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MAGAZINES' TRANSITION TO DIGITAL: THE CASE OF GEORGIA

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to show the results of a study into how Georgian magazines adapted to a digital transition, the kind of innovations they used and the kind of challenges they faced. For this purpose, we use the qualitative approach - the semi-structured interview method. The study was conducted among editors and journalists (n=12) of the magazines from 1 March 2023 till 15 December 2023. In the digital age, magazines in Georgia have faced a number of challenges: it is not easy to retain readers for the print edition, and the tendency of readers to decline is gradually becoming more apparent.

Keywords: print magazine, digital transition, online magazine, Georgian media, digital era

Introduction

The transition from the print version of magazines to the digital space is a global trend which is associated with a number of challenges, but the biggest challenge is decreasing audience. According to Santos, the majority of print magazines have an online counterpart, but the quantity of digital-only magazines is also rising: "almost every print magazine has an online presence, but the number of digital only magazines is also increasing. However, the fact that a print magazine has an online presence doesn't mean that its 'online version' is a digital 'magazine'" (Santos, 2011, p. 301).

Digitization and transition are changing consumer habits because a part of the audience has moved mainly to the online space and new opportunities have emerged on digital platforms where magazines offer their content to readers through short texts and videos. Such content is especially preferred by young people: while scrolling on their mobile phones, they do not read printed versions.

The change of magazine readers has not been unnoticed by researchers. According to Hartley, "Suddenly, 'Readers' became 'users'. They used online and social media for their own purposes" (Hartley, 2020, p. 22).

The process of digital transition has been going on for several years in the Georgian magazine market and has related to some challenges. The number of readers of printed magazines in Georgia, as well as around the world, is decreasing day by day. Today, all magazines have an online platform, although some of them have completely moved to the online space and they do not exist in print. Today, there are only 12 magazines left in the print media market in Georgia; at the same time, they also have online versions. From these, only two are public magazines (*Indigo, Forbes*), five are thematic (*Arsenali, Gemrielia, Mkurnali, Rugby World, Sabavshvo Karuseli*) and five are yellow,

boulevard type magazines (*Bomondi, Sarke, Tbiliselebi, Gza, Nargis Magazine*).

Tabula and Liberali ceased to exist in printed form and moved only to the online space. At the same time, there is a new trend of establishing new magazines only on electronic platforms (*Publika, At.qe*).

The goal of this paper is to show the results of a study into how Georgian magazines adapted to a digital transition, the kind of innovations they used and the kind of challenges they faced.

Literature Review

Is a print magazine dead or not? What are the challenges for print magazines? These questions have been raised in a number of studies in various countries.

"Magazines face what may well be their greatest challenge to date: digital transition" (Cardoso & Holmes, 2022, p. 1). However, before the review of the literature about challenges, it is interesting to look at the effect of digitisation and the emergence of digitisation of print magazines.

BarNir et al. recognized that 'Digitisation' has had a negative influence on print media as "a disruptive, creative force that is revolutionizing how people work, play, communicate, buy, sell, and live" (BarNir et al., 2003, p. 792; Slywotzky and Morrison, 2000, p. 7).

Skog et al. (2018, p. 431) define digitisation as "environmental turbulence caused by digital innovation" which is the result of the erosion of boundaries and business practices that underpin production and revenue.

Skog et al.'s concept, according to Hogarth, was maybe used for magazine publishing while looking at a shift toward online content that began in the late 1990s but primarily

took hold in the early 2000s (Hogarth, 2022, p. 8). At this time, audiences started to shift away from print, preferring instantaneous, free online access to content. As Chandra and Kaiser note, as a result, advertisers shifted their focus from traditional media forms to the internet (Chandra & Kaiser, 2014, p. 1829).

As Hogarth writes, based on a Helen Powel cite (Powell, H, 2013, p. 186) the 2008 global economic crisis caused the loss of advertising in print magazines, which also caused the decline of their circulations (Hogarth, 2022, p. 9).

Abrahamson and other scholars (Abrahamson, 2015; Aguliar, 2020; McKay, 2019; etc.) noted certain negative aspects related to digital disruption, arguing that changing technology and a volatile environment have resulted in significant hurdles for publishers and readers. According to Abrahamson, "it distorts, even violates, the implicit magazine-reader social contract" (Abrahamson, 2016, p. 5).

While theorists have described the issues that digital disruption has influenced print media, it has also created new revenue streams through brand extensions such as events, database provision, and digital editions (McKay, 2019, p. 448).

In addition to the fact that digitisation and transition have changed consumer habits and some magazines have moved to the online space, new opportunities have emerged for digital versions through multimedia platform potential. However, at the same time, advertising revenue has also decreased, which has caused the reduction of circulations. Of course, the researchers noticed this problem.

This is exactly what Guenther was talking about when he tried to analyse the challenges of moving magazines to multimedia platforms: "The King is dead; long live the King. It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. The glass isn't half empty; it's half full. Most of us have used one of

these phrases to describe a noteworthy event or circumstance. But few of us view them as a near perfect description of today's magazine publishing industry. The traditional world of print magazines is in a gradual yet unmistakable decline under almost any measure of long-term value—paid subscriptions, single copy sales and ad revenue, to name a few. Magazine share of the global ad pie has declined from 13.5% a decade ago to a projected 8.7% in 2012" (Guenther, 2011, p. 327). However, Guenther was optimistic about the future of print magazines, and, as he wrote, in order to maximize brand and company value, we will have to design personalised touch screen experiences that excite customers, impress advertisers, and match top-line growth with a digital cost structure that offers enormous profit improvement (Guenther, 2011, p. 328).

When discussing the future of print media, researchers focus on the fact that changing reading habits must be taken into account, especially among digital natives. According to the survey conducted in Finland by "The Future Magazine. Transition from product to service", the authors noted that the internet is the primary media outlet in the world, especially for the generation born in the digital age. The ways in which consumers utilise media should be taken into consideration while thinking about the future of print media. Printed magazines continue to have a place as a calming and "slow" media, even though consumers are spending more and more of their free time on digital media (Seisto et al., 2013, p. 7). As they predicted in their research results, over the following ten years, there will be significant changes in the magazine industry:

Not only will the publishers meet increasing competition from other media (including user-generated content); the demand for content that targets specific reader groups and for offering advertisers a better way of reaching their customers will force publishers to develop their products continuously (Seisto et al., 2013, p. 7). Lawrence's study investigates how successful media firms in the USA have transformed the way they distribute materials, namely by adding tablet versions. The relatively recent advent of tablet devices on the market, the rising prevalence of smart mobile devices, and the ability to be online more regularly all contribute to the growing popularity of printed magazine tablet editions (Lawrence, 2014, p. 1).

When Kundalkar discussed the life and death situation of magazines, he argued that "amidst those tombstones there is some good news - many magazines are being reborn or resurrected on the intangible building blocks of digital technology" (Kundalkar, 2015, p. 25).

As Holmes pointed out, magazines evolved as "megazines" and "metazines". According to him, a "megazine" is defined when a print magazine becomes a magazine brand with multimedia (print and digital) strategies. He notes that a magazine is not a necessary product; it might "also exist as a 'metazine', which is both a metaphor for a magazine and a meta representation of the form" (Holmes, 2020, p.15).

As Nosek et al. concluded from a study conducted in nine European countries in 2015, "print media are still an important component of the new communications environment among European audiences" (Nossek et al., 2015, p. 378).

According to Aguliar, who studied the Dutch magazine market, "the print form continues to be the dominant core for the independent magazine market in the Netherlands" (Aguliar, 2022, p. 2).

Although in most European countries print versions are still dominant along with their electronic versions, some magazines have stopped printing and have been converted to digital magazines: "Some magazines offer both print and digital versions while others are exclusively digital" (Nossek et al., 2015, p. 365).

Bradstreet studied US magazines and pointed out that numerous social media platforms and applications now pose a significant challenge to publishers. The forecast that the magazine industry will die may come true, but not for long. Magazines are currently gaining popularity with the help of social media platforms like TikTok and Instagram. Niche magazines will continue to offer both print and digital copies in the near future: "It is important for the magazine companies to continue to market towards those looking for the nostalgic experience while reading magazines, as well as those looking to advance with the times of technology" (Bradstreet, 2022, p. 47).

This topic of digitisation/digitalisation of print magazines is less researched in the Georgian context. The use of multimedia news by print media has been studied by D. Osepashvili, who compares it to Lithuanian print media. Analysing interviews with Georgian and Lithuanian newspaper editors and journalists, Osepashvili concludes that despite the global challenge of declining readership in such small countries as Georgia and Lithuania, print media will still not be completely replaced by online media (Osepashvili, 2019, p. 169).

Makarashvili discusses the challenges of print media within the framework of the concept of media morphosis and studies the attitudes of the audience (Makarashvili, 2023, p. 27-28).

Thus, it is timely and current for Georgia to study the issue of the transition of print magazines to digital, because this topic has hardly been worthy of special attention. Therefore, there is no doubt about the novelty and actuality of this research.

This paper aims to highlight the challenges related to digital transition processes by responding to the following questions:

RQ1. What are the main challenges that Georgian magazine industries are facing in the digital transition process?

RQ2. What kind of innovations do Georgian magazines use? RQ3. Is digital transition a global challenge or the end for the magazines as traditional media?

To achieve this goal, this study provides an overview and two tables of high-quality and yellow magazines that shifted from print to digital. This is followed by qualitative analysis.

Method

The qualitative approach of semi-structured interviews has been used as a main research method in order to respond to the research questions. The study was conducted among editors and journalists (n=12) of print and online magazines from March 1, 2023 to December 15, 2023.

Some of the interviewees are representatives of Georgian universities (n=8) who teach print media and online magazine. There are representatives from both state and private universities: TSU/Tbilisi State University, ATSU/Kutaisi State University, CU/Caucasian University, IBSU/International Black Sea University, GIPA/Georgian Institute of Public Affairs, CIU/Caucasian International University, UG/University of Georgia, and SEU/Georgian National University.

Purposive selection was used. For these semi-structured interviews, six magazines were selected based on the quality of the magazine (high-quality vs yellow): *Indigo* and *Forbes* for public magazines with both print and online versions; *Bomondi* and *Sarke* for print and online yellow magazines; *Liberali* and *Publika* for public magazines with online versions only.

Main Findings Overview of the high-quality magazines which shifted from print to digital

The magazine industry in Georgia has been experiencing difficult times since 2014 when a popular and readable

high-quality monthly magazine, *Tskheli Shokoladi*, stopped publishing, and other high-quality weekly newsmagazines, *Liberali* and *Tabula*, started struggling for survival.

From 2013, *Tabula* decided to change the frequency of printing from weekly to monthly. However, after one year it stopped its printed version and remained only on its digital platform. It is worth mentioning that they started looking for a new way of survival and established online TV on this platform.

Liberali was published from 2009 and it was the most trusted weekly magazine, but it stopped publishing and decided to remain only in digital space.

The customer's habit has changed. If I look at Google Analytics, mostly they have switched to smartphones. Also, when one of your main products is news, the demand for the online version is much higher. The attitude is also changing, that they don't read long texts online (Editor of *Liberali*).

According to the editor, this change brought results immediately: the rate of online users increased significantly. He pointed out the main challenge – the lack of advertisements.

To the question how *Liberali* was going to increase the number of readers and advertisers, and whether it would happen by integrating a certain amount of "yellow" material, the editor answered that there were no planned changes in the content and style of the publication:

We really want to diversify the content and adapt it to people of different interests, but this does not mean that you must tell the readers about Hollywood scandals or various cheap topics. You can prepare quality materials on sports, culture, technological achievements or other interesting topics as well as politics or social topics (Chimakadze, 2018).

Table 1 High-quality magazines

#	TITLES OF THE MAGAZINES	PRINT VERSION	ONLINE PLATFORM	PRINT + ONLINE	VIDEOS
1	Tskheli Shokoladi	2004-2014	no	no	no
2	Liberali	2009-2016	From 2009 - Present time	no	yes
3	Tabula	2010-13 weekly 2013-14 monthly	From 2014-Present time	no	yes
4	Publika	-	From 2019-Present time	no	yes
5	Forbes.ge	2014	From 2014-Present time	yes	yes
6	Indigo	2015	From 2015-Present time	yes	yes
7	At.ge	-	From 2018	no	yes

One of the recent steps *Liberali* has taken to promote its product was to add a social media manager to the team. They started with frequent usage of Facebook.

Liberali, which was transformed to an online-only magazine in 2016, was divided into two teams after three years. A new young team (one of the two teams) of Liberali stopped preparing the online version because of some financial challenges. The young core of the Liberali team decided to establish a new online magazine, Publika. This magazine tries to use innovative ways more frequently, such as by using video and multimedia forms like interviews or reporting more often than Liberali, but they still have a problem regarding advertisements because some advertisers prefer TV - which is more expensive but has bigger audience - and other advertisers prefer social media ads - which are cheaper and more effective to engage the target audience.

So, the case of *Tabula* and *Liberali* showed the tendency of full substitution in the transition from print to digital magazines. Besides this tendency, another trend is also distinguished: the hybrid form of transformation in the era of media convergence

– i.e., when magazines still have printed versions alongside electronic versions. The examples of this tendency are two quality magazines: *Indigo* and *Forbes.ge*. However, this study does not review the *Forbes* case, because although it is published in Georgian, it works according to the *Forbes* magazine formula and has a specific business audience.

The print media market in Georgia is very small (the population of Georgia is approximately five million with more than 1.5 million having migrated to different European countries and the USA). Because of the small media market, it is difficult to maintain special interest print magazines with different topics such as literature, health, sport, religion etc. Most of them have been transformed from print and have been replaced to the digital space.

Overview of yellow magazines which shifted from print to digital

Only sales-oriented yellow magazines and some lifestyle magazines that use loud headlines and leads to intrigue readers manage to survive in print. It should also be noted

Table 2 Yellow magazines

#	TITLES OF THE MAGAZINES	PRINT VERSION	ONLINE PLATFORM	PRINT + ONLINE	VIDEOS
1	Sarke	From 1995	yes	yes	yes
2	Bomondi	From 1996	yes	yes	yes
3	Gza	From 1996	yes	yes	yes
4	Tbiliselebi	From 1996	yes	yes	yes
5	Nargis Magazine	From 2014	yes	yes	yes

that for this purpose, they also use the online space: they try to attract readers and increase engagement in social media, such as Facebook, but in most cases the content is the same and is seldom different from print and online materials.

So, the main reason why yellow magazines could remain print versions along with online platform is the factor that they are sales-oriented with teasers and loud headlines.

Case of *Indigo* as the only high-quality Georgian magazine with print and digital versions

Indigo magazine holds a distinct niche among independent, small-budget media outlets. Indigo was created in the summer of 2015 with the initiative of several people. The focus of this magazine is art and culture; however, in some cases you will find depth-reporting, articles on health care, human rights and other socio-political topics. Today, Indigo is the only printed periodical of this type in Georgia. It does not have a PDF version. On the online platform it tries to use not only multimedia or transmedia products, but also other innovative outlets.

Due to the quality and exclusivity of the texts and interesting authors, the magazine quickly established itself and gained a few loyal readerships who consider themself "somehow privileged" because they are readers of *Indigo*. The magazines have a small but certain influence on the public, which helped them to master a new niche and attract the interest of advertisers. In parallel with the magazine, the founders soon established a small but multifunctional publishing house through which they could work on commercial projects and maintain the magazine. By offering a variety of print services, *Indigo* helps customers structure and package their content into issues like a special sports edition, anniversary magazine, NGO report, booklet or more. After their earnings, the editorial team divides the money into investments and to help the magazine's direction. However, such orders are still periodic and, for stability, the founders have to constantly look for alternative ways of income.

As for advertising, there is little, but as the editor notes, *Indigo* cooperates with various companies, whose interest in this case is mainly the image of the magazine and the specificity of the readership. According to editors, "They advertise with us only because of the quality, this is not a big magazine that sells hundreds of thousands".

In addition to advertising and publishing activities, the editorial office periodically submits applications for small grants to international organisations in order to prepare articles and studies on a certain topic or hold discussions.

The frequency of print changed from monthly to quarterly. Today, the magazine is maintaining itself, although there are many challenges and they have to take care of it on a daily basis.

Indigo tries to be active in social media. Besides Facebook and Instagram, they started using Tik-Tok in order to attract Generation Z. Besides this, Indigo started printing an English version and sells this in eight European countries.

The Indigo is the only Georgian magazine which has a mobile application and subscribers' system:

And now our business model and overall strategy is primarily online, where we also independently produce digital content and that's completely open to everyone, and additionally there's print and there's content that's behind paywalls. Nobody has such a model in Georgia yet. (Executive Director of *Indigo* Magazine).

Main findings of Qualitative Study: Declining circulations and advertising revenues

As it was revealed by this research, the main challenge for magazines is the lack of finance, which leads to a decrease in the circulation of printed magazines. The decrease in the audience also leads to a decrease in advertising revenues, because one of the main factors for the advertiser is the size of the audience. All the respondents named this as the primary problem for print media in the digital era:

The main problem is the decrease in readership. Consequently, business is less interested especially since social media has emerged, as it has become easier and less expensive for businesses to make and distribute advertisements independently. (One of the online magazine editors).

Nowadays, I think that the main challenge of magazines is to attract and keep regular subscribers, which does not work in any magazine in Georgia, unless we count *Indigo* as an exception. (One of the print magazine journalists).

It is natural that advertising is ordered by media organizations with a large audience. In Georgia, the audience of printed magazines is no longer large, which is caused by the effect of the Internet. (One of the media managers and lecturer).

Interviewed editors and journalists talk about the main challenge that has become even clearer in the digital age: the non-existence of print magazine as a business.

According to questioned respondents, one of the main challenges is the changed behaviour of the audience for printed magazines; they now read less and consume media mainly through social networks. Most of them pointed out that reading habits have changed in the digital environment:

I would say that they are no longer readers, but users, and consumption is just like that. Scrolling short texts, watching short videos on mobile phones. (One of the online magazine editors).

The habits of digital natives have completely changed, drastically different from 45+ people... (One of the magazine journalists).

In my opinion, the main challenge for magazines is that the audience, who are active users of social networks, find it very difficult to read long texts. the socalled long- readings texts are mostly read by people over 40 years old, while the younger generation is used to short texts, which is why the number of readers is inevitably reduced. (Lecturer of Magazine Production).

As most of the interviewed respondents mentioned, the content of the printed version of the magazine must be different from the content of the online platform. The web should be more innovative, and the stories should be told in a visual way:

I think it should definitely be different from the print version because the habit/taste/consumption style of online media users is absolutely different from print media users. (One of the magazine journalists and Lecturer of Media Managements).

I believe there should be some differences between the print and digital versions. Some things may only be available in print, while others may only be available digitally. The same content cannot be placed on the web in a reduced form. I do not think this is right, maybe they are satisfied with the material they read online and don't want to pay money to buy a printed magazine any more. (One of the magazine multimedia journalists).

Some of the respondents emphasised that it is preferable to offer multimedia and transmedia projects alongside videos to stimulate the desire to purchase the printed version and read long-read articles:

I think that in order to attract the audience and interest them in the printed magazine, you might digitize the part of the materials published in the printed magazine and offer it to the audience in different formats (posters, videos, animations). If it is interesting to the audience, there is a good chance that they will read the print magazine too. (One of the print magazine journalists).

If most of the interviewees think that the content should be presented on the web in a concise and innovative way – which would make people want to read more in print, according to

The *Indigo*'s concept – the main materials are created for the web and print plays a more complementary role.

According to questioned respondents, marketing the magazines today is unimaginable without social media; the correct positioning of magazines in social networks is of great importance for sales:

One of the most powerful promotional tools is social networks which allow for more accurate selection of target groups, for the sale of industry press. Thematic groups in social networks are of crucial importance (Lecturer of Magazine Production).

Social media definitely has the potential to draw attention, but it will only increase sales if you take a professional approach to it. When a specific segment of the audience knows that a specific magazine always offers content that is necessary or interesting for them, it increases their interest. Announcing the content of part of the materials to stimulate appetite, operating successfully in social media, will definitely bring an increase in sales to the magazine. (One of the print magazine journalists).

As it was revealed, interviewed respondents think that it is very important to use not only Facebook, but also Instagram and Tik-Tok. The young generation prefers the latter platforms, and if editors want to attract Gen Z, they should actively use them:

One of the ways to engage the audience is to use social media. As many consumers are too lazy to read huge texts, perhaps print media that produce analytical, large-format content can do the following for digital platforms: today, the card system is actively working, many people share it and it spreads quickly. Therefore, conditionally, editor should extract a key

phrase, an important quote, turn it into a card with the respondent's photo and post it on social media. (One of the Magazine Editors).

I think that today the internet is no longer the enemy of print magazines, on the contrary, the correct use of the Internet and social media platforms can significantly increase the audience of printed publications. For this, it is even sometimes necessary to offer magazine content online for free. If you stay active online and have your own niche, this is a sign that your advertising revenue will increase, both online and offline. (Magazine editor).

Will print magazines disappear or not? The answer to this question is not straightforward. Most of the interviewees think that magazines will never disappear. Although print media faces challenges due to the effects of the internet and a readership which is decreasing day by day, the print magazine will still not disappear and will still have an audience who will comfortably flip through the pages:

Certain journals will be able to survive with print editions, at least for the foreseeable future. (Online magazine editor).

In my opinion, they will not disappear, magazines will exist for at least several decades, because the consumption of printed products is still very attractive. Just like printed books will never go away. (Lecturer of Magazine Production).

On the example of *Indigo*, I can say that they will not disappear, because if you adapt to the changing times and think about how to develop your own product, whether it is online or offline, you are not in danger of disappearing. (One of the print magazine journalists).

However, a small number of the interviewees do not optimistically see the future of printed magazines as digital natives have completely different habits of media consumption. Therefore, in the future, in their opinion, they will not have traditional readers at all:

Who needs a printed magazine today and even more in the future? In the age of Instagram and Facebook, how do you get a reader or advertiser interested in a print publication? Whereas online magazines have a much better chance of doing so. (One of the online magazine editors).

Online media is developing so much and creating so many new opportunities that it will be very difficult for print media to maintain an audience. Unfortunately, the generation that is used to reading printed magazines and newspapers will slowly go away" (One of the magazine journalists).

It is important that every magazine should create customized content on social media platforms, but as respondents mentioned, many magazines still fail to create separate content for social media. This is explained by insufficient resources as the same people work to produce both print content and online and social media platforms.

Conclusions

According to this study, some challenges facing Georgian magazines in the digital era have been revealed. As a result of the research, it was determined that the circulation of magazines in Georgia decreases every year. Over the last 10 years, the existing number of circulations has been reduced.

It was revealed that the cost of printing is so high that media outlets are not able to fully cover the costs of publishing with the printed product. It's interesting that in some cases the print version is financially supported by the revenue generated by the digital product. Therefore, print media do not consider their own digital platforms as enemies.

In the digital age, advertising and revenue is a particularly pressing issue for print media. Research has made it clear that the situation in this direction is very difficult. Businesses in Georgia do not view print media as an advertising market. The situation became especially acute after the onset of digital development in the country. Social media allow businesses to advertise on their networks at a much lower cost than in a print magazine. This also gives them the opportunity to research their audience themselves without print media; therefore, they are less interested in such cooperation. This can be said to be disastrously damaging for print magazines.

In the last decade, all Georgian high-quality magazines have entirely moved from print to digital platforms. Only *Indigo* and *Forbes.ge* managed to maintain print editions. However, the example of *Indigo* shows that their business model has changed: the online platform is their primary platform and print is a premium offer for a loyal audience. Only sales-oriented yellow magazines and some lifestyle magazines that use loud headlines and leads to intrigue readers, manage to save print versions.

The research also clearly revealed that consumer habits have changed in accordance with the digital environment, especially among digital natives, and other editorial strategies need to be developed to attract consumers to increase engagement in social media. Mobile applications and the development of the subscribers' system are also to be implemented.

Despite the challenges that print magazines face today, research shows that print magazines will not disappear

completely and, like printed books, they will have a small readership.

Recommendations:

- It is desirable for Georgian magazines to conduct frequent research not only among their readers, but also among the wider audience of social media in order to be able to satisfy their interests and increase engagement.
- It is desirable for Georgian magazines not to repeat the print and online content and use multimedia, transmedia projects and other innovative ways more often.
- It is desirable for Georgian magazines to introduce a subscribers' system, like *Indigo* magazine.
- It is desirable for Georgian magazines to have mobile applications (like *Indigo* magazine), which would help them to attract a young segment of audience.
- It is desirable for Georgian magazines to use not only Facebook, but also Instagram and Tik-Tok to increase their younger audience.

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