

Reporting on Immigration: A Content Analysis of Major U.S. Newspapers' Coverage of Mexican Immigration

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ABSTRACT

Immigration in the U.S. is an issue that has polarizing political implications at the national and local levels. Reports by the press shape how the public perceives immigration and influence public policy regarding immigrants and immigration. This study examines the stories about Mexican immigration published by four major U.S. newspapers by analyzing their patterns, frequency, length, topics, and framing. This research seeks to shed light on the national print news media's coverage of Mexican immigration to the United States as well as any of its perceived attempts to influence public opinion and public policy.

Key words: Mexican immigration, U.S. news media, public opinion, immigration images, American journalism

RESUMEN

La inmigración en Estados Unidos conlleva implicaciones políticas polarizantes en los niveles locales y nacional. Los informes de prensa moldean la percepción pública sobre el tema e influyen en las políticas locales hacia los inmigrantes y la inmigración. Este artículo examina las historias que sobre la inmigración mexicana presentan cuatro de los principales diarios estadounidenses al analizar sus patrones, frecuencia, tamaño, principales temas y contexto. Busca echar luz sobre la cobertura de las noticias impresas sobre la inmigración mexicana hacia Estados Unidos, así como los intentos de estos medios para influir en la opinión pública y en las políticas públicas.

Palabras clave: inmigración mexicana, prensa estadounidense, opinión pública, imágenes de la inmigración, periodismo estadounidense

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Talk of the national implications of immigration from Mexico to the United States frequently appears in newspaper headlines. It is an ordinary occurrence when U.S. news media covers stories of crime related to border crossings, immigration forces, and the legislation that tries to control actions involving movement across the border. One such example is a front-page article in the *New York Times* published March 22, 2009. Entitled "A Slippery Place in the U.S. Work Force," it examines the stories of U.S. immigrants, highlighting the experience of an undocumented migrant from Mexico. It documents his struggles and triumphs as a worker in the United States trying to support his family. Such stories infiltrate the minds of media consumers, making them capable of shaping both public opinion and public policy.

The portrayal of Mexican immigration in the news media is a largely unexplored topic in need of critical examination. The increasing number of Mexican immigrants in the United States presents a challenge to the press concerning how to cover this population. These immigrants' experiences ought to be reported objectively in order for the public to gain a realistic perception of them as well as their communities, aspirations, and participation in U.S. society. The limited research available on this topic—from the media perspective—suggests the need for a national-level analysis to determine how the media portrays the experiences of Mexican immigrants. This article will attempt to uncover the dispersion and length, themes and topics, and frames of the stories published in four major U.S. print publications about immigration from Mexico to the United States. It also will examine these publications' attempts to influence public opinion and public policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The majority of social science literature has concentrated on the description and analysis of immigrants' lives, their families, and their experiences in communities across the United States with little emphasis on the role of the media. Some of the most relevant research on this topic has been conducted on a relatively small scale and with limited analysis of media coverage of immigrants. Yet, the attempt of Santana and Smith (2001) to determine how the Florida media covered Hispanics focuses on an appropriate population. The study included a content analysis of *The Orlando Sentinel* to ascertain how Hispanics living in the surrounding area were represented. Also, focus groups were conducted with some of the Hispanics living in the area to determine how they thought they were being portrayed in the publication. Participants in these focus groups largely agreed that the publication did not ignore local Hispanics; rather, it portrayed them favorably. They also identified areas they found

troubling, including a heavy concentration on Hispanic individuals involved in crime and a lack of Hispanic sources in stories. Results from the content analysis both contradicted and supported the criticisms from the focus groups. Hispanics were mentioned in 115 news stories, only 10 of which portrayed them as criminals. However, Hispanics were used as sources in only 30 percent of stories about Hispanics. Though this newspaper seemed to cover Hispanics fairly, the perception of its coverage among the Hispanic population was somewhat distorted.

Though limited, other research has examined the experiences of Mexicans living in the United States. One such study illustrated the stories of Mexican children and their immigration to the United States. Horton (2008) asserted that children are a primary reason for Mexican immigration to the United States. In-depth interviews with parents revealed that many leave Mexico after having seen images of healthy, happy American children portrayed in the media. In hopes of providing their children with a more luxurious childhood, parents sometimes leave their children in Mexico when they immigrate to the United States. Their children stay behind until the parents can afford to have them join them. Horton contends that U.S. media portrays these immigrant families negatively. Children are depicted as victims of immigration, as the media focuses on images of abandonment and the struggles of many children to rejoin their parents. Such assertions deserve further analysis for validation purposes, which this article intends to do.

The portrayal of Mexican immigration in the media becomes especially concerning when considering the media's agenda-setting capabilities. A study by Wanta, Golan, and Lee (2004) sought to determine how the coverage of foreign nations affected media consumers' beliefs about them. The results of content analysis and a survey showed that the more negatively a country was depicted in the media, the more negative the public's perception of it. Though positive coverage had no discernable effect on public opinion, these results illustrate the implications of the negative portrayal of a particular culture in the media. Thus, it is important to note how Mexican immigrants are represented to determine if this may play a role in shaping public opinion and public policy about these people.

Moreover, the framing of news coverage is an important mechanism to consider. If the media is able to shape public opinion through the way stories are presented, public perceptions of these issues could be manufactured. De Vreese's examination of the frames in which news stories are presented (2004) determined that they shape public opinion. Frames, found in headlines, introductions, and questions, among others, establish the structure of the story and, ultimately, help individuals compartmentalize their thoughts about the subject being addressed, to make later judgments about it. The individuals surveyed were able to change the salience of framing

effects only when they were aware that framing was taking place. De Vreese concluded that the media have the ability to shape public opinion by creating frames emphasizing specific facts or values within a story. If stories published about Mexican immigrants contain framing that promotes stereotypical images of them, media consumers ought to be made aware of how their views could be shaped by their media consumption.

Similar findings illustrate how frames directly influence those consuming them. Price, Tewksbury, and Powers (1997) used four experimental frames to create stories about the same issue. The stories were then used to see how readers would respond to the varying frames. The results showed that different frames produced different responses, even though the stories were about the same topic. The frames became even more salient when they fed into readers' perceived pre-established thoughts and feelings.

More recently, Aday (2006) found "frame setting" –the merging of framing and agenda setting– used in stories has a noticeable effect on audiences. In this study, the author distinguished between advocacy frames, which are "largely one-sided, often solution-oriented, and/or reflecting consensus," and objectivist frames, which are two-sided and offer a balanced approach to the presentation of an issue. The study concluded that advocacy frames used in stories not only favor the issue addressed, but they affectively encourage media consumers to make judgments in favor of the opinion imbedded in the stories. Objectivist frames did not elicit this effect. Thus, news stories presented with bias –however blatant or latent– have the ability to influence public opinion and, potentially, public policy.

The implications of these findings delve below the surface level implications of each framed news story; they may create or affirm readers' prejudices. Domke, McCoy, and Torres (1999) observed that the news can be presented to provoke racial cognitions, which can be connected to subsequent political judgments. The authors conducted a survey after having participants read framed news stories. When "material values," including economics and tangible resources, were presented in the stories, the survey found racial and ethnic issues were heavily considered by participants. When "ethical values," including human rights and personal responsibility, were presented, racial and ethnic issues were not heavily considered by participants. Specifically, when participants were presented with a "material" story about Hispanics, they considered immigration issues. When the story was presented with "ethical values," they did not. The authors conclude that the way the media frame stories influences whether consumers apply racial prejudices and stereotypes. Such findings are of notable importance when considering this study's objective. The racial implications of how Mexican immigrants are portrayed in the media must be

examined to better understand whether public opinion is susceptible to change based on uses of framing and agenda setting within the news media.

In his book *Covering Immigration*, Leo Chavez argued that society forms its connotation of images in the media based upon the culture itself, as “they are constructed though the practices of communication engaged in by members of a social group” (2001: 35). Since the media often serve as the entry point for many conversations, the messages the media present have the ability to lead citizens to particular conclusions related to the material presented. Though Chavez’s work focused on the meaning within images in the media—in this case, magazines—the same logic can be applied to the words corresponding to those images. “An author is historically, socially, and culturally situated at the intersection of various discourses. Therefore, an author does not simply produce something that is purely autonomous in meaning; the meaning that is produced is societal in origin” (Chavez, 2001: 40). He went on to state that the meaning of something has to do with its cultural construction. Thus, the representations of Mexican immigrants in the media ought to be indicative of what the larger society thinks of them.

After examining numerous magazine covers published in the United States, Chavez concluded that “Mexican immigration has been represented almost entirely in alarmist imagery” (2001: 260). He found no image that depicted Mexican immigrants positively. All portrayed them as having “backwardness, peasantness, and lack of modern sophistication” (2001: 260). If these themes carry over into the content of other forms of media, this study is important in identifying them and alerting the news media and the public of the connotations they may have formed based on these depictions.

Ultimately, Chavez found that the images he studied led readers to form particular conclusions about Mexican immigrants. He concluded that “magazines are in the business of attracting consumers, but in a larger sense, they are also part of the national agenda of constructing subjects as citizens” (2001: 302). This is an important societal implication, especially if it is the case among major U.S. newspapers.

Specifically relating to national newspapers, one of the most comprehensive news media studies of Mexican immigrants in the United States was conducted by Celestino Fernandez and Lawrence Pedroza in 1982. The authors did a quantitative study examining stories published in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Arizona Daily Star* over a six-year period. They concluded that the news media displayed unbalanced and sometimes inaccurate reporting, which helped mold popular perceptions about Mexican immigrants and their communities. Since this study’s publication, no other published research has updated or shed additional light on its findings. This topic’s timeliness warrants the need for updated research and further critical analysis.

Not only does the permeability of the news media illustrate the need for this study, but the obvious lack of available research does as well. This article will attempt to uncover the way in which Mexican immigrants are portrayed in four of the most prominent U.S. newspapers. Such findings will provide a better understanding of the objectivity, however perceived, within the news media's coverage of Mexican immigrants.

METHODOLOGY

A content analysis examined the content, frames, and general news media coverage of issues related to Mexican immigration and the subsequent immigration experience in the United States. This study focuses on major U.S. newspapers that cover national and international issues and have the ability to influence the general public opinion and public policy (Gans, 2003; Schudson, 2002; McCombs, 2001). The newspapers it analyzes include the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*. These four papers serve as news resources for the national and international public as well as regional and local news media not only in print but also in electronic media –radio, television, and Internet (Meyer, 2004). Moreover, in 2010, according to BurrellesLuce, a company that tracks circulation figures for the top 100 newspapers, all four are among the top five circulations for U.S. newspapers: 1) *Wall Street Journal*, 2 024 269 daily; 2) *USA Today*, 1 900 116 daily; 3) *New York Times* 927 851 daily; and 5) *Washington Post*, 582 844 daily.

The research questions this study seeks to answer include:

- RQ1: What are the lengths and dispersions of stories covering U.S. immigration from Mexico in U.S. print news media?
- RQ2: What are the themes and topics commonly used by U.S. print news media to cover issues of U.S. immigration from Mexico?
- RQ3: What are the frames used by U.S. print news media to cover issues of U.S. immigration from Mexico?
- RQ4: What are the differences among U.S. print news media organizations' coverage U.S. immigration from Mexico?

The research period of this study spans the full year from June 1, 2008, to June 1, 2009. It includes a census of all stories published from Monday to Sunday, including those published in print editions and on websites.

Stories were located using the newspapers' websites, Lexis-Nexis, and ProQuest by using keyword searches, including all combinations of "Mexico" or "Mexican"

and “immigration” or “immigrant(s).” Each story was coded with a double coder format. One author coded first, then the primary author conducted a second stage coding to ensure consistency and reliability.

Each story analyzed was designated one or more topics that corresponded to its content. A total of nine topics were used in the categorization process of each piece.

The first topic, “border issues,” encompasses stories dealing with the physical location of the border between the United States and Mexico. For example, the *New York Times* published an article on May 8, 2009, called “Work Under Way on ‘Virtual Fence’” that announced the beginning of construction of a set of towers used to detect illegal immigrants along the United States-Mexico border. Thus, this story was included in the border issues category.

The “crime” topic deals with issues including criminal activity, court cases involving criminal activity, drugs, and violence. For example, the *New York Times* published an article on January 1, 2009, called “Push on Immigration Crimes Is Said to Shift Focus,” pointing to an increase in the prosecution and sentencing of illegal immigrants over a period of five years.

The third topic, “economics,” includes stories about the economy, jobs, businesses, and business interactions. For example, the *Washington Post* published an article on May 29, 2009, called “Slump Disrupts Migration; Fewer Mexicans Are Going to U.S. and Sending Money Home” that showed how a floundering economy affected the job market for immigrants, deterring them from moving to the United States.

The “education” topic focuses on the methods and availability of schooling. For example, the *New York Times* published a story on June 22, 2008, called “Breaking Down Barriers to Get Parents Involved,” illustrating the involvement of immigrant parents in the U.S. school system. It analyzed the possible causes of the lack parent participation among Mexican immigrants and how to overcome it. This article was also listed under the topic of “family.”

Family-related stories illustrate the relationships between members of families who are in some way involved in the immigration process. For example, the *New York Times* published an article on May 28, 2009, called “Study Reveals Changes Among Second-Generation Hispanics,” looking at the development of immigrant families. It detailed the differences between Mexican immigrants and their children, including names, immigration status, and level of education.

The topic of “health” details the physical and mental wellness of individuals as well as their living conditions. For example, the *Washington Post* published an article on July 23, 2008, called “AIDS Among Latinos on Rise; Hispanics in U.S. Face Unique Obstacles to Diagnosis, Treatment” that reported on the increased health

problems Mexican immigrants face, especially AIDS, and told the stories of individuals who faced these kinds of issues.

"Legislation" includes bills and policy matters relating to immigration and all attempts to make immigration legal. For example, the *Washington Post* published a story on May 20, 2009, called "Little New in Obama's Immigration Policy," describing the similarities between President Barack Obama's immigration policy and that of President George W. Bush. The story described possible legislative action that the Obama administration might take to restructure his predecessor's policy.

"Prejudice" involves stereotyping, persecution, or other hate-related incidents vocalized or physically performed by one or more of the story's subjects. This topic was never used as the sole category for a story. It was frequently found in stories also listed under the topic of "crime." For example, the *New York Times* published an article on May 16, 2009, called "After Pennsylvania Trial, Tensions Simmer Over Race" that described the aftermath of the murder of a Mexican immigrant. The individuals accused of the crime were acquitted and, as a result, racial violence broke out throughout the surrounding area.

Lastly, if a story is classified under the topic of "statistical analysis," it contains numerical data extracted from outside research and then presented to the reader. For example, *USA Today* published an article on February 4, 2009, called "Number of Illegal Immigrants Declines; Better Apprehension and Rising Unemployment in USA Cited" that provided a breakdown of data from the Department of Homeland Security.

Stories were also analyzed for their implications in influencing public opinion and public policy. Each story was categorized based upon its content and whether it sought to affect public policy (e.g., legislators, legislation, etc.), public opinion (i.e., it attempted to provoke the reader's emotions), or was informational (i.e., it made no attempt to influence public policy or public opinion).

RESULTS

The number of stories written about Mexican immigration to the United States varied immensely among the publications analyzed. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* accounted for more than 85 percent of the total stories (44.4 and 41.3 percent respectively). Neither *USA Today* nor the *Wall Street Journal* individually published more than 10 percent of the stories (10 and 4.4 percent respectively). Among these, story length rarely exceeded 2000 words (7.5 percent). The greatest number of stories (41.3 percent) ranged from 501 to 1000 words.

Table 1
STORY DISTRIBUTION AND LENGTH

	<i>New York Times</i>	Percent	<i>Wash. Post</i>	Percent	<i>USA Today</i>	Percent	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	Percent	Total	Percent
Total No. of Stories	71	44.4	66	41.3	16	10.0	7	4.4	160	100.0
Length (No. of Words)										
0-500	19	26.8 ¹	9	13.6	5	31.3	3	42.9	36	22.5
501-1 000	22	31.0	34	51.5	8	50.0	2	28.6	66	41.3
1 001-2 000	20	28.2	22	33.3	2	12.5	2	28.6	46	28.8
2 000+	10	14.1	1	1.5	1	6.3	0	0.0	12	7.5

¹ Percentages of story length are in relation to the total number of stories in each newspaper.

Most of the stories published about Mexican immigration in these four publications (95 percent) were written about events that happened in the United States. Another 2.5 percent were stories featuring action in both Mexico and the United States. The majority (52.5 percent) focused on illegal immigration, and 21.9 percent cited factors including both legal and illegal immigration.

Table 2
STORY CONTENT

	<i>New York Times</i>	Percent ¹	<i>Wash. Post</i>	Percent	<i>USA Today</i>	Percent	<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	Percent	Total	Percent
Country										
United States	69	97.2	62	93.9	14	87.5	7	100.0	152	95.0
Mexico	1	1.4	2	3.0	1	6.3	0	0.0	4	2.5
Both	1	1.4	2	3.0	1	6.3	0	0.0	4	2.5
Migrant Population Type										
Documented	13	18.3	8	12.1	2	12.5	1	14.3	24	15.0
Undocumented	42	59.2	37	56.1	3	18.8	2	28.6	84	52.5
Both	13	18.3	13	19.7	6	37.5	3	42.9	35	21.9
Unknown	3	4.2	8	12.1	5	31.3	1	14.3	17	10.6
Frames										
Public Opinion	39	54.9	49	74.2	13	81.3	5	71.4	106	66.3
Public Policy	9	12.7	6	9.1	0	0.0	0	0.0	15	9.4
Informational	23	32.4	11	16.7	3	18.8	2	18.8	39	24.4

¹ Percentages calculated based on the respective newspaper.

These stories were mainly used to influence public opinion. The majority (66.3 percent) used the information presented to influence readers' emotions, opinions, or actions. A smaller number (24.4 percent) gave readers strictly informational content, while the remaining 9.4 percent was used to influence public policy.

Of the 160 stories analyzed, the topics they covered were diverse. Though many topics were touched on, the greatest percentage of stories examining one topic in all four publications involved crime (50.6 percent). The greatest percentage of stories for the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* was in the crime category (59.2 and 50 percent respectively).

Economics was the next largest category, totaling 30.6 percent of all the stories analyzed. It was the topic most used by the *Wall Street Journal* (57.1 percent) and tied for the top spot in *USA Today* (37.5 percent). It also garnered the second greatest percentage in the *New York Times* (32.4 percent).

The third largest group within a category was stories about legislation (28.1 percent). Though legislation was not the top category for any individual publication, it was second-highest for the *Washington Post* (40.9 percent).

Conversely, the least frequent topic among all stories was education (6.3 percent). Few stories analyzed from these four publications involved the education of Mexican immigrants. It was the lowest category for the *Washington Post* (4.5 percent) and tied for the lowest spot in the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* (0 percent and 5.6 percent, respectively).

Table 3
STORY TOPICS

	<i>New York Times</i>		<i>Wash. Post</i>		<i>USA Today</i>		<i>Wall Street Journal</i>		Total	
	Percent ¹		Percent		Percent		Percent		Percent	
Topics²										
Border issues	4	5.6	14	21.2	1	6.3	0	0.0	19	11.9
Crime	42	59.2	33	50.0	3	18.8	3	42.9	81	50.6
Economics	23	32.4	16	24.2	6	37.5	4	57.1	49	30.6
Education	4	5.6	3	4.5	3	18.8	0	0.0	10	6.3
Family	12	16.9	16	24.2	5	31.3	3	42.9	36	22.5
Health	11	15.5	14	21.2	6	37.5	0	0.0	31	19.4
Legislation	12	16.9	27	40.9	4	25.0	2	28.6	45	28.1
Prejudice	15	21.1	9	13.6	0	0.0	0	0.0	24	15.0
Statistical analysis	5	7.0	7	10.6	5	31.3	2	28.6	19	11.9

¹ Percentages calculated based on the respective newspaper.

² Stories may cover more than one topic, so percentages will not total 100 percent.

Also deserving notice is the topic that tied as the second least-covered category. Border issues were covered in only 11.9 percent of all the stories. It was among the two lowest percent-gaining categories for three of the publications (*New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*).

CONCLUSIONS

The *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* addressed the topic of Mexican immigration with significant similarity with regard to topic selection. Each provided coverage on a variety of issues related to immigration, from employability to assimilation into U.S. society. However, the topic most frequently covered was crime, including drug trafficking, violence in Mexican border towns, court/legal cases, and organized crime. This comes as no surprise given the escalation of violence and crime in Mexican border towns since 2006 and the propensity to connect any type of crime with illegal border crossers. These stories also exhibited strong tendencies in framing toward public opinion.

While the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published the majority of the stories analyzed, all four publications exhibited consistency. The majority of stories ranged from 501 to 1000 words. Furthermore, the vast majority illustrated events in the United States, and most involved illegal immigrants. This is not a surprise either as the newspapers focus on U.S. readers responding to domestic issues and the more politically problematic issue of illegal immigration.

On an individual level, the *New York Times* covered immigration most frequently and with lengthy, in-depth pieces that provided different perspectives on the issues surrounding the arrival of Mexican immigrants in the United States. The framing of its stories tended to be more compassionate about the difficulties Mexican immigrants confront in moving to the United States. This is important to note since the *New York Times* stories permeated public opinion in a way that makes the immigration process seem more human. Furthermore, the *New York Times* framed some stories toward influencing public policy. While this was not the case in the majority this publication's stories, it happened more frequently in the *Times*' stories than any of the other publication's stories.

The *Washington Post* covered immigration similarly: frequently, in depth, and in average-length stories that added more knowledge and information about the complexities and interdependent process of Mexican immigration to the United States. The *Post* frequently discussed family consequences of deportation, legalization impacts for labor markets, consequences on local education and health providers,

cost-benefit analysis of border controls, and the indirect connection to organized crime. Stories weighted heavily upon the impact of immigration on public opinion and national public policy.

USA Today printed fewer stories than the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* but in many cases, the stories were longer. They most frequently covered family issues and the participation of illegal workers in local economies across the United States, as well as statistical analysis. Coverage frequently connected the lives of immigrants and their families with the communities they live in; in a way, they also presented immigration in a more humane context. This newspaper also exhibited a strong framing toward public opinion by providing a look at health, family, and economic issues more often than legislative issues seeking to influence public policy at the state and local levels.

The *Wall Street Journal* offered the smallest number of stories related to Mexican immigration. As expected, considering this newspaper's aim toward economic and business journalism, its stories focused on labor economics, regulations, and implications for small and mid-size businesses, especially those in the service sector. And yet, it also published stories related to family, legislation, and crime. Similarly to the other publications analyzed, the *Wall Street Journal's* content oriented toward public opinion.

One of the major differences among these publications' coverage of Mexican immigration to the United States was the number of stories published. The *New York Times* and *Washington Post* devoted a great deal of coverage to the topic, while the work of *USA Today* and the *Wall Street Journal* dwarfed in comparison. The other is that the framing of stories tends to respond to the newspapers' traditional editorial policies. For instance, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* were not shy about making explicit statements in their stories about the nature of how policies need to be formulated or implemented. *Wall Street Journal* framing was more traditional by illustrating how immigration forces or policies affected businesses. And *USA Today*, published its stories with a more evident frame of social impact and social change by providing examples of the different issues surrounding immigration –from the personal, community, employment, school, and housing perspectives.

This study illustrates how four major U.S. newspapers reported on Mexican immigration and how they framed their stories. While these newspapers often set the national news agenda, two major areas still need study: regional and local newspapers with a direct impact on communities experiencing large numbers of Mexican immigrants as well as national and cable news broadcasting that tends to provide rapid snapshots capable of polarizing the public perspective. For instance, the recent passage of Arizona's SB1070, which allows state law enforcement agents to ask for proof of legal status in the U.S., has created a highly polarizing and con-

frontational environment that is difficult for the news media to cover not only in Arizona but in other states with large immigrant populations.

Another important area of future study is how the Mexican print and electronic news media presents the issue of immigration and if news content varies depending on the location of the news source. These studies, coupled with this article, will provide much-needed steps toward clarifying the news media's influence on public opinion and public policy as it relates to Mexican immigration to the United States.

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