

SOME PROBLEMS IN INTERNATIONAL COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

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Abstract: This article examines some of the problems and difficulties encountered in international comparative research programmes in mass communications. To ensure comparability the units of analysis should be determined by the nature of the research, its aims and objectives and it is essential to be clear about what, precisely, is being compared. The lack of consensus manifested in dichotomization into 'conventional' and 'critical' approaches is one of the crucial issues arising from the nature of social science. The other is suitability of exported models, theories, concepts and methods to Third World conditions. The one-way flow has existed in research as well, but the indigenization of social science cannot be dismissed although it could lead to further weakening of consensus. The experiences from former research, which are reviewed in this paper, should give us advice regarding what we should not do and where we should not go.

The task I have been given is to examine some of the problems and difficulties likely to be encountered in designing and executing international, comparative research programmes in mass communications. I shall do this, inter alia, by drawing on my research experience over thirty years, during which time I have been responsible for, or contributed to, some twelve international research exercises, with participating countries ranging from three to over twenty in any given project.

Lessons Learned?

The immediate purpose of this examination on this

occasion is to see what, if anything, can be learned from past research which might contribute to the current discussions on the possibility of developing a new international news flow study. This might be conceived as a follow-up to the earlier study, involving twenty-nine countries, which was carried out in 1979, and reported in a UNESCO publication in 1985.[1]

There can be no doubt that we should have learned something -- not least from the aforementioned study. There have been plenty of opportunities, and relevant publications are available.[2] Unfortunately, as the discussions on future research possibilities have clearly illustrated, we do not seem to learn from the past as we should do; sometimes it appears that we are not even aware of the past, failing to accept that social science without history is blind and wasteful. So often, at these international research meetings, it is impossible to escape a *deja vu* feeling, as so many attempts are made to re-invent the wheel. Social scientists rarely seem to apply social science to social science.

We may divide the problems and difficulties in comparative research into two broad categories, namely administrative and social scientific. In this presentation I intend to give more attention to the latter, although readily accepting that the two types of problems should not be seen in watertight compartments. For, as I shall show, financial, practical, logistical, political, cultural and institutional considerations invariably play an important part in circumscribing or facilitating the social scientific effort.

These days we are frequently told that social science is now in a position to benefit tremendously from technological developments and that, consequently, what was extremely difficult or even impossible a decade ago in international comparative research, is now much simpler and more straightforward. It would, of course, be foolish to turn one's back on these developments, but we would do well to remember that technology, and methods generally, are but a means to an end. The wheels may now be capable of grinding more effectively, what what about the grist? What do we put into the mill? What questions are we asking? What are our aims and objectives? How do we define our

problems?

It is when we come to these sorts of questions, and when we try to apply them to any possible future news flow study, that I become concerned about what progress has really been made in this field over the last quarter of a century. We might have more convenient and more economical methods at our disposal, but are we adequately equipped intellectually to effectively use these methods, or even better equipped intellectually than we were some twenty or thirty years ago?

I shall return to these matters later, but at this stage I think it would be worth while to look at the first foreign news study and see how it was conceived and developed, identifying some of the crucial factors in its passage.

The first foreign news study was carried out in 1979. It stemmed from the development of a cooperative working relationship between UNESCO and the International Association for Mass Communication Research which dated from the UNESCO Montreal Conference in 1969. This conference has been recognized, by friend and foe alike, as constituting "a watershed in international communication research", particularly as far as UNESCO's involvement was concerned. At the risk of oversimplification, it marked a shift from a conventional, mainly service, administrative and western dominated approach, to a more critical approach with a wider sociological orientation.

The record suggests that UNESCO would not have been involved in such a potentially critical study as the news study prior to the Montreal Conference and unfortunately, more recent records clearly indicate that its involvement in this sort of work was short-lived. I have dealt elsewhere [3] with the wider political ramifications of these developments; suffice it to state here that UNESCO's paymasters were not going to fund research that might challenge the status quo and their own international vested interests.

In a sense, then, the first news study was a response to a particular form of social-political concern, and it reflected a relatively new and by no means universally

popular, social scientific approach. This need not be a bad thing in itself, but when the concern is not uniformly experienced or interpreted, and the approach not adequately understood by all the participating countries it often can, and in this case did, lead to a series of "political compromises" at several levels.

These compromises -- well nigh inevitable in the international arena at that time -- do not make for good social science and, in the circumstances, it was not far short of miraculous that the work was successfully completed and, above all, that a useful and interesting report finally emerged.

Of course, to write about "good social science" raises more questions than it solves, for not all the problems encountered in the news study stemmed from the external conditions just outlined - the internal nature of social science/mass communication research was at least equally to blame.

This is not the place for a detailed discussion on the nature of social science but, in reviewing old studies and attempting to use these to inform new ones, there are certain fundamental features that must be borne in mind.

Nearly 30 years ago our host in Tampere, Kaarle Nordenstreng, characterized mainstream, conventional communication research in the USA as being concerned with "doing rather than with thinking". Around the same time an American sociologist, Charles Wright, commented on the theoretical paucity of so much of mass communication research which was marked by crude conceptualization, a lack of hypotheses and the predominance of means over ends. In a similar vein, I concluded a review of the field by asking why it was that so many research reports seemed to consist of allegedly definitive statistical statements about the irrelevant, the trivial, the inconsequential and sometimes the plainly invalid?

As indicated earlier, this type of conventional approach did not go unchallenged, particularly after the Montreal Conference, but it still underpinned the vast bulk of research that was carried out at the time, and no doubt still does to this day. It certainly was an important part

of the ethos within which the news study was conceived and executed. Moreover, just to make matters more complicated, the critical approach attracted its extremists, whose preference for an ideological package tour frequently led them to regard hard evidence as irrelevant. Planning an international comparative study involving over twenty countries was no simple matter twenty years ago, and recent exchanges, at this meeting and elsewhere, indicate that many of the problems we experienced then are still with us.

I do not wish to imply that there has been no progress in mass communication research over the last quarter of a century, although it should be obvious now that what I might regard as "progress" is not so regarded by all who work in this field, including some who might wish to take part in any future study. One needs to bear this in mind in what follows.

Methodology

At the risk of oversimplifying the issue it may be said that, over the last thirty years or so, there has been a greater willingness to accept that, in international comparative research, there was no need for all the participating countries to rigidly and mechanically apply the same agreed instruments and that a more flexible, sociological orientation which recognized national, cultural, social and linguistic differences, and the implications of these differences for design and data collection, had its advantages. Put briefly, it was recognized that, except in the most simple of categories, different questions, at least differently presented questions (reflecting differences in culture, language, etc.) -- not the same questions -- would be necessary to evoke the same type of information in the different circumstances. This would hold even when the research was dealing with what might be termed the "common denominator", i.e. the area of enquiry included in the work of all the participating countries. Moreover, in addition to this, it came to be accepted that, in order to do justice to the complexity of the subject matter, it would be necessary for each country to include special segments in their enquiries which, amongst other things, would facilitate a deeper understanding of national differences.

One final general point in this connection was that the hard/soft, quantitative/qualitative, hierarchical dichotomy with regard to data was rejected. Wherever possible attempts were made to blend the two. For example, quantitative data could be enriched and refined by data gained from more ethnographic and anthropological approaches -- both being equally valid and useful.[4]

Let us now look in a little more detail at the significance of this shift in the mode of enquiry.

Some of the researchers have recognized for some time that international comparative research was bedevilled not only by understandable and inevitable problems (practical, logistical, policies, research interests, resources, etc.) but also by misconceptions and misunderstandings about the very nature and potential of this type of research. Above all, it was felt that there was a need to ask what was really meant by comparative studies, and what should be the essence of the units of comparative analysis?

The units of analysis selected in any given project are essentially determined by the nature of the research and its aims and objectives. Unfortunately, this is not always clearly understood. For example, in one project in which I was involved, which focussed on producers and their knowledge of their audience, the point was raised, as a criticism, that the children in the different countries were not all of the same age. Age may be central in some studies, but the important factor in this particular study was that the main unit of comparison was not young people of the same age in different countries, but the relationship between the broadcasting institutions and broadcasters on the one hand, and their target audience (which might be 13/14 years in one country, 12/13 years in another) on the other. The match, or lack of it, between the two and the factors that influenced both provision and reaction to provision, were what mattered, and what had to be analysed.

With regard to another project it had to be emphasized that comparability should not be confined to simple, and somewhat obvious comparisons of age, sex, etc. The aims of the research in question meant that it was not adequate to compare the media behaviour of, say, farmworkers in Hungary and fishermen in Canada. It was necessary, in this

particular case, that the comparisons should centre on the way in which the different media systems were organized and the differences in what was provided, how the provision was used by different groups within the society, (e.g., farmers and fishermen), and what were the consequences of that use in the different countries in relation to the selected objectives of the research. It is absolutely essential to be clear about what, precisely, is being compared. Yet so often this is not clarified, and the situation is further complicated and obscured by the introduction of conventional variables (sex, class, age, educational background, etc., etc.!), which could be totally irrelevant as far as the main aims of the specific project are concerned.

There used to be many researchers -- in fact there are still some - who automatically accept that even in the type of research discussed here [5] the carbon-copy, blue-print application in different societies of pre-tested questionnaire items, in a highly structured research instrument, is capable of providing data suitable for genuine comparative analysis. The position held here is that unless the "analysis" is confined to very simple categories this approach is meaningless, and is likely to produce invalid and misleading information.

It is important to stress that language does not develop in a vacuum, and that words, phrases, sentences, questions, etc., have meanings only within given cultural, or even sub-cultural contexts. Consequently, it would be a mistake to attempt to produce uniformity in the verbal stimulus (questionnaire items) in a universe which is likely to be characterized by linguistic-cultural pluralism. The task is to make sure, in the various societies/cultures in which the research is being carried out, that the verbal stimulus or question used in the interview or survey, or the coding category in the analysis of news, is the one most capable of eliciting the precise type of information that the objectives require. Real comparability is obtained at this level of analysis, not at question item level. In different cultures -- because they are different -- different questions have to be asked (in different ways) to obtain the same sort of information. Comparing the answers to allegedly identical questions asked in different countries is not necessarily comparing like with like, as some would have us believe.

Taking another specific example from some research on Foreign Images it was discovered that personal contacts with foreigners meant totally different things in different countries. In Canada, England and Germany the dominant form of contact could be living in the same town or neighbourhood as immigrants, but in Hungary it was more likely to consist of meeting foreign tourists. Whilst in some countries immigrants were seen by the children as coming from economically less developed cultures, in Hungary the tourists (quite different from immigrants or workers, but the main source of foreign contact nonetheless), were more likely to be seen as representatives of an economically more developed society. Generally, this meant that high contact/low contact had totally different implications in different countries in terms of both the nature of the contact and its wider effects. This demonstrates that it is not valid to attempt an item by item, precise comparison between the various participating countries. The unit of comparison should be the nature, the essence of the information sought and evoked under certain agreed categories.

In most comparative research attempts are usually made to achieve the widest possible band of agreement so that comparisons can be attempted on a wide scale. Even so, it has to be recognized that it would be quite artificial and misleading to ignore real national differences at structural, institutional and cultural levels. Consequently, it is often appropriate -- in fact necessary -- for the researchers to pursue some lines of enquiry which would be relevant only - in their own country.

However, sometimes there is a price to pay for this flexibility. In certain circumstances the flexibility could result in insufficient attention being given to the main comparative elements -- the common denominators -- and might possibly lead to something approaching anarchy in presentation. In the design and planning it is necessary to strike the right balance between the common and the particular.

In any kind of comparative research it is not very useful simply to provide an item by item inventory of similarities and differences from the various participating

countries. The studies from the various countries need to be integrated or compared in relation to some model or set of guidelines. These guidelines make it possible to impose some sort of meaning and coherence on what would otherwise be a relatively meaningless collection of snippets and fragments. In other words, to be useful data have to be classified, analysed and interpreted in relation to a chosen set of principles, for data never speak for themselves. But, of course, there is not just one model, or one set of principles -- several may be available, so choices have to be made, and there are often fundamental disagreements amongst the participants. In the circumstances this lack of consensus is almost inevitable. What matters is to be clear as to what guidelines or models have been used, and to articulate this and specify the reasons for the choice. In studies such as these there is no room for spurious objectivity.

It is important to note that the above comments about the integration of data in accordance with selected guidelines or frameworks is more of a statement of an ideal than an accurate description of what normally happens in comparative research.

It is perhaps convenient that discussion of these methodological problems now enables us to return to some of the basic issues in relation to social scientific research which I mentioned earlier. Moreover, these problems and issues create certain difficulties with regard to the dissemination and acceptance of research results and, as will be seen, they are also relevant to any consideration as to the possibility of carrying out research in Third World countries.

Basic Issues

Let us then focus on two main aspects of what I regard as a very crucial issue - crucial to the nature and scope of social science and, in particular, to the application of social science, including mass communication research, to Third World situations. The first has to do with the lack of consensus in mass communication research, and in social science generally. The crude dichotomization into "conventional" and "critical" approaches, which I have used from time to time, is an example of this. These gross

categories conceal as much as they reveal, for they are by no means homogeneous. Although there are differences within as well as between, they reflect the main basic divisions between the Aristotelian hermeneutic approaches and the Galilean positivistic approaches which have characterized so much of conventional communication research. At this stage our main concern, without taking sides or without dismissing any of the approaches as illegitimate, is with the implications of this lack of consensus of these "warring schools", and the "ferment in the field" in an allegedly scientific exercise.

The situation becomes even more problematic when we add geographical and stage-of-development components to those contributing to the lack of consensus, and to the discontinuities already mentioned. There is ample evidence in mass communication research, as we saw earlier, to suggest that cultural, regional and national differences profoundly influence the research effort at all stages and levels.

But we should not expect to be free from such influences. It is not surprising if, in a situation of conflicting ideologies and other geo-cultural differences, we find disagreements across a wide range of relevant factors, including aims, purposes, needs, theories, conceptualization, design and methods. The different schools actually look for evidence (selectively defined, of course) in different places, and employ different criteria in assessing its validity. In such circumstances dialogue, meaningful exchanges and constructive debate are extremely difficult, if not impossible. The necessary common referents and agreed basic assumptions are lacking, as is the overlap in the respective fields of discourse which is the sine qua non of effective communication.

Yet we talk of "social _science_", emphasize the importance of _scientific method_, and in many cases act as though, once we have progressed beyond the understandable confusion and uncertainty associated with the embryonic stage of development, we shall be able to rid ourselves of the conflicts, contradictions and discontinuities and reach the holy grail of consensus, the hallmark of "real science".

But, realistically, what are the chances of this? Of

course there are differences within the natural and physical sciences, but on the whole they are not of the kind which make constructive dialogue well nigh impossible. If consensus is a mark of scientific maturity, as some would claim, then the social sciences are not very mature. What is more, it is possible that, by their very nature, the social sciences will never be able to grow up or mature in this way. This could mean that new criteria of development and maturity are required -- perhaps "healthy, critical dissensus"! The continued use of natural science as a model for social science may not be appropriate.

In suggesting this I am by no means wishing to signal the end of mass communication research or international comparative studies. Systematic, disciplined, fruitful studies can still be carried out within an eclectic framework, and assessed accordingly. This is not an escape from rigour, but an acceptance of an approach (albeit as yet by no means a fully developed approach) which is capable of doing justice to the complex set of relationships, structures and processes which characterize our field of study.

Third World Indigenization

The next point, very closely related to the previous one, centres on mass communication and media research in Third World countries. What are we exporting from the so-called developed world in research? How suitable are these exported models, theories, concepts, methods, etc., for the conditions it is intended that they should address? Are political, commercial, cultural and media imperialisms being followed by research imperialism? What forms of indigenization are required, and to what degree should they be applied? These are just a few of the questions which should be asked, both directly in relation to mass communication research, and more generally and more widely with regard to the question of universality and relativity in the social sciences. Obviously this last mentioned matter, important though it is, can only receive passing mention here, but it is relevant to our general problem.

Wherever we look in international communication research -- exports and imports of textbooks, articles and journals; citations, references and footnotes; employment of

experts (even in international agencies), and the funding, planning and execution of research, we are essentially looking at a dependency situation. This is a situation which is characterized by a one-way flow of values, ideas, models, methods and resources from north to south. It may even be seen more specifically as a flow from the Anglo-Saxon language fraternity to the rest of the world, and perhaps even more specifically still, within the aforementioned parameters, as an instance of a one-way traffic system which enabled USA-dominated social science of the conventional nature to penetrate cultures in many parts of the world which were quite different from the culture in the USA. As the USA emerged as a super-power in social science, like it did in other spheres, even what little input there was from other sources tended to be excluded.

To me (although there would be considerable opposition to this stance), there is no doubt that much of what was exported from the USA, post-World War II, and the implications of these exports, were on the whole detrimental. The exports certainly did not serve to increase our understanding of the Third World and its communication requirements, nor did they facilitate development in any way.

Daniel Lerner's extremely influential work on The Passing of Traditional Society was a prime example of this, irrespective of whether or not it is regarded as an artefact of the cold-war politics of that time. However, it has been argued that this is not simply a matter of unsuitable exports -- it is a much more fundamental matter of bad social science per se. The point being made here is that the principles and models underpinning Lerner's research (and much more research by others in a similar vein) would not have been adequate in any situation, including the situation in the USA. To export such models simply compounded the felony, so to speak. It was not solely a Third World problem -- it was a social science problem.

This takes us back to the questions already raised about the very nature, potential and universal applicability of social science, no matter how free it may be from the aforementioned conditioning. We have plenty of basic problems at the national or regional levels, as we have already noted, but we must now ask how can we possibly deal

with the increasing diversification within our general field of communication research which inevitably stems from the extension of our investigations to cultures outside the cultures within which our ideas and tools were conceived, developed and articulated?

In general terms, the answer frequently given to this question is "Indigenization at Several Levels". Unfortunately, this proposed solution is often put forward without any apparent recognition that, in certain circumstances, it could lead to increasing dissonance and discontinuity, and a further weakening of the consensus which many still regard as the hallmark of social scientific maturity.

The global cry for the indigenization of social scientific and mass communication research cannot be dismissed, but it needs to be treated with reserve in certain areas, particularly in relation to some of the ways in which it has already been applied. I would have thought that we could readily accept the need for emerging nations and regions to determine their own research policies, priorities and strategies, rather than having them externally imposed, as was the case so often in the past. The need for home-based institutions, housing native staff capable of carrying out the necessary research in their own countries, also appears to be generally acceptable -- at least on the surface. I insert this "surface" qualification simply because, for many years now, the case has been fiercely argued that the situation would improve to the benefit of Third World countries if the nationals of those countries were given the opportunity, and the resources, to enable them to carry out the research. But this is far too simplistic a view, as our experience makes clear, for many of these nationals have been trained as conventional researchers, mostly in universities in the USA, and seem unable to free themselves from the ideological shackles of their educational and professional mentors. In this way they tend to exacerbate the situation and perpetuate the error by giving the "alien import" a national seal of approval.

The essence of this particular problem of indigenization, particularly as far as international comparative research is concerned, is at the levels of

language, conceptualization, models, paradigms, theories and methods, which means that it is central to the more fundamental problems of social science with regard to universalism and relativism and as to whether we should be pursuing consensus (in part or in whole), or accepting the inevitability of dissensus.

Perspectives Ahead

As someone who has been actively involved in the design, planning, organization, execution and reporting of international comparative research for over a quarter of a century, my approach to the problem is not from the armchair, but from the field. There is no panacea and I have no easy answers; to me the problem is still there. In fact, the questionings and explorations are only just beginning, and there will be much more to question and explore in the years ahead.

However, we know enough from recent experiences in research programmes to put us on our guard against those who come with new, all embracing solutions. Having rightly rejected the absolutism of positivism and all its universalistic implications for international research, we must be careful not to jump out of the frying pan into the fire. In rejecting a position, there is no logical necessity to wholeheartedly adopt its mirror opposite. Yet there was some evidence at the Tampere meeting that this is precisely what some were doing. The danger in this unthinking, knee-jerk reaction is that knowledge is reduced to mere perspectivalism -- a riot of subjective visions -- and a form of anarchy prevails. There are many examples today, inside and outside our particular field within social science, which demonstrate the tyranny of the absolutism of non-absolutism, where anything goes and where plural subjectivism frequently masquerades as knowledge. Useful comparative research cannot thrive in such conditions which, incidentally, are also conducive to political paralysis.

So, in our explorations, we have to navigate between Scylla and Charybdis in the hope of eventually reaching a safe port. An accompanying difficulty is that, as yet, we haven't quite decided on our destination -- again, the nature of social science! Choices will have to be made and, in the end, we can't dodge the issues of validity or values.

In comparative international studies we need to start with an acceptance of differences at all levels. But it is quite legitimate -- in fact necessary -- to proceed from this base and attempt to identify, establish, articulate and combine what, if anything, is common. As Paul Hirst argues, different ways of life may be related by ties of symmetric reciprocity and we may eventually find common denominators -- universals which reflect the nature and needs of every culture. At least this possibility should not be ruled out, but it has to be established in our research, not simply assumed or taken for granted.

This, then, is what we see when we attempt to look into the future with the benefit of the experience of the past and when, in our particular case, we contemplate a second news study. The situation we are discussing is a complex and difficult one, but granted the embryonic nature of developments in our field, this should not surprise us, so there is no need for pessimism. It is better to be realistic and aware of the problems, for only in this way can we address them. In some ways it is the false optimism and "certainty" of the positivists that have muddied the waters, and made things more difficult than they might have been.

I think that we may say that the picture that emerges from our overview is one of general guidance rather than clear, specific lines to follow. However, I would suggest that there is still a very clear indication that, even if we don't know exactly what to do or where to go, the picture is unambiguous as to what we should not do, and where we should not go. I hope that this has been made clear.

There is one further and final problem which, so far, I have only touched on in passing. This has to do with the dissemination of our research results, and the influence of our work on policy and the public debate. The conclusion of the research project is the beginning, not the end of the educative task. Another aspect of this problem was mentioned by one of the contributors when he asked, Why do we do this work? Why do we want to carry out a second news study?

There can be little doubt that just as we found

differences in the approaches to social science and mass communication research, we shall also find differences in the answers to these questions. Some researchers, perhaps most of those interested in the news study, although by no means a uniform group, are probably motivated in some way or other by social concerns and would hope, to put it at its simplest, that their work might inform communication policy and lead to the more effective meeting of communication needs -- however these are defined. On the whole they would not necessarily regard theoretical sophistication, methodological rigour and normative concerns as being incompatible.

But there are others who would object to the inclusion of the normative element (referring to it as "politicization"), although in consciously espousing scientific neutrality they would probably not be aware of the conservative, status quo maintenance function of their work. It is worth noting that the safe, uncritical results from this school are more likely to be fed into policy than those findings which stem from the more challenging stance of those whose social concern leads them to ask questions about the nature and function of existing systems.

Needless to say the critical school, if in fact there is such a group, is certainly not homogeneous -- the part played by "the ideologists" has already been mentioned. Additionally, there is no shortage of those who might think of themselves as belonging who, because of their lack of discipline, obscurantist writings and alienated stances, fail to mount any effective challenge.

Quite simply, no one involved in policy-making is influenced by these people, although they seem to increase in numbers with the burgeoning of communication studies. Their work, such as it is, is not regarded as serious outside their own incestuous group. They fall back on themselves manifesting, as Robert Hughes put it, that "powerlessness corrupts, and absolute powerlessness corrupts absolutely". In many cases what might at one time have been a concern with wider social issues gets channeled into an overriding concern with self, with one's own existence and institutional preservation -- "academic life, and communication studies for the sake of academic life and communication studies".

I mention these points in concluding this presentation on problems in research simply because, if we wish our work to be taken seriously, to have impact and inform policy -- and I hope we do -- then we need to be aware and face up to not only the difficulties inherent in social science, but also those associated with the wider (and wider) "academic" community inhabited by those who claim to address communication issues along the lines just mentioned. As we have seen, the external opposition to critical research is formidable enough as it is -- it doesn't require reinforcing from this source.

Notes

1. Foreign News in the Media: International Reporting in 29 Countries, (Ed.) Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi, Kaarle Nordenstreng, Robert Stevenson, and Frank Ugboajah, UNESCO, Paris, 1985.

2. See, for example, James D. Halloran, A Quarter of a Century of Prix Jeunesse Research, Stiftung Prix Jeunesse, Munich, 1990, pp. 117-126.

3. James D. Halloran, The Context of Mass Communication Research, Paris: UNESCO, 1980.

4. Again it needs to be emphasized that this was not a "majority movement".

5. These examples are taken from audience studies, and the lessons might not apply _to the same degree_ in the content analysis of news bulletins. Nevertheless, the same general principles are relevant across the board.

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