

MAIN TOPIC

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The Future of Journalism Education in the United Kingdom: a Personal View from the Academy

Summary

Journalism training must not only equip students with the practical skills essential for their career, but must also show students how journalism 'participates in the production and circulation of meaning'. 'Journalism studies' is not an irrelevance to the trained journalist, or even a desirable add-on – it is an essential element of journalistic training. A journalist without an understanding of the history, values and ideology of her profession is an illiterate journalist. The consequences of the internet for journalism and journalism education could be disastrous. We must also be able to trust the information we are given – and in order to do that we need a new generation of ethically-conscious, well-trained journalists for the challenges faced by the new online environment. Those journalists must be prepared to be adaptable, which requires more than producing journalists to meet the perceived skill gaps of today's environment. The challenge for journalism educators is to be equally adaptable. The industry is asking and expecting a great deal of both educators and students. Most crucially, employers must recognise that training cannot be left to the universities alone.

Key Words: Journalism, Education, Training, Skill, Technology, Information

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TEMA BROJA

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Budućnost obrazovanja novinara u Ujedinjenom Kraljevstvu: osobni pogled s akademije

Sažetak

Školovanje novinara ne mora studente samo opskrbiti s praktičnim vještinama važnim za njihovu karijeru, nego im mora i pokazati kako novinarstvo «sudjeluje u proizvodnji i kruženju značenja». «Studij novinarstva» nije nešto nevažno školovanom novinaru, ili čak poželjan dodatak- to je jako važan element novinarskog školovanja. Novinar koji ne poznaje povijest, vrijednosti i ideologiju svoje profesije je neobrazovan novinar. Posljedice interneta mogle bi biti katastrofalne za novinarstvo i obrazovanje novinara. Moramo također biti sposobni vjerovati informacijama koje nam daju- a da bismo to učinili trebamo novu generaciju etički svjesnih, dobro obrazovanih novinara za izazove s kojima se suočava nova online sredina. Ti se novinari moraju pripremiti da budu prilagodljivi, što zahtijeva više od stvaranja novinara koji će moći svladati uočene nedostatke u vještini današnje sredine. Izazov za profesore novinarstva je da budu jednako prilagodljivi. Industrija traži i očekuje mnogo i od profesora i od studenata . Ono što je najbitnije je da poslodavci moraju prepoznati da se školovanje ne može prepustiti samo sveučilištima.

Ključne riječi: novinarstvo, obrazovanje, školovanje, vještina, tehnologija, informacija

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Introduction

Rod Liddle, former editor of BBC Radio Four's *Today* programme, perhaps the most influential news and current affairs output in the British media, believes that the basic principles of journalism could be mastered by 'most sentient beings ... in a couple of hours' (Liddle 2007). Maybe in Liddle's world, where waving a newly-acquired degree from either Oxford or Cambridge University in the direction of the BBC was enough to secure a job for life. Today, fresh from a university journalism course, the new entrant to the profession is expected to possess skills that just a few years ago would have been carried out by 'teams of technicians' (Delano 2008, 71). Even so, criticism of the standard of journalism graduates is widespread in the industry: arguably, the expectations of employers are unrealistic and some of their complaints unfair. This article explores the past, present and potential future of journalism education and training in the United Kingdom.

Some background

British university journalism degrees have a short history. London University briefly offered a journalism diploma more than sixty years ago, but the first established journalism courses offered in British universities did not appear until 1970 when Cardiff University offered a one-year postgraduate diploma: in 1971 the first undergraduate degree in Journalism was offered by City University in London. Most training continued to be provided by short concentrated courses or by day release, preparing young journalists apprenticed to newspapers for qualifications in law, news writing, public affairs and shorthand. In the last decade, the majority of journalism training has moved to higher education institutions. The growth, as universities have seen the market demand from both students and industry, has been phenomenal. Both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in Journalism (with areas ranging from Multimedia to Broadcast to Online to Sports) have proliferated.

Some of these courses are the much maligned 'Journalism Studies' where the emphasis is more on theoretical perspectives than practical skills. It has taken time for British universities to accept the place of largely vocational courses. There was considerable resistance to shorthand as a suitable object for university study among the traditional academic establishment, as those of us involved in establishing university journalism courses can testify. Now, vocational elements dominate most such courses. As Delano (2008, 73) points out, practical elements comprise about 60 percent of most BA courses and 80 percent of MA courses, far higher than in the USA where three-quarters of most courses are academic and analytical.

There are three major accreditation bodies for journalism training in Britain. Historically, each has been primarily concerned with a different area of the media. The oldest is the National Council for the Training of Journalists (NCTJ), which was established in 1951 following a Royal Commission on the Press which expressed serious concerns on the standards of reporting, notably in the 'tabloid' press (Temple 2008, 56-7). The NCTJ's practical examinations, including law, shorthand, public affairs and news writing – which students from accredited courses take in addition to their university examinations – remain the gold standard within the industry. There are currently 42 'education providers', ranging from commercial training organisations to universities, accredited by the NCTJ to offer approved journalism training courses. Recently, there have been concerns within academia (especially) that the NCTJ has failed to keep pace with developments in the industry and remains rooted in a culture in which the perceived requirements of print newspapers (especially local and regional) dominate. The NCTJ has now introduced a wider range of examinations and training programmes and its recent journalism skills survey admitted the need to re-examine some aspects of their requirements, notably in the much criticised Public Affairs syllabus.

The Broadcast Journalism Training Council (BJTC) is a partnership of all the main employers in the UK broadcast industry, including the BBC, ITV, Sky and Reuters. It accredits 'nearly 50' courses in 'nearly 30' college and universities, and, like the NCTJ, their standards are 'very much based on direct practical experience' (BJTC website, 2009). Unlike the NCTJ, it does not provide a suite of exams, but recognises the importance of entrants to broadcasting having training in law and core news-gathering skills. It has a more flexible approach to accreditation than the NCTJ, but equally rigorous standards on course delivery.

The Periodicals Training Council (PTC) has a very specific role. It is responsible for overseeing the delivery of vocational training and development within the magazine industry and accredits a number of pre-entry magazine journalism courses at undergraduate and postgraduate level. Working with the magazine industry, it also offers a number of vocational qualifications (PTC website).

New technology is breaking down the barriers between online, print and broadcast. The increasing demand for multi-media journalists, able to work in a variety of platforms, has meant an increase in university courses in multi-media journalism which do not fit comfortably within the frameworks of the existing accreditation bodies. Established courses have also had to respond to technological change. For example, on Staffordshire University's BA Journalism course, originally designed to prepare graduates largely for entry into the local newspaper market, students now take practical modules in broadcast and online journalism, digital photography and web-design. The BJTC and NCTJ have held a number of talks since 2006 about working more closely together on convergence initiatives but progress has been slow.

Accreditation – the seal of approval from one of these three bodies – has many pluses, but can also prove problematic: for example, some academic authorities do not care 'for the idea of an external non-academic entity deciding course standards'. Some, including some of the 'most prestigious courses' did not and do not seek NCTJ accreditation (Delano 2008, 73). Others, like Staffordshire University, recognised the value of accreditation from the NCTJ and BJTC, not just in terms of reassuring students, parents and prospective employers of the quality of the training offered, but for the valuable guidance offered by experienced trainers. However, care must be taken to ensure space on the curriculum for critical and analytical elements. As we shall see, those elements are potentially under threat from calls to increase the range of practical skills graduates possess.

The challenge of the new environment: journalism in the twenty-first century

In an age when the digital revolution means almost anyone can write an opinion piece or produce a video report and put it on a website, the question might be asked – do we need journalism training any more? Technological developments such as blogging have led to a widespread belief that ‘we are all journalists now’ (for a rebuttal of this, see Hudson & Temple, 2007). Blogging, it is claimed, has challenged or even ended journalism’s ‘reign of sovereignty’ (Rosen, 2005). Coleman argues that blogs have become key sources of information for those ‘who prefer to trust their own judgement rather than depend upon the spin, censorship and narrow agenda of the usual sources’ (2005: 276), which is a trenchant criticism of current journalistic practice. It is undeniable that never before have so many people been able to communicate their views to a potential audience of millions. However, blogs and suchlike are great ways to spread opinion and information, especially when it is unconventional, but they should not be confused with journalism.

Anyone can call themselves a journalist - the late Nicholas Tomalin’s famous prescription that the only qualities needed for journalistic success are a ‘ratlike cunning, a plausible manner and a little literary ability’ (cited in Randall, 2000, p.1) is still widely believed, as Rod Liddle’s comments at the start of this article demonstrate. But the future needs more than this. It needs a journalism which takes the best of current practice and imbues it with something else – a search for a ‘truth’ which is not influenced by the commercial and ideological needs of owners. The ‘thinking journalist’ – given not only the technical training necessary to survive in this new world but also essential critical skills – will prosper. In a potentially ‘chaotic’ and fragmented world there will be a market for news media we can trust and the university-trained journalist’s sound grounding in ethics will be a valuable tool.

There is no doubt that blogging and online journalism challenge established traditional perceptions of journalism but the lazy assumption that just because someone has an opinion they are a journalist needs to be contested. Clearly, a less elite-driven news agenda, one driven from the bottom-up rather than top-down and representing many different interests, offers the opportunity for effective engagement with political

issues by far more participants. However, the growth of online sites and the current parlous state of much of the traditional journalism industry (see Hodierne 2009), prompts some educators to argue that we need to train journalists to be much more self-sufficient. As one academic and professional working online says, that means 'not just operating without an employer - as freelancers, as self-publishers (online and in print, broadcast), but being able to operate without the 'trading name' of a newspaper or TV station giving them access to events, people, products, and (maybe most importantly) without news editors and workmates feeding them ideas' (interview, January 2009).

There is a clear technological argument that anyone with access to the means of distributing media is in the same position as a traditional broadcaster. So, in this multi-media world, what is journalism, and what is not journalism? The question might also be asked 'does it matter?' Is it, as noted, already a 'stale debate'? I'm with Brian McNair, who argues it matters because:

'the sociological significance of journalistic communication arises largely from the audience's expectations of a distinctive form and content and from their agreement that when these distinguishing characteristics are present the resulting communication enjoys a special status over others which are not journalistic' (1998, p.4)

Indeed, something of significance appears to be happening: the blogosphere is rapidly becoming colonised by the traditional media who initially ignored its existence. Blogs and alternative news sites are notoriously unreliable. Lies, rumour and supposition pose as truth, and our inability to weigh up the merits of such sources has meant that traditional news providers are flourishing in the new media. The majority of media companies now have web operations in addition to their main area of activity (NCTJ 2008, 9). We know the provenance and the ideological bias of websites such as those of the BBC and the *Telegraph*, and online versions of such established media are seen as particularly credible by the public (Johnson & Kaye 2002). Indeed, there is compelling evidence that blogs have been moulded by journalists to fit and 'in some ways, augment, traditional professional norms and practices': in other words, blogs are being 'normalised by journalists much as other aspects of the internet have been' (Singer 2005, 174).

So, it is clear that, despite the claims of those who argue anyone can be a journalist now, the demand for trained journalists has become even more crucial in a rapidly-changing professional industry. That is not to deny the possibilities the 'blogosphere' offers. As a web specialist and journalism educator points out:

'there are also opportunities opening up in the mainstream media as newspaper groups pull out of local print regions. Many of these titles supported print in terms of content and advertising revenues for many years; therefore the 'one man band' operation could find them still highly profitable using the right tools' (interview with author).

In order to take advantage of these sorts of opportunities, he argued that journalists will need to be trained to run every aspect 'from advertising to marketing' while not forgetting the requirement for them to learn the essential 'basic journalism' skills. Journalists in the decades ahead will have to be more self-sufficient, multi-skilled, proficient in working across a wide variety of platforms and, most importantly, ready to adapt to change. How well student journalists are being prepared for this new world is matter of much debate.

What do today's journalism graduates lack? The Journalism Skills Survey

The NCTJ, in cooperation with a number of other training and accreditation bodies, recently asked a variety of employers and trainers whether 'newly-trained journalists' were ready for the new media environment. Their research found that many journalism professionals perceive a 'skills shortage' in new entrants to journalism. In the traditional skills, particularly in their writing ability, shorthand and finding and developing stories, employers found many reasons for concern. They also found flaws in new entrants' ability with the newer journalistic skills such as, 'video, writing for search engine optimisation, writing for multi platforms, assembling news bulletins and audio or video packages' (NCTJ 2008, 7). However, the quoted comments from industry professionals tended to hark back to a 'golden age' when things were much better –

corresponding to their own early years in journalism – which might call into question their expectations of young journalists.

The NCTJ found there was 'no question' of compromise between old and new skills – unsurprisingly, employers wanted both. The skills survey report welcomed employer insistence on high levels of skill but skated over the difficulty of meeting not only the demands for enhanced 'traditional skills' but the insistence on adding yet more competencies to fledgling journalists, maintaining that, 'in addition to the traditional skills required to enter any of the main sectors employing journalists, new entrants also need the skills to work across all of the others' (NCTJ 2008, 9). In short, employers appear to want people who can come straight into their organisation with a wide variety of practical skills and operate to high levels across all platforms. They want Jacks of all trades – and masters of all trades.

However, and without acknowledgement from some critics, British university courses were already restructuring their courses to meet these objectives: the journalism team at Staffordshire University can testify to that. Journalism educators are constantly looking into the future to ensure their students are prepared. But something will have to give, and the concern is that the reflective and analytical elements of journalism courses will be gradually discarded by the demands of the market-place. It may be that optional modules – in which students are encouraged to select options from an eclectic menu that can range from specialist journalism to introductions to philosophy, ancient history or Spanish – will be reduced or eliminated, as has already happened on some university pathways. Students may be given no choice, which would run contrary to a number of aims of higher education.

We not only need to decide what we want from the next generation of journalists. A university education must do more – much more - than prepare our young people for the journalism workplace. Not all will get or want a journalism job, so their degree needs to prepare them for both the wider workplace and for 'life-long learning'. The study of any subject has its own intrinsic value, and the skills acquired when reading and researching any subject go far beyond the narrow confines of utility in the marketplace. We should not be in the business of turning out 'clones' fit merely to meet stated industry demands. So, ignoring those who believe that three year undergraduate journalism degrees are a waste of time, what do journalism students need to be taught in this new converging

environment? As Delano points out, the best of the degree courses offer both rigorous vocational training in writing and news-gathering, design skills, picture handling [and] production' (Delano 2008, 73) but also modules which justify the award of an academic degree. At Staffordshire, these critical and analytical elements – for example, in politics, sociology and law – are tailored to 'suit a dedicated journalism curriculum'. The teaching of law must embrace ethics. The teaching of government must include not only the structures of central and local government but – and in my opinion, far more importantly - the role played by journalism and media outlets in informing and shaping the public sphere. Public Affairs was 'often cited' by employers as one area where they would be prepared to compromise in order to accommodate new skills (NCTJ 2008) – certainly, in my experience the content of the NCTJ's Public Affairs curriculum is widely regarded as unsuitable and out-dated, an opinion its own research discovered was widely shared. However, and disregarding my own training as a political scientist, the idea of politically illiterate journalism graduates is not enticing.

Our first year journalism students study news writing, law, public affairs and shorthand. They also study the history and politics of the British press, theories of news values and critical analyses covering philosophical and cultural studies of media impact. Our first year core module in 'Thinking Journalism' introduces students to theoretical perspectives on journalism – the much-derided 'Journalism Studies' – in lectures and seminars which are specifically designed to produce thinking journalists. As noted above, even 'print' journalists now take modules in broadcast and online journalism, digital photography and web-design while broadcast journalism students must post to our online site *StaffsLive* as part of their newsday assessment.

The ability to find and write stories was seen as a weakness by employers in all sectors (NCTJ 2008, 19). On the best courses, students must seek out their own stories: for example, on broadcast newsdays, students must be encouraged to do more than repackage stories from local and national news media. Indeed, the BJTC insists that students on accredited courses already do this. From day one, all students must be taught to seek out and write original stories, and encouraged to submit them for publication.

The media environment is now undeniably multi-platform. In order to meet employer demands students must learn even more skills.

Indeed, some providers feel that the length of courses may need to be increased in order to integrate new skills such as video, pointing out that the job is 'more sophisticated' than just a decade ago – although some also felt employers were 'exaggerating what they want'. As the NCTJ's report noted, 'an expanding curriculum puts huge pressure on courses ... if any accrediting body wants to add content without taking anything out, something will have to give' (NCTJ 2008, 39). Among university educators, there is a clear concern that the demand for new skills in addition to maintaining (and improving!) traditional skills could lead to a thinning of resources and a loss of value.

Prior to the NCTJ's skills survey, the National Union of Journalists had already expressed concern about the quality of much online journalism. Responding to their concerns, the NCTJ's chief executive Joanne Butcher stated that accredited courses would need to reflect 'developments in media convergence' but that courses would continue to 'focus on the traditional elements of media law, shorthand, public affairs and news writing'; Butcher argued that 'the skills journalists need to succeed have not changed, even if the tools have' (Press Gazette, 2008). However, there is concern that accreditation bodies are failing to recognise the possibilities of new media. Paul Bradshaw, an online specialist at Birmingham City University, points out that the stress placed by the NCTJ's skills survey on preparing journalists to work in multiplatform news organisations treats 'the website as a place to shovel - and possibly add to - content produced for another medium'. For critics, it appears that our accreditation bodies 'continue to view the net as a distribution platform for existing print and broadcast content, rather than recognising the web as a distinct medium' (reportr.net 2008). If so, their proposed training will not prepare student journalists adequately for the challenges to come.

The need for theory

There is a belief within the academic institutions now largely responsible for formal journalistic training that the NCTJ (in particular) regards the teaching of any but practical skills with suspicion. Certainly, the ignorance displayed by some journalism trainers is disappointing. Andy

Bull was the NCTJ's qualifications and careers consultant and author of the NCTJ's own career's guide, yet his account of what is taught in university journalism departments appears 'tendentious and misleading' (Delano 2008, 68). Dismissing the value of journalism theory, Bull maintains that to be a first-rate reporter you need a 'nose for a good story' and a 'journalistic instinct' that can't be taught but can be 'channelled' through the teaching of 'good practical skills' (Bull 2007: 59). Such a belief in the mystical 'news sense', a lack of awareness of the socialisation process that take place in all institutions and crafts – including journalism – belongs in the stone age. The suspicion of 'journalism studies' – and journalism education in general – appears widespread in the profession.

As Niblock has pointed out:

“There is an oft-repeated adage in some fast-moving newsrooms that if you have to mull over an editorial decision for more than one-and-a-half seconds then you are probably taking too long. Journalistic judgement, it is claimed, requires split-second decision-making or, as it is often put, “thinking on your feet”. Journalists should always be looking to the next story, the next production cycle instead of pondering critically over the one that has gone before. “Your job’s to report the news! Leave the analysing to society”, ordered a former editor of mine, commenting on my communication studies degree. That seems incontestable at first glance, for if journalism practice is to fulfil its consensual role as an independent watchdog for democracy it should be left alone to report and interpret the facts as impartially as possible. However, in a journalism context that is rapidly evolving and bringing ever greater pressures and dilemmas, the journalism industry is starting to look in on itself and engage in a dialogue about standards and responsibilities. A new word has entered the journalism lexicon “reflective” that denotes a different way of thinking about the practices of reporters, feature writers and all involved with the editorial process’ (Niblock 2007, 20)

Nick Davies' wrote a highly critical analysis of modern journalism (2008) yet his understanding of journalism education at universities – blamed for producing journalists who contribute to the PR-generated 'churnalism' he believes dominates British newspapers and broadcast news – reveals an alarming ignorance of what journalism schools in the UK actually teach (Lockwood 2008). In truth, vocational elements now

dominate. Angela Phillips noted recently that the increasing emphasis on practical and vocational courses, as exemplified in the NCTJ's skills survey, risked putting more pressure on analytical elements of journalism courses. She posed the crucial question - how do we persuade editors and industry professionals of the need for theoretically informed, thinking journalists? (Phillips 2009).

The deriders of Media and Journalism Studies would not dream of attacking Political Studies as an academic discipline. The frequent attacks on theoretical elements by industry professionals may reflect a fear of journalists who think too much about what they do, in addition to a fear of a media-literate audience – although concerns that Media and Journalism Studies students are being misled about the utility of their degree also plays a part (Bull 2007). It is also undeniable that many of the theoretical critiques of journalistic practice do need to be challenged. Barbie Zelizer, moving from journalism to academic life, found many academic studies of journalism, 'partial, often uncompromisingly authoritative, and reflective far more of the academic environments in which they'd been tendered than the journalistic settings they described'. She felt such accounts failed to capture her own experience of journalism (Zelizer 2004, 2-3), a not uncommon experience for new entrants to academia from journalism.

The increasing number of experienced practitioners conducting journalism research is changing that pessimistic perspective and more practice-based research is beginning to inform practical teaching. Angela Phillips teaches journalism at Goldsmiths College: she has noted there has been 'too great a gap between academic and practical teaching in the UK but the gap is closing' (journalism.co.uk, 16 September 2009). Theoretical knowledge is not irrelevant to journalistic practice. As Sheridan Burns has noted, the journalist who is 'conscious of and understands the active decisions that make up daily practice is best prepared to negotiate the challenges involved' (2003, 11). The student journalist who is introduced to theoretical approaches should be prepared to assess how they fit with her practical knowledge both in 'newsday' sessions and in the workplace. So, the future of journalism education must encompass theoretical approaches, for good practical reasons:

'a reflective journalist is one who can make confident editorial judgements that are informed by a strong awareness of their role in society' (Niblock 2007, 26)

Niblock (2007) argues that journalism needs to find its own 'critical vocabulary' and presents a model that could help bridge the divide between theory and practice. Perhaps the industry might then value the reflective and analytical elements of formal journalism education which are designed to help deliver a 'critical practitioner'. There is no space here to consider the question of what constitutes 'reflective practice' in journalism: Niblock (2007) offers an elegant introduction. Delano's (2008) suggestion that the discourse of semiotics be explored by trainee journalists might have the Society of Editors and the accrediting bodies questioning his sanity, yet this is unquestioned in many American journalism schools, where media studies and communication studies are not terms of abuse.

Conclusion

As Skinner *et al* argue, journalism training must not only equip students with the practical skills essential for their career, but must also show students how journalism 'participates in the production and circulation of meaning' (2001, 341). 'Journalism studies' is not an irrelevance to the trained journalist, or even a desirable add-on – it is an essential element of journalistic training. A journalist without an understanding of the history, values and ideology of her profession is an illiterate journalist. And one who, like Andy Bull, believes in some ingrained news sense is in ignorance of the political, economic and sociological influences which help decide what 'news' is and determine how it is gathered and interpreted.

As one trainer (and working journalist) told me, 'a good journalist' now is defined more by the range of skills they possess, certainly when it comes to employability or simply survival in the market, than the ability to seek out stories. They must be able 'to write, blog, produce audio and visual material and have all the technical (and traditionally non-journalist) skills required to handle material for the multi-media platforms' (interview with author). There is concern that employers are expecting too much and abdicating their own training responsibilities. Arguably, the NCTJ's survey exposes a lack of responsibility by employers themselves, who appear to

see their major training input as developing certain sector-specific skills 'on the job' (NCTJ 2008, 41-43). Training offered by employers was what has always been provided – in-house training sessions by existing staff members and 'structure support on the job'.

The consequences of the internet for journalism and journalism education could be disastrous, if observers such as Peter Kellner of the online polling organisation YouGov are right: he maintains 'we can discover what we need to know without reading, watching or listening to a single conventional journalist' (Kellner 2008, 6). However, the public sphere requires more than a billion bloggers bleating in cyberspace. A functioning and healthy democracy requires news, comment and analysis that has faced the rigours of a 'well-honed editorial process' (O'Reilly 2007) from news providers who value their reputation for probity. We must also be able to trust the information we are given – and in order to do that we need a new generation of ethically-conscious, well-trained journalists for the challenges faced by the new online environment. Those journalists must be prepared to be adaptable, which requires more than producing journalists to meet the perceived skill gaps of today's environment. The challenge for journalism educators is to be equally adaptable.

The industry is asking and expecting a great deal of both educators and students. Accredited university courses are turning out some high quality professionals with a range of skills yesterday's journalists neither possessed nor needed. That needs to be better acknowledged. Most crucially, employers must recognise that training cannot be left to the universities alone. Good journalism schools can (and do) turn out employable young people with a wide range of basic journalistic skills but employers will need to take a more active role in developing those skills for today's technologies – and for those yet to be invented.

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