar newspaper reports and the promotion of the idea of alternative schools and centres for difficult to manage and alienated children and youth have appeared in the press around the country.

## **Discussion**

Two theories guide our understanding of the influence of the media – 'cultivation theory' and 'Agenda-Setting Theory'. A definitive answer to whether or to what extent the press influences and helps form public perceptions of educational issues and events is not easy to find. Certainly there is evidence that press coverage, often of an intense nature, has preceded many political and educational decisions that relate to discipline and student behaviour. On the other hand though, one has to question the potential impact of newspaper reports on educational topics when over a five-year period just 161 articles relevant to discipline in 21 papers across the nation could be located. To this, one needs to factor in the placement (mostly several pages into the paper), the length of the reports (usually between 300 – 400 words), and reader behaviour (to read the headline and to quickly scan the article). Even given the practice of newspapers to sensationalise reports through exaggerated and sometimes misleading headlines, the extent to which even this practice captures reader attention and influences public thinking is questionable.

There is more evidence in this examination of newspaper coverage of discipline and related issues, of agenda-setting theory in practice. Newspaper reports focused predominantly on several key topics – violence, safety, suspensions and expulsions and teacher stress. Items from, what could be described as the full agenda for discipline and student behaviour, were just occasionally visited. Rarely were issues covered in any depth. For example, the introduction of segregated facilities for behaviour problem students and how this contrasts with and contradicts expressed policies of inclusive education and social justice could and arguably should be addressed, but, so far they have received no coverage.

Unlike the American media which has been criticised for carrying out an orchestrated campaign of criticism of public education and educators in that country and misleading the public in respect of student achievement data and the level of violence in schools, there is little indication that the Australian press has adopted a similar approach. Indeed,

using common indicators of media bias, the report card on Australian journalists and editors is good, if not glowing. What is particularly noteworthy is the balanced approach journalists have taken to the sources used to develop their stories and particularly in respect of the relative prominence given to punitive as opposed to more supportive responses to discipline problems. When the issue of youth crime and antisocial behaviour outside of the school context is reported on in the news, there is a much stronger focus on retributive forms of justice and a poorly disguised disdain for restorative judicial practices. In this respect at least, the media appears to recognize and accept the educative and supportive role of schools in the social development of children and are receptive to reforms and practices that are far removed from the calls to “bring back the cane” that surface from time to time.

Reading the newspaper articles sampled for this study one is struck by the reactive role adopted by educators at all levels. Educators it would appear have an uncomfortable relationship with the media, brought on perhaps by seemingly always being called on to respond to a problem, criticism or crisis. In this respect educators are constantly on the back foot and in defensive mode. This allows for little opportunity to actively communicate and promote the many positive and innovative programs and directions schools are adopting and taking in both pedagogy and behaviour management. The media, certainly the press, appears to be open and receptive to such stories. Educators need to be more proactive and assertive in making sure these stories are covered and in the broader process of agenda setting for educational topics of all kinds.

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## Appendix 1

### Newspaper Sample

The Courier Mail Hobart Mercury Sydney Morning Herald The Australian The West Australian The Age Sunday Times Sunday Mail Sun Herald Sunday Age Sunday Telegraph	Sunday Herald Sun Sunday Territorian Daily Telegraph Canberra Times The Newcastle Herald Gold Coast Bulletin Townsville Bulletin The Cairns Post Centralian Advocate Illawarra Mercury
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